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### News Connections: Regional newspapers and the Web

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#### Introduction

This paper examines key discussions occurring in relation to three issues currently affecting the news media both globally and locally. They are: an apparent disconnection between the media and their publics; declines in circulation and readership; and the increasing role and influence of new technologies on news media. While this paper considers these issues at the global level, it applies them to the local. It does so through an exploration of their impact on and consequences for regional newspapers in Queensland. Specifically, I explore these issues through an examination of the current status of Queensland regional newspapers in relation to a number of areas including: circulation; the use of information technologies, in particular websites; and how technologies might be used to foster public discussion in the process connecting geographically isolated publics and creating new readerships.

This paper sets the scene by reviewing the latest research and discussion surrounding the key issues of public disconnection with media, declining circulations of newspapers and the Internet's impact on newspapers. In respect to the latter issue, this paper investigates some of the ways in which the Internet is being used as a method of reinvolving a variety of publics in public discussion and reconnecting them with journalists. I then provide an overview of the current status of Queensland regional newspapers in relation to circulation and their use of websites. Finally, this paper draws on the recent developments in the use of the web by newspapers, particularly those in the USA, to provide a number of suggestions and ideas about how regional newspapers might improve their use of information technologies. In particular, the web offers these newspapers a method of addressing ongoing circulation declines as well as the disconnection between the news media and publics.

#### Disconnections

I want to begin with an overview of the discussions occurring about the apparent disconnection between the media and its publics. While this debate is not a new one, more than 20 years ago Wald and Lupfer (1978) and Whitson (1980) identified that this was a problem, it is the more recent history of this issue on which I want to focus. In the past ten years or so, a growing body of literature has attested to the continuing disconnection between the news media and their publics (Wilkins, 2000; Rosen, 1999; Janeway, 1999; McChesney, 1999, 1997; Hackett and Zhao, 1998; Sparks, 1998; Munton, 1997; Nye, 1997; Putnam, 1996; Raboy, 1992; Jencks, 1993). Hackett and Zhao (1998, p. 6) explain: 'Marketing surveys reveal a growing disconnection between media and their audiences, and younger people in particular are simply shunning the conventional news media en masse'. They stress (1998, p. 1) that members of the public expect the news media to function 'in the public interest' because of their role as agents of democracy. Hackett and Zhao (1998, p. 6) explain that along with the fragmentation of the links between publics and the news

media, there has been a cogent decline in the public's interest in politics. In the USA, one of the key movements developed in response to this has been that of public journalism. This form of journalism draws on precursors such as developmental journalism (Gunaratne, 1998), and its proponents describe it as a method of reconnecting the public to the democratic process via the media (Rosen, 1999, 1997; Rosen and Merrit, 1994). It seeks to do so by re-positioning journalism as a key agent in the democratic process and by reinvigorating public debate through the reinvolvement of a variety of publics in such processes. One of the key criticisms of traditional journalism by those involved with public journalism is that the former has moved away from its key purpose of serving the public (Rosen, 2000, 1999). By altering the way journalists do their jobs, public journalism seeks to transform the type of journalism being done and subsequently change its outputs. The disconnection between some news media and their publics has been evidenced through declining audiences or readerships (Sommerville, 2001; Peiser, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2000; Gleick, 1996). I explore this more fully later in this paper.

In Australia, debates about the current status and role of the news media have been somewhat less intense than those in the USA, but certainly just as important. Grattan (1998) expresses concern about the increasing influence of commercial considerations on the Australian news media. She believes this has shifted the focus of the news media from serving the public, to making a profit, thus limiting the ability of the media to act as a mechanism through which publics can enter public life and democratic process. Others have also been vocal about the disconnection between the media, the public and political process (Kingston, 2001). Schultz (1998, p.9) argues that despite the problems which have beset the news media, they are in a position to develop links to communities and reinvigorate social capital. She suggests that while there are limitations on the ability of the media to facilitate wideranging and informative public debate, there is still the potential for the news media to rediscover and re-engage with their primary role as facilitators of democracy. More recently Australian journalism was criticised by News Limited chief executive officer John Hartigan <sup>3</sup> (<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/mediarpt/stories/s647619.htm>) for the apparent 'disconnect between what issues that readers really care about and largely the diet of journalists (sic) that they receive on a day by day basis, both in newspapers and broadcasting'. He said the Australian media needed to reconnect with the public and take a 'leadership role' in facilitating and encouraging community debate. Hartigan is not the first to raise these issues in relation to Australian journalism. As discussed earlier in this paper, Kingston (2001) and Grattan (1998) point to the apparent failure of the Australian news media to focus on issues of concern to the public and Schultz (1994, p. 15) indicates that Australians are dissatisfied with, and sceptical about, the news media.

