

Conference 2006: news and current affairs

Putting Content before Delivery: a Digital Dilemma

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Abstract

A key theme of this paper is that the development of quality content in the news and current affairs areas has fallen behind the quality and range of development in digital delivery.

Digital developments in media and telecommunication receive the greatest attention and investment in a corporate environment where timeliness and competitive edge are critical.

This paper also asserts the 'mixed-media age' has led to much more un-sourced or half sourced comment. Journalism is diminished while speed of delivery is celebrated. Much of this is represented to the public as more democratic than the old professional journalism. Professional news production and delivery have been forced into an uneasy pairing with populist forms such as TV One's 'Your News'.

Despite Bill Gates' assertion 'content will be king' in the digital age the fact is content is manipulated to fit the digital platforms and deliver to technology savvy audiences. These platforms are constantly upgraded, relentlessly competitive and content is forced to meet corporate financial goals.

This situation may be responsible for the lack of vitality and creativity in content production. Those qualities are needed to put the content on an equally valued footing with delivery in news and current affairs. This is even more critical as newer and more varied platforms provide more opportunities to feature quality content.

We need to consider newer (or older) funding mechanisms and a broader range of content suppliers in order to sustain democracy's need for information and policy alternatives.

The paper

In the rush to put out new digital media products and win the battle for consumers between television and the internet something precious may be lost - or at least overlooked – programme content quality.

To the outside observer all the developments and investment seem to be in the areas of delivery and the sophisticated, miniaturised technology of reception. (McKenzie-Minifie, 2006. Doesburg, 2006.)

Quality in the content of news and current affairs broadcasting (Atkinson 2001, Edwards, 2002) is in danger of being pushed out of the public consciousness by the technological delivery debate. 'Which platform, which set top box, what reception vehicle, who gets commercial advantage?' are the questions of the moment.

In Canada, media giant CanWest Global (owners of NZ's TV3 and C4) has leveraged off its Global National News broadcast to send newscasts to cell phones. News anchor Kevin Newman says "We're trying to migrate to the internet. Yes, it's only a 1.5 minute newscast on

your cell phone for now. But in two years time when they solve the bandwidth problem, at least we'll have the real estate there." (Chang, 2006, p.11) If we just wait for the technology the quality may follow.

New broadcasters such as the un-named company which recently signed with New Zealand transmission provider Broadcast Communications in July plan to enter the fray. A strong case is being made by web enthusiasts here (as in Canada) that the future is not on your television screen; it's on your PC. (Nowak & McKenzie-Minifie,2006)

"Lean-forward consumers" who want anytime, anywhere content made available to them via multiple channels" are a vocal minority for change. (Doesburg, 2006,p.22) even if the rest of us qualify as 'lean-back' people who are content to wait and see their programming.

In response (or anticipation) WOOSH Wireless has entered an agreement for broadcasting spectrum with Sky TV which means it can develop an internet television service. (Keown, 2006) There will be more companies currently in, or entering, the broadband market such as Telstra Clear. The market is opening in unexpected ways driven not by content but by the pace of changing delivery technology.

Nowak and McKenzie-Minifie quote Geof Heydon of Alcatel as saying "telcos worldwide are looking at IPTV services as replacement revenue for declining traditional calling revenue." (2006,p.C4) They assert that "while telcos' initial IPTV services may be complementary to existing offerings from traditional television companies, the ultimate goal is full competition with them." (ibid)

Television will not lie down in face of the internet challenge. The New Zealand government has committed to support the new free-to-air digital initiative. The Freeview consortium of the country's free to air broadcasters will initiate the service in 2007 with a new set-top box which will cost consumers about \$200.

This is in addition to the money paid by over half a million households who subscribe to Sky Network Television which has its own (subsidised) set-top box. Sky's advantage was allowed by successive neo-liberal governments who couldn't or wouldn't allow for a public presence in digital television.

New Zealand's Broadcasting Minister Steve Maharey announced in November the government would support TVNZ's digital plans with \$79 million over the next 6 years. TVNZ News 24 (2007) will be 70% news and current affairs repeats from mainstream television and TVNZ Home (2008) will have plenty of New Zealand content which sounds like an older vision of TV One with children's shows, drama and documentaries. (2007) This is hardly groundbreaking but it does indicate the government's dilemma. How and what to spend on content and how to give viewers access to the new channels are key issues to be dealt with.

