

1. Reflecting the new realities of the digital age

ABSTRACT

Three broad themes reflecting the role of the media in the digital age emerged from the Journalism Downunder journalism education conference in Auckland in December 2006. These were trepidation, confusion and celebration. The sense of trepidation relates to a fear of the unknown and unknowable: a sense that digital technologies are changing at a speed that confounds attempts to master them before they morph into new forms. Another theme was the confusion created by the new digital technologies. This confusion is related to the fetish-isation of gadgets and the growing gap between those who have always interacted with the digital world and those who have had it thrust upon them. The third theme was cautious celebration. The power, speed and usefulness of digital creation, transmission and reception opens up communication and the media to people in previously unimaginable ways. This commentary is an overview of papers presented at the conference, with some general conclusions reached about the future of journalism in the digital age. While the new digital platforms and technologies do present significant challenges to traditional journalism, they are also enabling technologies that offer opportunities to reinvigorate newsgathering. Although the future of journalism is a digital one, the core competencies of a good journalist will be as important as ever.

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THREE broad themes reflecting the role of the media in the digital age emerged from the second joint Journalism Educators Association (JEA)/Journalism Educators Association of New Zealand (JEANZ)

conference, Journalism Downunder, in Auckland in December 2006. These were trepidation, confusion and celebration. Keynote speaker Professor Roy Greenslade provided a framework for these themes by likening his ongoing engagement with daily broadsheet newspapers to a comfortable marriage and his growing reliance on web-based information to an extramarital affair. While he felt bad for not spending as much time with the traditional media, his engagement with the new media was growing. For Greenslade, there was no denying that the media must change to reflect the new realities of the digital age. While this can be extremely uncomfortable for some journalists, the change is inevitable, unstoppable and irreversible. The keynote address called for journalists to not be blinded by the new technologies, but to engage them to ensure journalism of the future was 'more vibrant, more penetrating, more questioning and, ultimately, more beneficial for the citizens of the world than it is today' (Greenslade, 2006). This is a challenge to journalists and journalism educators to face the reality of the digital age by working through the confusions and using the utilities of digital platforms to reflect what is needed now. The Journalism Downunder conference explored the challenges and opportunities of the digital age for journalists and their teachers.

The sense of *trepidation* expressed by conference delegates relates to a fear of the unknown and unknowable: a sense that digital technologies are changing at a speed that confounds attempts to master them before they morph into new forms. This fear is somewhat justified as Martin Hirst demonstrated by tracing the feedback loop that has developed between YouTube and the mainstream media. Hirst showed how a story that would not have made it to the mainstream media prior the digital age could be created with a mobile phone camera, uploaded to YouTube, picked up by the mainstream media, with those reports, then quickly uploaded to YouTube (Hirst, 2006). The rapid dissemination, interpretation and reconfiguration of the story demonstrates a real challenge to traditional newsgathering. New channels of information are being created through the use of digital technologies and the internet. Channels such as YouTube are being driven by consumer/creators who are using the technology of the digital age to tell important stories that the traditional media have ignored. For journalists and their audiences the sheer amount of information, coupled with the speed of its dissemination is unprecedented and evolving daily in unpredictable ways. This evolution is a serious challenge to traditional newsgathering and reception (ibid.).

As prime sifters of information, the traditional journalist has the power in the producer/receiver relationship (ibid.). The process of collecting and editing information with authority has been challenged by the advent of digital technologies such as YouTube and the blogosphere. Audiences can now seek out information experiences that not only teach them new things but also reinforce their own worldviews. The noble labour of journalists informing the citizenry has been reshaped in the digital age. Delegates found that the challenge for journalism is the same as ever. The craft is in revealing the truth from a myriad of sources and interests. The new information economy means a quantum leap in the number of these. Cutting through the chaff will become increasingly important in the digital age.