While the disconnection between the news media and their publics has been intensely scrutinised in the past decade or so in the USA, and to a lesser extent in Australia, a school of thought has arisen in tandem with this idea which suggests newspapers should do more than provide information. Hollander (1994, p. 60) laments that: 'Newspapers used to be an important part of what bound a community together, a common forum for ideas and discussion'. His point is an important one in the context of this paper and it has particular relevance for regional media in Australia. Regional newspapers often play a significant and important role in their communities in facilitating discussion and linking publics, although it is arguable that this role has been somewhat eroded through tighter advertising to editorial ratios and shifts in the content of the newspapers (Ewart 2000b, p. 237). Many regional communities have access to only one local newspaper, often located in a major centre which services a number of satellite towns distributed over a large geographical area. Regional media, in particular newspapers, should provide the spaces and places where issues of importance to the community can be discussed. Australian research indicates these newspapers play a pivotal role in uniting regional communities (Meadows and Ewart 2001; Ewart 2000a). They 'play a central role in constructing and cementing the identity and culture of communities and their publics' (Ewart 2000a, p. 1). Communities form understandings and ideas about themselves and their members through their representation in

local media (Ewart 2000a, p.1). Therefore the issue of disconnection between Australian regional newspapers and audiences, and how it might be overcome by using information technologies, warrants further attention. Before exploring how some newspapers in the USA have used information technologies, in particular the web, to address some of these issues, it is important to examine a topic closely related to the disconnection between the media and its publics, that of declining circulations.

## **Circulation and Readership**

Newspapers globally and locally have been battling the problem of declining circulation for some time. Since 1967 (Sommerville, 2001, p. 24), when declines in readership and circulation were first noted, newspapers have tried to halt the flow of readers away from their product. A few newspapers have gone against the trend, experiencing small circulation gains (Garneau, 1992), but for the most part reductions in circulation and readership have continued (Gleick, 1996, p. 66). The World Association of Newspapers (1997, p. 8) summed up the situation: 'By whatever criteria one may choose to measure it – advertising levels, circulation, time spent reading – newspapers are in decline and have been for decades'. Researchers suggest a variety of factors have contributed, including: fewer young readers (Peiser, 2000); the death of afternoon newspapers and consequent loss of blue collar readers (Morton, 1992); the threat from online news sources (Snoddy, 2000; Gleick, 1996; Green, 1999); an economic downturn (Garneau, 1992) along with spiralling costs; and reader dissatisfaction with content (World Association of Newspapers, 2000, p. 8). While some believe there are ways of recovering from the various problems facing news media (Bain, 1990) others, including Compañie (cited in WAN, 1997, p. 8) are not so positive about the print news media's future. Compañie suggests that: 'Newspapers are a mature product that will continue their decline' (WAN, 1997, p. 8). Newspapers in Europe have also experienced declines in readership in the past few decades (Peiser, 2000, p. 11). Peiser reveals the impact of the 'negative cohort effect' on newspaper readership. He suggests 'that young birth cohorts tend to read less than cohorts born earlier' (Peiser, 2000, p. 11). His study reveals that newspapers in the USA and Germany have been significantly affected by the negative cohort trend. Clearly, newspapers need, as Strupp (2000) argues, to do more work to develop the Generation X and Y readerships. He reports on a survey of newspaper readers in the USA, in which more than half of the respondents indicated they read a newspaper regularly (Strupp, 2000). However, his research also suggests newspapers need to create youth readerships, while retaining those readers over 50 years of age. Another marker of declining readerships and advertising profits is the reduction in the number of daily newspapers in the USA (Gleick, 1996, p. 66). Gleick (1996, p. 66) found:

'Readership is declining even as new technologies transform or undermine the role newspapers have traditionally played: that of town crier, bulletin board, community troublemaker and trusted interpreter of the outside world. For years newspaper circulation has in general been on an inexorable slide. Between 1992 and 1995 it fell about 3% nationwide, with some major papers taking even bigger hits'.

