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Introduction

Social media present both opportunities and threats for news media, affecting their relationships with their publics and the geographical places and spaces that they have traditionally served. Social media provide opportunities to create and expand audiences, increase geographical reach, respond more quickly than ever before to news events and issues, and interact with news consumers in more immediate and direct ways. Consequently, they may enable news media to develop new publics and shift understandings of their relationships with place. However, news outlets' capacity to respond to these opportunities may be limited by competition for audience from non-traditional news providers, dispersal of demand, and as-yet limited opportunities to profit from social media engagement. Further adding to the complexity of the picture is that these opportunities and challenges are occurring at a time when the news media are in a state of flux more broadly, with the destruction of established

business models, the fracturing of audiences and the widely heralded demise of print newspapers threatening the ongoing profitability — and in many cases viability — of news organisations. The threat to newspapers is particularly profound: McCombs et al. describe them as having been in perilous decline for many decades (2011), but the decline has been hastened more recently by technological and societal developments that have both severely impacted their capacity to sustain themselves through advertising and dispersed audience demand for news and information.

At the same time as capacities for information distribution have expanded and audience expectations of instant, ubiquitous access to news have continued to grow, declining profitability has resulted in large-scale and ongoing redundancies (see, for example, New beats, n.d.; Paper cuts, n.d.). This declining resourcing puts newsrooms and journalists under severe and constant pressure — pressure that may be felt even more intensely in newsrooms outside major cities, as non-metropolitan newsrooms have traditionally operated with relatively few resources. A small number of journalists have to cover not only a wide range of news topics, but also, in countries such as Australia, a geographical territory that may span thousands of square kilometres. Further adding to the complexity of the news environment in regional areas are the historically strong relationships between audiences and traditional news products, which may limit both incentive and opportunity to comprehensively utilise online platforms.

Nonetheless, having and maintaining a social media presence has become central to practice in newsrooms small and large. While the frequency of engagement and updating may vary widely, news outlets in the Western world which are not represented on at least one social media platform are becoming increasingly rare. However, the impact of this on news media's publics has yet to be fully explored — not least because the territory is shifting rapidly as new platforms are introduced and patterns of usage and engagement change. Mitchelstein and Boczkowski suggest that fragmenting of audiences has begun to occur as audiences utilise both online and traditional media (2013). Social media may further this fragmentation by providing additional ways for news consumers to access information and interact both with it and with the providers of the information. Exploring ways in which newspapers — particularly smaller newspapers, because of their variety of publication frequencies and ownership patterns — engage with social media may help to provide some pointers to the ways in which news media and their publics are connecting in the networked environment, and to the ways in which these connections are being influenced by social media. It may also further understanding of the increasingly complex relationships between news outlets and their publics, and the ways in which these relationships are being navigated in response to societal and technological change.

A time of change

Journalism is undergoing a significant period of change, affecting 'almost every aspect of the production, reporting and reception of news' (Franklin 2014, p. 469). Academics and practitioners alike have identified a number of key themes in this change. For example, van der Wurff and Schoenbach suggest that the current media environment is characterised by intense competition, commercialisation, falling trust and growing opportunities for user participation (2014), while Picard suggests that 'mature and saturated markets, loss of audiences not highly interested in news, the diminishing effectiveness of the mass media businesses model, the lingering effects of the economic crisis, and the impact of digital competitors' have all taken their toll (2014, p. 488). Franklin, too, highlights digital media as 'creating economic difficulties for legacy media and a frenzied search for alternative business models' (2014, p. 469). Sheller suggests that

> new mobile interfaces are reshaping not only how we filter and access news, but also how we engage in communication and shape social space, and hence how news itself is packaged, presented, and connected to location, proximity, and place. (2015, p. 20)