The conference also revealed some trepidation about the rise of the 'citizen journalist'. While it is true that the term more often than not flatters those it describes, there is increasing recognition of their place in the digital media ecology. These new sources are outsiders; they do not have the formal training, do not follow the established traditions and do not rely on the resources and pay cheques of the traditional media. They are also able to sidestep the mainstream distribution channels in the digital age. David Cameron posited the mobile phone had 'become the media by stealth' at the conference (Cameron, 2006). The capabilities of modern mobile phones make them powerful multi-media receiving, creating and sending devices, increasingly linked to the internet and regularly used to gather and transmit newsworthy events. Those who are able to bear witness in the absence of the mainstream media have provided some of the most important insights into our world in recent years (www.poynter.org). Many traditional news organisations are now scrambling to include the citizen as reporter in their operations. A good example of this is the BBC's website that allows the public to file stories using text and video (www.bbc.co.uk). Again, the journalist as the prime aggregator of information will be using the same skills to gather and edit these sources. Those organisations that develop the interfaces between these two groups will prosper by strengthening the bonds between the broadcaster or broadsheet and audiences that have the skills to create and disseminate their own media experiences. With such fragmentation of the information market, audience loyalty and engagement will be essential to a successful media enterprise (Greenslade, 2006).

Another conference theme was the *confusion* created by the new digital technologies. This confusion is related to the fetishisation of gadgets and



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'And now, ladies and gentlemen of the press, welcome to the future ...'

the growing gap between users who have always interacted with the digital world and those who have had it thrust upon them. *Wired* magazine writer Sonia Zjawinski, who coined the terms 'the golden age of gadgets' and 'the third age of gadgets' in 2003, posited

that the 'harbinger of this change was the iPod' and a new economy was developing around consumer electronics. This was driven by competition between large computer and electronics companies (Zjawinski, 2003). The cultural status of devices like the iPod and ubiquity of feature-packed mobile phones and other devices generates confusion about their utility (Mollgaard, 2006).

While these gadgets are indeed remarkable for their storage capability, multimedia abilities and communication powers, they are in themselves neutral technologies. They require users and content to operate. That computer giant Apple has managed to market much of the language around what is essentially the transfer of files between hard drives using a network reinforces the confusion of gadgets with applications. Part of the challenge for information providers will be to reinvent the semiotics of electronic file creation, transfer and storage. At the moment, most of the language of the digital age is in branding, evidenced in 'podcasting', 'googling' and 'txting'. This leads to

confusion in that gadgets are statements, rather than devices. In reality, an iPod is another tool for storing information in much the same way a tape recorder is. Users must learn to master its buttons and functions as they would have to with any technology from the genus 'recorder/storage device'. Underneath the branding and the smart design of modern digital tools are close relatives of similar previous technologies. Once this is understood by journalists and their audiences, much of the confusion about the gadgetry will be alleviated. These gadgets simply assist creators to make and store content that is easy to manipulate and transmit on digital platforms (ibid.).

Significant confusion was also evident in general discussion at the conference about the fundamental differences in the experiences of the digital age of those born before and after 1980. Named the 'digital immigrants' and the 'digital natives' these two groups are portrayed as living on opposite sides of a chasm of skills and experience in the digital age (Prensky, 2001). This gap in digital competencies relates to the vastly different media and communication experiences these two groups have grown up with. The advent and development of the microchip, the internet and the digital economy have meant a change in the traditional allocation of power between young and old and a shift in values and practices in business, education and entertainment.

This new generation is portrayed as intrinsically different to the older in that their educational, social and cultural expectations and needs are profoundly shaped by digital technology. Prensky pointed to the average US college graduate in 2001 having read books for 5000 hours but having played 10,000 hours of video games (ibid.). The very way digital natives learn information has changed from static contemplation to active participation.

This different learning pattern challenges journalists to create content that will appeal to the new audience by being interactive, malleable and engaging. This will require a high level of literacy in digital arenas not previously seen as a focus for core skills in journalism training. Some training organisations are now attempting to bridge this gap by including digital skills in their curricula. One example is the news production module at AUT University in New Zealand that produces a constantly updated electronic version of the journalism programme tabloid *Te Waha Nui*.¹ Another example at the Journalism Downunder conference was the recent successful experiment with podcasting learning experiences for journalism trainees at Deakin University in Australia (Murrell, 2006). Susan Hetherington from Queensland

University of Technology also related another successful experiment using ‘wiki’ technology to help students become better journalists by using online collaboration tools to peer-review each others work (Hetherington, 2006). In this way, journalism training organisations are responding to the challenges presented by the newest generation.