In the past few years, newspapers in Australia and overseas have begun calling for new ways to measure readership, because of the view that circulation and readership are not always interdependent (Simper, 2002, p.12; Fitzgerald, 1999). While this is an important issue, it has become increasingly clear that Australian newspapers are facing the same kinds of problems as their counterparts in the USA. Green (1999, p. 18) explains:

Australian newspapers are confronted by the same visceral problem that confronts newspapers around the world – declining circulations. As circulations fail to keep pace with population growth, newspapers everywhere are forced to ask themselves: What are we doing wrong? The answers to that question are manifold and far from unanimous. Reasons proposed for falling circulation range from competition from other media (most recently the Internet), to declining levels of literacy among the

population in general, to the proposition that newspapers represent a “mature” industry approaching its sunset.

The World Association of Newspapers reports that, overall, Australian newspapers experienced a decrease in circulation of 1.9 per cent in 2000 (<http://www.wan-press.org/ce/previous/2001/congress.forum/wpt/circulation.inc>). A clearer picture of readership trends amongst Australian newspapers is provided by The Australian’s Media supplement (Simper, 2002, p.12). Although the information only covers metropolitan titles and magazines, it is evident that any circulation gains in the past 12 months or so do not make up for significant losses in past years.

Australian regional newspapers also continue to struggle with the problem of declining circulations (Kirkpatrick, 2000, p. 82-83). Kirkpatrick (2000, pp. 84-85) shows that the circulation of regional daily newspapers in Bundaberg, Gympie, 5 Ipswich, Mackay, Maryborough, Mt Isa, Rockhampton and Toowoomba declined in the ten-year period from 1990 to 2000. While circulation losses varied between titles, some newspapers lost more than 10 per cent of their circulation in that decade. Significantly, Kirkpatrick identifies that only a few regional daily newspapers have experienced circulation increases including those at Gladstone, Cairns, the Gold Coast and Maroochydore. All of these newspapers are in moderate to high population growth areas. Attempts by regional newspapers to reverse the problem of declining readership and circulation have mainly focussed on re-branding and reader surveys, which, while including issues about content, have focussed mainly on advertising and rarely on reader needs. Undoubtedly, regional newspapers in Queensland need to reverse declining circulations.

### **Impact of the Internet on Newspapers**

The introduction of the Internet, and more specifically the web, was heralded by dire warnings to the newspaper industry. Online news was positioned as a significant challenge to the printed newspaper. Media outlets throughout the world, and particularly in the USA, have established websites in response to the rapid uptake, and apparent popularity, of this form of technology by a variety of publics. However, the majority of news websites continue to struggle with profitability (Casale, 2000). Casale (2000, p. 22) explains that only 24 per cent of online newspapers make a profit. Until this year, Australian online newspapers remained unprofitable; however, Fairfax CEO, Fred Himmler, says online advertising revenue is increasing, with F2 starting to make a profit (Day, 2003: 6). Some newspapers, for example the Wall Street Journal, have been successful in raising profits from online subscriptions. In Australia, the Financial Review offers online subscriptions although these appear to be tied to print subscriptions with five-day and six-day a week subscribers being offered access to the online version of the newspaper (see <http://afr.com/>).