All of these factors point to a media environment facing ongoing financial pressure, competition from non-traditional providers, shifting and fragmenting audience demand and upheaval of professional practice. While this raises questions about whether the fundamental nature of journalism is changing, there is a strong suggestion in the literature that the shifts being wrought by developments in technology and audience movement are part of a constant and ongoing revision and reinterpretation of practice, creating 'new imperatives' in journalists' work (Usher 2014, p. 5). McCombs et al. point out that many of the influences on journalism remain the same (2011), while Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton argue that 'audio, visual, and digital innovations have not by themselves redefined what it means to be a journalist … but they have contributed to changing the way journalists think about and engage in their work' (2012, p. 19). Shifts in practice are perhaps most evident where they are brought about by changing technology, as 'journalistic practices are integrally tied to the technologies available to and leveraged by practicing actors' (Barnard 2016, p. 191). Technology may be an ongoing influence on journalism (Pavlik 2000), but Fenton claims that the current wave of change is part of a complex convergence of economic, regulatory and cultural forces (2010). While the journalist's job now involves the use of 'multiple tools to produce multiple types of content for multiple delivery platforms' (Singer 2011, p. 217), practitioners must also contend with cuts in newsroom resourcing which have resulted in fewer journalists producing more content under greater time pressure (McChesney 2012; van Leuven, Deprez & Raeymaeckers 2014). This convergence of pressures creates unique challenges for news media in navigating relationships with their publics.

News and social media

The changing technological and social environment has necessitated the staking out of online territory by news organisations, but digital colonisation has not necessarily been a smooth or comfortable process. Initial moves online were relatively slow and limited, with early digital journalism relying on content from newspapers and decisions made by print newsrooms (Bastos 2015). More recently, such approaches have been increasingly replaced by corporate strategies emphasising and/or prioritising digital communication (see, for example, Fairfax Media, n.d.), as media companies restructure and branch out into new products and new audiences (Gade & Lowrey 2011). However, the pace of change has varied widely.

It can be argued that news organisations' early approaches to online publishing have been to at least some extent reflected in their moves into social media. In many cases, particularly among smaller news organisations, social media engagement was — and may continue to be — led by one or more enthusiastic individuals rather than being part of an outlet- or group-wide strategy. This may reflect a limited understanding of the impact and benefits of social media, but could also be seen as indicative of the financial and resourcing constraints affecting journalism:

> Amid shrinking staffs and fewer resources, journalists find their jobs expanding and their routines vastly altered … [J]ournalists are producing additional content, learning multimedia skills, creating content for multiple platforms, updating continuously for the Web and interacting more with the audience. (Gade & Lowrey 2011, pp. 31-2)

In 2013, Hedman and Djerf-Pierre identified three groups of journalist users of social media, stratified by factors including age, type of work, and professional attitudes and practices, suggesting that even within newsrooms there may be limited consistency in journalists' approach to, and use of, social media. The benefits of being able to provide news immediately to an audience that is not geographically bounded, and to interact directly with that audience, have to be weighed against the challenges of both producing additional content for extra platforms at a time when resources are already thinly stretched, and operating in an environment that may not be comfortable for some.

However, as social media have become more firmly embedded in everyday communication, their importance and relevance to news organisations have grown: 'As most newspapers have become multiplatform enterprises, their product lines have expanded from the print domain to include the Web and social media platforms' (Ju, Jeong & Chyi 2014, p. 3). Advantages of being visible on social media include the capacity to draw traffic to their websites (Ju, Jeong & Chyi 2014) and the opportunity for audiences to disseminate online content via social media (Hermida et al. 2012). While any economic benefits may be less immediately evident (Ju, Jeong & Chyi 2014), a social media presence is now largely seen as integral to news media operations.

Social media and news audiences

The impact of this shift on news publics remains unclear. Traditionally, news has relied on a one-to-many model of information distribution:

> For at least 500 years … the basic relationship between publishers and their publics has been defined by a 'broadcast' model of communication. The broadcast model emphasizes a one (or few) to many communication flow, with little feedback between source and receiver (or journalist and audience) and a relatively anonymous, heterogeneous audience. (Pavlik 2000, p. 234)

Pavlik argues that traditional media communication is also asymmetric, with information flowing primarily from organisations to their publics. For news media, the 'audience has traditionally been viewed as the receiver of news and information created, packaged and distributed by professional media organizations' (Hermida et al. 2012, p. 816).