The digital free to air service could mean 18 new channels but typical of the government's muddled planning we do not know how it will contribute to their development and programming. (Trevett, 2006) Of course, programming is the key benefit to viewers and a boost for locally-produced content which will meet public service objectives outlined in the Charter.

NZ Herald columnist Peter Griffin found the government's announcement of support for Freeview said nothing about content for the new channels. "Nothing to whet our appetites, like the unveiling of Parliament TV or a 24 hour news channel" (2006, p.C4) Is there any sign that this will now happen?

NZ On Air will face an increase in funding demands on such an expanded scale of channels. The government-funded organisation has recently commissioned Unitec communication

lecturer Peter Thompson to report on issues surrounding broadcasting quality to help it assess its new broadcasting environment.

As viewers, broadcasters and internet providers change their viewing regimes Nielsen Media Research has been driven to adjust how it measures viewership. Nielsen chief executive Susan Whiting announced the changes. "A2/M2 (Anytime Anywhere Media Measurement) is the result of extensive consultation with clients, who told us we should deliver integrated measurement of all television-like content (italics mine) regardless of (the delivery) platform." (NZ Herald, 2006, p.C5) In 2007 Nielsen's People Meter homes in the U.S. will also feature computer software to measure web viewing. The battle is really on when advertisers get involved.

In the past two decades of de-regulation and commercialisation the public sphere elements of particularly publicly owned television seem to have succumbed to 'tabloidisation' and 'decontextualisation' and other sins enumerated by Atkinson (cited in Miller, 2001, p.285). TVNZ's balancing act between its public responsibilities and its financial obligations to the government have caused governance strains and even ruptures most obviously in the past two years.

Although the debate continues in New Zealand as a response to the Labour-led government's TVNZ Charter (2003) it is being overtaken and passed by developments in digital delivery and concerns about political direction.

This paper asserts that populist news formats such as Edwards and Atkinson, among others, described in the 1990s continue into the new century with the additional pressures on news applied by digital developments which emphasise speed, competition and variety of outlets. This leads to further pressure on quality on journalism; time, resources and legal issues were always problems for journalists but this is exponentially worse.

"Ted Koppel believes that in today's intensely competitive media environment there is more pressure than ever to run with a story that may not be solidly verified" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, (1999). p.54)

The (US) Committee of Concerned Journalists commissioned Princeton Survey Research Associates in 1999 to find out what Americans learned from their news media and how much was 'verified' in standard news practices such as 2 sources to qualify as fact. The timeframe for the study was the first few days of the Clinton-Lewinsky story.

What they found was terrifying:

"Four in ten statements were not factual reporting at all."

"Forty percent of all reporting based on anonymous sourcing was from a single source."

"Only one statement in a hundred was based on two or more named sources."

"Nearly one in three statements was effectively based on no sourcing at all by the news outlet publishing it." (Kovach & Rosenstiel. pp.100-101)

The serious conclusion for those who revere factual reporting complete with context is that this takes time, energy, commitment and resourcing. All of these qualities are under greater pressure than ever so we are often left with a rush to judgement.

Kovach and Rosenstiel report "when one news organisation broke an especially controversial story that others couldn't confirm, there was widespread tendency by other media to pick it up without verifying it." (p.103)

Blogging, twenty-four hour news channels and new varieties of news delivery such as podcasting increase the pressure to be first now and right later. Surely this need for speed

undermines news as a requirement for democratic societies to rely on an informed public to make important political choices.

The question asked by New York's Carnegie Corporation is whether news organisations are "up to the task of sustaining the informed citizenry on which democracy depends? (The Economist 2006)" So far the answers appear mixed.

Peter Golding put the question succinctly nearly a decade ago. "To what degree and in what ways are people denied access to necessary information and imagery to allow full and equal participation in the social order?" (1997.p.682)

Self-styled 'democratic' news such as TV ONE's 'Your News' encourage viewers to provide instant, low grade pictures from house fires and car crashes but their real cachet is immediacy rather than objectivity, fact-based reportage and context. This is the illusion of full and equal participation without its realisation.

"Wow! Look at this and I'm right here" deserves the 'So what?' response Golding postulates.

Of course this development is in response to falling viewership figures just as newspapers have faced in declining readership over the past three decades. Without the commercial numbers the profit-oriented news media will struggle to fulfil a democratic function. The future of network television news as well as traditional newspapers appears to be under threat but given the relentless criticism of the media by both academic and media sources can we say this is a bad thing?