Although more than 2000 newspapers in the USA have created websites linked to their print editions, the interactivity, or lack thereof, of many such sites remains a problem (Schultz, 2000, p. 217). Research (Schultz, 2000, p. 217) has identified that more than 4000 magazines and newspapers throughout the world have established an online presence and newspapers continue to create websites. The World Association of Newspapers reports that between 1999 and 2000 in two-thirds of countries for which it could obtain data, the number of daily newspapers with websites increased (<http://www.wan-press.org/ce/previous/2001/congress/forum>). In the other one-third of countries, the number of newspapers with websites remained constant. Although the establishment of a newspaper website does not necessarily lead to increased circulation, one of the few studies to examine this issue reveals that French newspapers with websites have experienced circulation improvements ([http://www.pressflex.com/news/fullstory.php/aid/.35/Cannibalization\\_Au\\_contraire!.inc](http://www.pressflex.com/news/fullstory.php/aid/.35/Cannibalization_Au_contraire!.inc)). More research is needed to determine the extent to which these findings are applicable both internationally and in Australia. Compaine (WAN, 1997, p. 9) believes the Internet has the

potential to reverse the continuing decline of newspapers and suggests (WAN, 1997, p. 9) the 'internet is the technological and economical way out of the spiral of paper, presses and trucks. And newspapers have several reasons to embrace it. Now, wholeheartedly'. Compaine believes that the Internet is an important factor for the survival of newspapers because 'there is evidence that internet users are looking for the same type of content as in the newspaper' (WAN, 1997, p.9).

Recent developments in Australia indicate that the online divisions of newspapers can be made profitable. However, in the case of F2, Fairfax's online division, significant losses were incurred before the online arm became profitable (Australia Media, Day, March 13, 2003: p 6). The extent of the impact of the Internet and the web on newspaper circulation, readership and profits has yet to be fully revealed. A review of recent research and discussion in this area reveals some polarisation about the web's impact on traditional media such as newspapers. Nicholson (1999, p. 34) suggests that: 'Online users are very likely to be print newspaper readers too. According to survey results released by the Newspaper Association of America. The NAA reported that among all Web users in the top 50 markets, 61% read a daily print, and 74% read a Sunday print newspaper'. Others (Higham, 2000, p. 17; Thottam, 1999, p. 217) have shown that online news can take readers away from the traditional print product. Thottam (1999, p.217) says newspaper readership fell by almost 20 per cent between 1970 and 1999. However, Boynton (2000) suggests that online news might assist the survival of printed newspapers. Higham (2000, p. 17) explores the challenges print newspapers face from online news sites. In particular, he suggests the reliance of print newspapers on classified advertising makes it difficult for them to compete with online sites which offer a number of services and products to users.

### Current content of Queensland Regional daily newspaper sites

In assessing the current status of newspaper websites in Queensland, I choose to focus on regional daily newspapers because of the important place they hold and the role they fulfil in their communities. I used the National Library of Australia (<http://www.nla.gov.au>) to identify those Queensland regional newspapers with websites. As well, a research assistant undertook a search using Google to determine whether any of the newspapers had websites which were not listed by the National Library of Australia. Some of the 15 newspapers studied did not have dedicated websites. Those newspapers with websites were examined to determine the type of information and facilities they provided. For ease of analysis I identified several key services which these sites provide including: news; advertising; information; feedback; links; products; subscriptions; and forums.

Table 1: Queensland regional daily newspaper website contents

Title News A) Briefs B) top stories in full C) PDF front page D) Weather E) headlines Ads A) Link to Classified Adverts B) Online Display Info. A) Staff B) History C) Production Feedback A) site B) newspaper C) reader needs Links A) business B) comm.- unity C) ISPs D) medical E) education F) govt. G) other titles in group Products A) Photos B) Other masthead C) Competitions Subs A) by email B) online form C) phone Forum A) letters to editor B) guest book C) discussion D) general chat room group \*News- Mail BDE A B G Advocate No site Gladstone Observer No site Gympie Times No site Queensland Times A C E A AB BDEF A A Being revised Northern Star No site Daily Mercury AD AB ABC AB ABCDE BC A \* Morning Bulletin Site being developed Sunshine Coast Daily BD AB AC A ABEG AC B AD Chronicle BCD AB ABC ABC AB B AB Daily News C Cairns Post No site Gold Coast Bulletin BD A ABEG AB C A (email contact) Townsville Bulletin No site North West Star No site

\* The Morning Bulletin website was not fully developed or online at the time of submitting this article. Improvements are planned for other sites including the News- Mail which intends to provide additional services including online chat forums about local issues. Some of the newspapers included in this table do not have websites.