However, online media have disrupted this model. As far back as 2000, Pavlik noted the emergence of two-way news communication, at that time led by email. More recently, 'internet technologies … have facilitated the involvement of audiences in the observation, selection, filtering, distribution and interpretation of events' (Hermida et al. 2012, p. 816). Hermida makes a case that social media are influencing news models because they 'facilitate the immediate dissemination of digital fragments of news and information from official and unofficial sources over a variety of systems and devices' (2010a, p. 298). This means that news is no longer solely the province of professionalised news media (Picard 2014). Sheller suggests that news is now being 'pushed' to audiences through social media, where it is 'mixed with commentary and recommendations from personal social networks, and where the audience/consumer can easily add comments, share items, and re-distribute it to their social networks' (2015, p. 19).

This disruption presents challenges for newsrooms and journalists in navigating understandings of who engages with the work they produce and how people engage with it. While in decades past it might have been possible to generalise to some extent about news publics in terms of geographic location or demographic detail — although Allan argues that most news workers know very little about their audience (2004) — these assumptions have been rendered largely obsolete by the removal of geographic barriers to information access and the growth of online interaction. This shift to what Hess and Waller (2014) have labelled 'geo-social' journalism, with audiences no longer bounded by specific physical location, suggests that news media understandings of the publics must be responsive to change, even to the point where the conventional term 'audience' loses currency. In the networked environment, audience, with its implications of one-way information transmission, may be a largely ineffective term to describe the publics with which news media engage and the numerous ways in which this engagement occurs.

The public sphere and the networked environment

These changes may also be influencing news media's public sphere role. Newspapers were integral to Habermasian conceptualisations of the public sphere (Habermas 1989), as the communication of news helped to enable 'the people to reflect critically upon itself and on the practices of the state' (Stevenson 1995, p. 49). Lee and Chyi note that news 'comprises raw material from which public opinions are formed' (2014, p. 706), and that the media can influence the issues people think about and how they think about them (p. 707). However, the growth of the networked environment — and particularly of social media — is impacting on understandings of the public sphere (or spheres), and through this the role played by news media. Skogerbo and Krumsvik argue that social media have become part of a networked and increasingly hybrid public sphere (2015), and that 'by their sheer ubiquity, these media contribute towards changing media ecologies and open new ways and forms of communication between citizens and their representatives' (p. 350).

Notable about these new forms of communication is the shift away from hierarchical approaches to news traditionally utilised by news media (Hermida et al. 2012). Instead, members of the audience are 'connected not just to the person who sends a message, but also to each other. What emerges is a networked means of communication that alters the publishing dynamics of a media system premised on the idea of a broadcast audience' (p. 816). Lewis, Holton and Coddington point out that

> [a]s the adoption of social media has risen, so too have opportunities for interactions based around the sharing of and commenting on content ranging from text, photos, music and videos to user-generated memes and mobile games. Spaces such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are built for audiences who want to seek and share specific bits of information with others. (2014, p. 233)

In shifting away from information hierarchies, social media blur boundaries between public and private (see, for example, Hess & Bowd 2015) and open up spaces for activities including opinion formation and news production (Skogerbo & Krumsvik 2015).

Social media and journalism practice

Van Leuven et al. identify the networked public sphere as allowing 'non-linear, decentralized and multi-directional information flows' (2014, p. 852), and this may be shifting fundamental understandings of news dissemination as social media become 'ever more ingrained in the news experience, both from the perspective of audiences and the journalism profession' (Hermida et al. 2012, p. 822). The public spheres facilitated through social media are becoming spaces for audiences to share, discuss and contribute information, and a growing body of work suggests this is increasingly central to people's experience of news. News is shared not only by traditional media gatekeepers but also among and between networks (pp. 817, 821), which play a key

role in distributing information on niche topics to specialised communities (Bastos 2015). Veo describes the mass media market as fragmenting 'into thousands of niches' (2009, p. 24), and this presents both opportunities and challenges for news media in engaging with publics in networked spaces. While twentieth-century industrial models of journalism focused coverage on institutions such as government, ignoring or downplaying ordinary people and daily life (Picard 2014), the capacity of networked technologies for personalised news streams allows people to concentrate on content that interests them. For news organisations, social recommendation can extend reach, but may further undermine established business models (Hermida et al. 2012).