The new technology-savvy generation also challenges traditional media organisations to meet them in the spaces they use to communicate and learn in, such as the internet. The development of complementary activity to the traditional broadcast and broadsheet on the internet reflects this. Websites such as *The New Zealand Herald* online edition² and the Radio New Zealand web portal³ are designed to ‘remediate’ content in a way that appeals to new audiences. A panelist at the Journalism Downunder conference, chief executive of Radio New Zealand Peter Cavanagh, presented his organisation as a ‘content provider’ rather than a radio enterprise. The move to providing radio programming on the internet allows for new ways for audiences to access it. These audiences are geographically and temporally dispersed, no longer restricted to the physical broadcast signal’s reach, or the linear and time-bound broadcast programme schedule (Cavanagh, 2006).

This remediation of material is a key feature of the digital age. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin refute the notion that new media developments necessarily make older media redundant, claiming that no medium exists in isolation from others in a ‘separate and purified space’ (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 55). For Bolter and Grusin the advent of the internet and related digital media technologies is part of an ongoing historical process involving the remediation of content. This is not a linear progression, but a ‘genealogy of affiliations’ whereby new media can remediate older forms and older forms also remediate newer ones (ibid.).

David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins conceptualise this new ‘dual delivery’ experience as ‘hybrid or collaborative forms that often emerge during times of media transition’ (Thorburn & Jenkins, 2003, p. 3). This allows for the ‘complex synergies that always prevail among media systems’ (ibid.). What Cavanagh and fellow conference panellist Tim Murphy of *The New Zealand Herald* acknowledge is that the future of the mainstream media is a multi-platform distribution system that will still rely on the skills of traditional journalism but will require the new skills of the digital age (Murphy, 2006).

The third theme of the Journalism Downunder conference was cautious

celebration. The power, speed and usefulness of digital creation, transmission and reception opens up communication and the media to people in previously unimaginable ways. The creator/consumer audiences that are evident in the new public arenas of YouTube, Blogspot and MySpace indicate that people want to participate in and share their media and information experiences.

Peter Kollock identifies three main motivations that are driving these 'virtual communities': anticipated reciprocity (the sharing of content), increased recognition (peer esteem) and a sense of efficacy (the achievement felt when creating complex digital content) (Kollock, 1999). These motivations are shaping the content that media organisations produce in that there is increasing recognition that meeting their audiences in the middle ground of cyberspace requires content that is media-rich, targeted carefully and allows user participation in the experience by being able to pass it on to others of their ilk and also contribute their own content. Murphy identified this as the cyberspace 'business model' of his company. This is an acknowledgment that the online environment allows for new ways of forming audiences (Murphy, 2006). The desire to create or manipulate content will be an important factor in the future. This may be as complicated as building a media experience from scratch or as simple as customising what media reaches your receiving device. The mainstream media will need to respond to the demands of new audiences by acknowledging the strengths of traditional newsgathering techniques and incorporating the strengths of digital technologies. This will help to make the outputs of contemporary and future journalists relevant to new audiences.

There is also some jubilation about the opening of new public spheres. Web-based citizen commentary and advocacy are challenging traditional power relations between mainstream media and their audiences. Organisations such as the Public Address System in New Zealand provide a forum for people to express opinions ranging across political, social, cultural and economic critique⁴, while side-stepping the mainstream media. Social movements, such as those that coalesce around the protests at various World Trade Organisation and G8 meetings, present their views in sophisticated online media, challenging the dominant paradigms of the traditional media.⁵

These new citizen-based media capabilities are both a challenge and a positive development for journalists. While they challenge traditional information systems, they also provide new sources and counter arguments that can be used to create more balanced news. Although many web-based news sources

are dubious at best, the most popular are visited repeatedly because they are considered to be of quality, reflecting the same ethical and balanced standards of the best of the traditional media sources. The best of these endeavours are providing valuable material to the mainstream as well as developing and promoting good news values in cyberspace.