## Website contents – Queensland regional dailies

Of the 15 regional daily newspapers based in Queensland, only half have dedicated websites. One newspaper, the Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton), is currently developing a subscription based website. Of the newspapers which have websites, two are being revised, including the News-Mail (Bundaberg) and the Queensland Times. The latter paper is revising its online chat section while the former is developing an entire website. The Morning Bulletin's site will contain access to a Portable Document File (PDF) of the front page, full text of news stories, news archives and classified advertisements. A sub-editor from that newspaper explained the site would be aimed at subscribers from geographical locations which traditionally had experienced problems accessing the print version of the newspaper early in the day due to their distance from this newspaper's home base of Rockhampton. The content and design of the existing newspaper websites, all of which are owned by APN with the exception of the Gold Coast Bulletin which is owned by News Limited, varies considerably. For the most part, these sites remain under-developed from both a commercial and non-commercial point of view. A common feature of the websites is the presence of online classified advertisements either linked to an individual newspaper's home page, or accessible through a link to a central classified advertisements site for a newspaper group. For example, Australian Provincial News has a central classified advertisements website (<http://www.checkout.com.au>) which covers regional daily newspapers based at Bundaberg, Fraser Coast, Gladstone, Gympie, Ipswich, Mackay, Rockhampton, Sunshine Coast, Toowoomba and Warwick. Some of the daily newspapers based in these areas do not have home pages and their sole presence on the web is through this classified advertisement site. A few of the newspaper websites, Daily Mercury (Mackay), Sunshine Coast Daily, The Chronicle (Toowoomba) include online advertising, but the majority have not progressed to this stage. Many of the sites have links to real estate agency websites.

None of the newspapers provide a full version of their print edition through their online sites. This could be explained by the difficulties many online newspapers in Australia and elsewhere (Casale, 2000, p. 22) have had in getting readers to subscribe to online versions and in making money from such subscriptions. The majority of the Queensland regional newspaper websites provide a selection of the day's headlines complemented by several paragraphs which outline the content of the key news stories. Most provide comprehensive coverage of local news, with a selection of news and sports headlines and summary paragraphs which allow users to link to the full version of these news stories. Live news feeds are provided by one newspaper, the Sunshine Coast Daily, which links site users to breaking news stories on websites hosted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Washington Post and a variety of other news media. Most of the regional newspaper sites provide links to weather sites including the Australian Bureau of Meteorology.

A range of general information is provided on most sites about the newspaper and the region it serves. As well, some sites include details about the newspaper's history and newspaper staff including names and phone numbers and in some cases photographs. Several sites offer facts about the production processes involved in producing the print version of the newspaper.

Only two of the newspaper websites provide a feedback section where users can leave comments about the site. The Daily Mercury in Mackay uses this function to gather data about those using the website. This is done through a survey focusing on the demographics of site-users and their likes and dislikes in relation to the content of this newspaper. The Sunshine Coast Daily asks users for feedback on its website. Most of the websites provide links to community organisations and businesses. Site users are able to purchase photographs and subscribe to the print versions of the newspapers.

With the exception of the Daily News at Warwick, none of these newspapers has attempted to provide anything approaching a dedicated online community discussion forum linked to issues of

public concern or the stories covered in the newspapers. Two newspapers, the News-Mail and Queensland Times, indicate this facility will be provided in the near future. Daily News web site users are able to leave comments in response to a question posted by the newspaper on the site. For example, on September 25, 2002 the question was: 'Should parents have the right to choose whether they will smack their children' (<http://www.warwickdailynews.com.au/cgi-bin/question/question.pl>). Responses were left on the site from readers of the newspaper as well as online site users from throughout Australia and overseas. By asking this question and providing the space for online site users to respond, this newspaper created a community of interest based on discussion about an issue, rather than geography. Pavlik (1999, p. 58) explains: 'Audiences are rapidly shifting from almost exclusively local to communities of interest that transcend geographical and political boundaries'. As well, the Daily News allows readers to submit photographs and stories for publication on the site, creating the kind of 'people's journalism' referred to by Yelvington (quoted in Tumber, 2001, p.108). Only one other regional daily newspaper in Queensland, the Sunshine Coast Daily, provides a similar facility. In this case the newspaper offers a chat room, but it is not specifically designed as a community forum. The newspaper's website explains how the chat room works (<http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au>):