Nonetheless, one of the benefits for news media in operating in network spaces may be the transfer of existing trust relationships, as Hermida et al. suggest: '[u]sers are adding social networks to their sources of news, but not at the expense of mainstream media outlets, in which they have retained a degree of trust' (p. 822). Even though they may not be the most immediately responsive entities in the social media space (particularly not when compared with online start-ups such as Buzzfeed), their established trust relationships with their publics may privilege them as sources of information.

Twitter and Facebook

Aligning existing trust relationships with widely utilised social media platforms provides opportunities for news media to engage with their publics in a variety of ways. Facebook and Twitter are the dominant social media platforms in news communication, although others, such as Instagram, are also being utilised. Pew Research Center data from 2014 show Facebook as by far the most popular social media platform, used by 71 per cent of online adults (Duggan et al. 2015). While LinkedIn, Pinterest and Instagram were all slightly more popular platforms overall than Twitter, Twitter was more popular for news. In a 2015 Pew survey, 63 per cent of Facebook and Twitter users said they obtained news through these social networks (in Lichterman 2015; see also Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried & Mitchell 2015). Ju, Jeong and Chyi claim that even though Facebook has more users than Twitter, the latter is more widely used as a source of news (2014, p. 12). In particular, Twitter has been identified as a source of breaking news, with 59 per cent of Twitter users following it for breaking news, compared with 31 per cent of Facebook users (Lichterman 2015).

The ways in which news outlets pursue users through social media are many and varied (Lasorsa et al. 2012), with Twitter and other social messaging tools both shaping and being shaped by established journalistic norms and practices (Hermida 2010b, 2012). For news outlets, establishing a presence on more than one platform may be an effective way of engaging a wider range of users: 'Different SNSs come with different feature sets and different user bases. That is why most newspapers are pursuing users on both Facebook and Twitter' (Ju, Jeong & Chyi 2014, p. 5).

Smaller newspapers and social media

This indication of variety in the ways news outlets utilise social media raises questions about whether this is apparent across, or also within, media sectors. The content and format of posts may provide an indication of what news outlets aim to achieve through their social media engagement. For example, exploring the use of social media by smaller newspapers may provide a sense not only of whether there are broad trends in this engagement, but also of what kinds of messages are being communicated and how, and the extent to which these exchanges are breaking down or maintaining hierarchical news communication processes. It may thus provide pointers to the ongoing nature of relationships between news outlets and their publics.

In Australia, smaller newspapers are generally those located outside metropolitan areas, although this sector could also be considered to encompass suburban newspapers and niche publications. The non-metropolitan newspaper sector in Australia is diverse in type but relatively concentrated in ownership, ranging from locally owned, weekly publications with limited circulation to corporate-owned dailies covering population bases of several hundred thousand people. Whatever their size, these smaller publications are seen as being in many ways different to their metropolitan cousins. They are generally noted as being 'closer' to their communities, and as having a strong emphasis on local news (Bowd 2010; Kirkpatrick 2001; Pretty 1995). In addition, they fulfil a historic role as champions of community interest — a 'voice of the community' (Ekstrom, Johansson & Larsson 2011, p. 259; see also Bowd 2010; Pretty 1995) — although this role may be being impacted by the growth of corporate ownership in Australia. Nonetheless, community-focused journalism is 'about connectedness and embeddedness. It articulates and emphasizes the "local" in both geographic and virtual forms of belonging' (Lewis et al. 2014, p. 232).