Rachel Smolkin, writing in the American Journalism Review, says it is too early to write the obituary of news. She quotes U.S. television analyst Andrew Tyndall at length.

This is a period of enormous innovation, but it's going to be innovation in delivery rather than content. It would be inappropriate use of their resources to spend all their time reinventing the CBS Evening News when they really should be spending all their time reinventing how news gets delivered to people in different ways. (AJR August/September 2006)

The conclusion seems to be that content will not be completely marginalised in the rush to new delivery vehicles. It had better adjust, however, to these new vehicles because they are coming at speed and will leave older technologies in their wake. For example in January 2006 ABC's (USA) "World News" "debuted a 15 minute Webcast that airs live on abcnews.com every day at 3.p.m and is updated throughout the afternoon." (Smolkin, 2006)

It seems to be working. Smolkin reports there were 1 million downloads in one week in May and is a leading news source on iTunes. CBS expanded its CBSNews.com last year in what its Digital Media President Larry Kramer calls "cable bypass". "Its focus is a sleek array of menu offerings allowing viewers to choose from a wealth of video reports and allowing them to build their own newscast." (Smolkin 2006)

We really do need highspeed broadband in New Zealand if Telecom decides we are ready for it.

This latter development is the most interesting in that it seems to say that content is not the problem. People want quality content but they also want to use the digital delivery systems to customise their news for their own purposes. The day of the editor as complete arbiter of content is under the most threat.

The audience is beginning to interact with news. We've gone from a world in which news organisations had either monopolistic control of certain markets or

because of barriers to entry, fairly exclusive control over certain aspects of media, and consumers gravitated towards a few favoured sources of news to a world in which there's saturation news. We no longer have exclusive control of the printing press. (Kinsey Wilson, USATODAY.com 2005)

Webcasts and podcasts are allowing traditional outlets such as newspapers to experiment with new delivery methods including the aforementioned customising of content "to decide when and where and how they (viewers/readers) receive it in a new 'always on' environment." (NewsHour, PBS, 2005)

One problem with this as an all encompassing statement is that academics and media professionals alike have complained for years that content quality is under serious threat from extensive commercialisation and under-resourcing of the news divisions of electronic media.

The development of a celebrity news culture and a perception that audiences have limited and shrinking attention spans add to the threat to contextualised news. Perhaps the Americans are halfway there with new modes of delivery but the quality issue remains. Now we need to check that new delivery systems can be compatible with quality. See Brian Edwards *The Cootchie Co News Re-visited* (2002).

We also need to know how quality content will be produced which can be compatible with delivery modes and acceptable to wider audiences. Certainly a vital news genre requires a lively political ecology.

This becomes problematic if we recall that one of the strongest criticisms aimed by academics (Atkinson) at the news media is the 'depoliticisation' of news bulletins.

Yet there has been a flowering of what Sue Abel (2004) calls 'Alternative/counterhegemonic voices in the news'. These voices illustrate the knowledge sharing role of new media which allows for a successful complementarity of digital delivery and more news sources which are authoritative but not necessarily professional. "A prime example is Indymedia, 'a collective of independent media organisations and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage' (www.indymedia.org)" (Abel 2004. p.194)

The Iraq 'war', currently being fought, raised independent media as a real alternative to embedded, monopolistic, corporate media which offered no genuine alternative view to that of the US/UK coalition.

The "barriers denying or qualifying full citizenship" Golding wrote of in 1997 apply to these media as to more traditional outlets. Independent media lack the production and professional resources and many citizens are deprived of the technology to fully make a contribution in the sense Golding means. The failure of the mainstream media to support a democratic public sphere amounts to a 'democratic deficit' as described by Hackett and Carroll (2006).

Cost will be a key issue for regulators in determining how a change to digital will occur. In Canada broadcasters are begging the CRTC national regulator for permission to jettison over-the-air signals to cut costs. Most Canadians have cable or satellite contracts so the broadcasters argue maintaining outdated infrastructure is an economic disincentive to going wholly digital. (Robertson, 2006) Are the remaining 15-20% to be left to fend for themselves? Do they have 'broadcasting rights'?

The role of public broadcasting, perhaps we should say a non-commercial, public broadcasting ethos, is crucial as never before. Market failures in the area of content combined with an emphasis on speed and variety of delivery could fatally undermine the democratic "information and imagery" Golding argues for. A new coalition of broadcasting interests and

public is required to re-orient us towards a digital future of quality content to match the delivery.

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