A caveat needs to be considered in the midst of this media evolution—the ‘digital divide’. Peter Hoar and Wayne Hope have concluded that the democratic and public sphere potentials of the digital age are partly negated by the traditional economic power differences between the haves and the have nots (Hoar & Hope, 2002). While the internet does promise to shift the nature of relations between information, dissemination and audiences, it also requires economic resources often unavailable to the groups it could help so much, such as those living under repressive regimes and marginalised groups without a voice in the current mainstream media.

This inequity needs to be considered on a global scale. While 85 percent of global internet access is based in Europe, North America and Asia, only 15 percent of access is in Africa, Latin America, Oceania and the Middle East (Internet World Statistics, 2007). A starker figure is the estimated 887 million people of Africa who share 33 million internet access points (Geohive, 2007). These figures reveal a large portion of humanity who do not enjoy the benefits of the digital age. The traditional media will remain the main sources of information for those not participating fully in the new media environment.

There is also another type of divide that is apparent in the digital age. While the traditional mainstream media continues to reflect the dominant cultures of previously colonised nations, indigenous peoples are now building their own unique media systems. These systems require a certain amount of ‘catching up’ to the mainstream as they are recent developments that lack the economic and labour resources of the dominant cultures. Te Anga Nathan, head of news at Maori TV in New Zealand, explored these developments at the conference. For Maori, the success or otherwise of a Maori broadcasting service lies in reflecting what is important to Maori, not the mainstream. The key to the passion, tenacity and struggle that lead to the launching of a television service for Maori was the protection of one of the foundations of Maori identity, Te Reo—the language. Although the digital age is upon us, for Maori TV the first priority is reaching as many Maori as possible, in their own language, with technology that most Maori are using. While digital platforms

are being rapidly adopted in the mainstream media, the main concern of Maori is developing a media *in* the mainstream that is an alternative to the mainstream for Maori (Nathan, 2006). In the future, these unique broadcasting systems will also make significant moves to digital platforms. In the short term however, much work is being done on building a skilled Maori media workforce and economic capacity to survive now and prepare for the future.

In this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* the opportunities and challenges of the digital age are related in papers from the Journalism Downunder conference. The papers here canvas a small but wide selection of the ideas presented and discussed. What became apparent at the conference was a recognition that change was happening and that during this transition period the anxieties and the opportunities of significant change are forcing journalists and news organisations to revisit their training, expectations and work practices. This is critical work, as the future of journalism and journalism training will rely heavily on digital technologies.

Media organisations are embracing digital technologies and platforms to meet the emerging digital savvy audience on their own ground. In the digital age we still have and use the older technologies to disseminate ideas, hold power to account and share our experiences. These abilities are enhanced by the power and utility of digital platforms. Hirst characterises this as a shift from ‘broadcast to narrowcast’ in that the proliferation of channels in the digital age means the ascendancy of the niche over the mass broadcaster. This challenges the traditional media to create content and delivery systems that acknowledge this new reality. By using sources such as citizen journalists and developing sophisticated digital skills, journalists will be able to better inform the citizens of the digital age (Hirst, 2006). Multiplatform newsgathering and reporting will be a requirement of journalists in the future and journalism training must reflect this.

Greenslade’s challenge to journalists is to relate to the new technologies as enabling and critical to the ongoing relevance and power of good journalism. While there are new skills to learn and new sources to develop for journalists in the digital age, the utility of these new technologies opens up many more channels of communication, that potentially give us more profound insights into our world than ever before (Greenslade, 2006). It is also worthwhile considering the ongoing relevance of traditional media forms for developing nations, older generations and indigenous peoples who using the traditional

media to help rebuild their cultures post-colonisation. While synergies are being developed and exploited between traditional and emergent media forms, the work of the journalist is much the same. Journalists will need to negotiate all of these new channels and potentials while still remaining the sifters and editors of information that people want and need—as they always have.

Notes

1. www.tewahanui.info
2. www.nzherald.co.nz
3. radionz.co.nz
4. www.publicaddress.net
5. www.indymedia.org

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