Regional newspapers in Australia have been severely impacted by the changes affecting the broader news industry. While initially many were in a stronger financial position than their metropolitan counterparts, more recently they have been increasingly affected by falling revenues (Hess 2015), leading to restructuring and redundancies (Lynch 2015). Nonetheless, most have a social media presence. Lewis et al. (2014) argue that while local journalists may lag behind their 'elite' peers in technology adoption, they 'may be open to more process-level participation' (p. 231). And while, for example, the 'Digital First' strategy adopted by Fairfax Regional Media, Australia's largest regional newspaper publisher, has resulted in job cuts, its emphasis on digital communication has highlighted the perceived importance of this area to the company. In 2014, Fairfax claimed that 'mobile and social media represent the biggest growth in the way readers are accessing information' ('Fairfax Regional Media has set another record win' 2014).

Exploring smaller newspapers' social media use

To explore how regional newspapers in Australia engage with social media, and through this to consider questions of relationships between these newspapers and their publics, the Facebook and Twitter posts of sixteen Australian regional newspapers were monitored and analysed over a three-month period in 2015. Four newspapers in each of four states — South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria — were included, with data gathered from each publication from 1 March to 31 May. Data were collected manually each week during the survey period, using screenshots of all of the posts by each newspaper on the two platforms. Only posts using official newspaper accounts were included (those by journalists under their own names were not). The newspapers represented a mix of locally and corporately owned papers, with publication frequencies ranging from weekly to daily. Included were:

- in New South Wales [NSW]: *Port Macquarie News*, *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), *Northern Star* (Lismore), *Moree Champion*
- in Queensland: *North-West Star* (Mount Isa), *Whitsunday Coast Guardian* (Proserpine), *Beaudesert Times*, *Observer* (Gladstone)
- in Victoria; *Ararat Advertiser*, *Moyne Gazette* (Port Fairy), *Sunraysia Daily* (Mildura), *Castlemaine Mail*
- in South Australia [SA]; *Bunyip* (Gawler), *Border Watch* (Mount Gambier), *Naracoorte Herald*, *Recorder* (Port Pirie).

Analysis of the posts focused on the type of content that was posted and trends across each publication. While posts were counted to provide an indication of these trends, the emphasis of the analysis remained qualitative, concentrating on what information was included, how it was conveyed and the ways in which this might contribute to interaction and ongoing relationships between the news outlets and their publics.

Key elements of the coverage

All of the papers in the survey had Facebook pages, but three either did not have Twitter accounts or had accounts that showed no activity during the survey period. The frequency of posting on both platforms varied widely from publication to publication, and there was also wide variation between platforms, with a minority of newspapers tweeting more frequently than posting on Facebook. Numbers of Facebook posts over the three-month period ranged from ten by Victoria's *Moyne Gazette* to more than 900 by the New South Wales daily, *Northern Star*. Twitter similarly showed wide variation, from one tweet by the *Moyne Gazette* to more than 1000 by Victoria's *Sunraysia Daily*. The greater number of posts overall on Facebook across the publications may be attributable to journalists' level of comfort in using Facebook rather than Twitter, but may also reflect the non-urgent nature of much of the news covered by regional

publications. Exploration of broad trends in post content revealed a high degree of variation, even between newspapers owned by the same company, suggesting that each publication may be adapting its social media use to what it perceives as its own needs and those of its social media followers. For example, while the Fairfax-owned *Moree Champion* made extensive use of a 'regional wrap-up' (called 'Up and At It') as a means of directing traffic to its website, some other publications owned by the same company used this technique rarely or not at all.

However, one consistent trend across the publications was the local nature of content. Local news focus has consistently been identified in the literature as a key element of regional newspaper publishing (Kirkpatrick 2001; Bowd 2010; Vine 2012), and this appears to be flowing through to social media. Some publications — particularly the smaller ones — posted only about local events, issues and people, while others included elements of state, national and international news, but at a low level of frequency. Where broader news was included, it tended to be on topics likely to be of direct interest to regional audiences, such as the death of former Australian prime minister Malcolm Fraser, the executions of Bali Nine pair Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, and — in Queensland and NSW — the State-of-Origin rugby. The local nature of content was more clearly evident in the Facebook posts than the tweets, but this reflects the nature of the platforms, with Twitter's 140-character limit rendering unclear the origins of more of the news items posted.

Several other broad trends were also evident. Unsurprisingly, the daily papers tended to focus more on breaking news and police news than their smaller counterparts, although most publications made use at some point of the immediacy of social media to post information on road accidents affecting traffic. Also worth noting was coverage of Anzac Day, an annual Australian armed services commemoration on 25 April, which fell within the data-collection period. All of the papers included social media coverage of Anzac Day commemorations, and this was arguably where some made the most effective use of the capacities of social media, by including not only pointers to online stories, but also photos and videos, and in some cases by providing running coverage of local Anzac Day events.

Beyond this, however, the newspapers showed extensive variation in post content and format. Unsurprisingly, common topics included police and emergency services news, council and government, sport, human interest and local events. But there was little similarity across publications in the extent to which these topics were a focus of social media content. For example, NSW's *Port Macquarie News* reported extensively on local sporting events through Twitter, but included only three council-related tweets, while the *Daily Advertiser* included little Twitter coverage of either sport or council, but concentrated on police and emergency services news; and SA's *Bunyip* tweeted similar amounts of council and sport news. Similarly, some used social media extensively to direct audiences to photo galleries on a newspaper's website or in its print edition —

for example, around 40 per cent of the Facebook posts by South Australia's *Recorder* newspaper directed the audience to image-based coverage (particularly archival photos) — while others used this technique little if at all. And some used social media as a form of direct promotion for their online or print editions — explicitly referring to content in the newspaper or to a competition being run by the outlet, but others did not. For example, South Australia's *Bunyip* and *Border Watch* newspapers regularly ran images of their front pages as part of Facebook posts, alerting audience members not only to the content of the print edition but also its appearance.

Despite the lack of consistency across the publications, the majority of posts suggested replication of established news communication practices, with newspapers providing information *to* an audience. While all social media platforms incorporate interactive capacity, such as the ability to 'like', re-post or comment, there was limited use of interactivity beyond this. Some papers, such as Queensland's *Whitsunday Coast Guardian* and Victoria's *Sunraysia Daily*, did not directly seek to engage their audiences at all during the data-collection period. Many of the Facebook posts by Victoria's weekly *Castlemaine Mail* appear to have been taken straight from the pages of the print publication, rather than having been adapted for the online environment. However, the publication did on several occasions make use of the capacity to post questions to its audience. In other cases where interaction was explicitly sought, this tended to occur at a relatively superficial level, and primarily through Facebook rather than Twitter. For example, the NSW daily *Northern Star*'s (n.d.) invitations to interaction included a question about predictions for the final score in the State-of-Origin rugby game (May 27). Another question was: 'Do you live in a street with an unusual name? We'd like to hear from you about addresses you love, or hate' (May 5). It also included 'throwaway' questions on many news reports, particularly 'What do you think?', on topics ranging from smoke-free outdoor dining areas (April 18) to the NSW state election (March 11). Nonetheless, while the questions were broad, the generally conversational tone of these questions suggests public responses would be welcomed.

One area where public interaction was specifically sought by some newspapers was in relation to photographs. This included calls for photos of local events taken by people who were there, and a regular 'photo of the day' poll in NSW's *Northern Star*, with readers invited to both submit photos and vote on those submitted. Two papers, the *Northern Star* and Queensland's *Observer*, regularly ran photographs (sometimes the same photographs) with a call to 'caption this photo'. These photos — usually featuring animals and usually also geographically non-specific — were evidently among the resources available to publications in the APN News & Media ownership network.[1]

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1   Note that APN's regional newspapers have since been bought by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp (see Battersby 2016).

There were a small number of instances where journalists used the capacities of social media — predominantly Facebook — to seek people to interview on specific topics, but for the most part the social media posts appeared to serve a primary role of providing information to news consumers. While most were local and relatively conversational in tone, both the content and the phrasing suggested information provision as their main aim, with interaction — through the capacity to like, comment or retweet, or through more direct appeal for information and/or opinion — secondary. This suggests that regional newspapers have yet to fully embrace the networking possibilities offered by social media, instead falling back on established news communication conventions.

Conclusion

In an environment in which 'the contraction of legacy media continues apace, characterised by falling audiences, readerships and advertising revenues' (Franklin 2014, p. 470), news outlets' engagement with social media is not just a way of 'keeping up', but also a means of helping to ensure survival in a rapidly changing media landscape. The growing presence of smaller newspapers in this space indicates that they are — on an individual basis or as part of a corporate strategy — taking steps to avoid being left behind. Allan argues that journalists are at the centre of public life as a result of their mission of 'ensuring that members of the public are able to draw upon a diverse "market place of ideas"' (2004, p. 47). Social media, and the networks they generate, may help to expand this marketplace, reshaping public sphere understandings and the role of journalism within them: '[s]ocial networking sites represent an evolution of the public sphere, where the dynamics of publication and distribution of news are being reshaped by networked publics' (Hermida et al. 2012, p. 816).

Regional newspapers, with their established role at the centre of local communication networks and their longstanding relationships of credibility and trust, may be ideally placed to capitalise on these shifts in public sphere understandings. However, in order to do so they need to be able to maintain their relevance and centrality across both online and offline platforms. Adapting to new media platforms requires more than 'repurposing existing media products' (Wolf & Schnauber 2015, p. 771), and Mitchelstein and Boczkowski suggest that online news producers and consumers 'straddle between tradition and innovation in their daily practices' (2013), a perspective that could also be applied to social media. Franklin points out that 'the expansive popularity of social media, especially Twitter, offers a further development of consequence for the future of journalism' (2014, p. 472), but the extent to which the development is a positive one depends at least in part on how news media respond to it. It appears that at this stage Australia's regional newspapers are taking relatively tentative steps into the social media environment. While engagement with social

media is widespread, and posts may cover a diverse range of topics, most generally replicate traditional one-to-many news communication practices. Where two-way communication with a news outlet's publics occurs, it tends to happen at a relatively superficial level.

In utilising social media primarily in a way that replicates established practice, regional newspapers run the risk of fragmenting existing audiences across a range of delivery platforms — print, website and social media — rather than expanding their reach to new publics and cementing their role in public life. Peters points out that 'old audience habits are certainly becoming de-ritualized and it is unclear what will replace them' (2015, p. 1). Ongoing replication of hierarchical communication practices may lead to news audiences choosing to engage with a preferred delivery platform rather than across the spectrum of communication options in the networked public sphere. As well as fragmenting existing audiences, this may limit opportunities for news outlets to build new publics. The uptake across the broader media environment of concepts such as 'participation, interaction, and openness' (Peters & Witschge 2015, p. 20) is less evident among the regional newspapers in this study, and may affect the extent to which such publications can build and maintain publics in the networked environment.

While regional newspapers have traditionally had relatively close relationships with their audiences because of their focus on local content and local interest, as the nature of the media landscape changes this relationship may not be secure. Peters suggests that in the past there was a 'certain stability and predictability to media consumption', but today such patterns seem 'increasingly anachronistic, at least with Western societies. The places, spaces, times, and further social aspects of news consumption are all changing … ' (2015, p. 5). This presents news media in regional areas with particular challenges. They may have been insulated to some extent by their longstanding connection with their — predominantly geographically bound — readerships, but as understandings of networks and public sphere engagement change, and understandings of place shift, they risk being left behind. While the study reported above has limitations in that it canvasses only the published social media outputs of the newspapers, rather than considering the motivations of journalists or the direct responses of audiences, it nonetheless is a first step in providing pointers to how Australia's regional newspapers are utilising social media and whether such utilisation places them in a position to expand their publics. It suggests that to a large extent established communication practices are being replicated through social media, supplemented by limited attention to new means of storytelling and superficial calls for interaction. Consequently, rather than being able to expand their publics as geographical and other communication barriers break down, and thereby consolidate their place as a central element of local communication networks, news outlets risk fragmenting existing audiences across the multiple platforms in which these audiences are increasingly engaged.

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