Now residents can log onto <http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au> and join with others in real time chatting. No registration or special software is required and it is open to visitors globally. Tell a friend overseas to join you in the Chat room and avoid the international phone costs ... <http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au> will be featuring special guests in the Chat room and holding special chat forums on special topics such as the local Council elections.

However, there remains little consistency in the appearance of the newspaper websites, the majority of which belong to APN newspapers.

## **Discussion**

The proliferation of websites, databases and the vast array of information the Internet offers, has heralded a variety of changes for journalism and journalists. One of the most significant changes being facilitated by the Internet is the redefinition and repositioning of the relationship between the news media and publics (Pavlik, 1999, p. 58). While some newspapers are starting to use websites as a means of reconnecting with their publics (Tompkins, 2002: [http://www.poynter.org/centerpiece/043002\\_intro.htm](http://www.poynter.org/centerpiece/043002_intro.htm)), many have failed to develop their sites beyond standard news and information features. The increasing role of the Internet in journalism prompted a call from Tumber (2001, p. 96) for a 'reassessment of journalism's role in the new media environment'. As a result, he suggests journalists need to spend time reflecting on and reconsidering the role of journalism as a democratic agent. While Tumber (2001, p. 110) believes the advent of new technologies is one of the key factors in bringing about a change to journalism, particularly its public sphere role, he says that journalism will continue to play an important and significant interpretive role for those who get their news from the Internet. Most importantly, Tumber (2001, p. 110) says journalism has a critical role to play in the evolution of the 'political struggle over control of cyberspace'. In this respect journalism should be a facilitator of public discussion on the Internet as well as in other public spheres.

While the Internet is one space in which journalism might contribute to the facilitation of public debate, other information technologies should not be ignored as potential tools of civic engagement (Bimber, 2000, p. 330). This means for those without access to the Internet or the web, information technologies such as the phone, fax and text messaging might help them engage in discussion about issues of community concern. Bimber (2000, p. 330) suggests that information technologies other than the Internet should not be overlooked because of the convergence in the use of them both by the public, government and media, as forms of engaging people in civic life. He believes (2000, p. 330) the boundaries are blurring between activities which happen in cyberspace and those which occur in the places and spaces where people traditionally engage in

civic life.

This idea is a key one in relation to the issues being discussed in this paper. Regional media should take account of Bimber's suggestion about using information technologies to develop community forums, for example using a number of information technologies to ensure groups, communities and individuals are not disadvantaged from participating in public discussion because they do not have Internet access. Rather, an approach which caters for a variety of methods of communication would be best. Bimber makes another point which needs to be considered in the context of this paper: 'A good deal of what matters for civic engagement is not information technology per se, but rather the information conveyed by it'. (Bimber, 2000, p. 331). Here Bimber identifies a significant issue: there is clearly little point in providing the mechanisms by which the community can engage in public discussion unless the kind of discussion occurring is useful and contributes to civic life. Regional newspapers would need to adopt a model which focuses on civic engagement, rather than one which only uses certain technologies. However, the technological infrastructure clearly needs to be in place before this useful and contributory kind of discussion can begin.

While some media owners and journalists see the Internet as a threat to journalism, Yelvington (Yelvington quoted in Tumber, 2001, p. 108) suggests that journalism might respond by becoming more people oriented where services other than those directly related to news are provided. An example of this approach is what Yelvington calls 'People's Journalism', involving people telling their own stories through news web sites. Media outlets in the USA have started to use their websites in more innovative ways to connect community members with each other, with authorities, and with journalists. The establishment of web logs has been at the forefront of these developments. While there are a variety of styles of web logs, those that enable members of publics to interact in public forums and to talk to journalists would appear to be most suitable for the regional newspapers on which this study focuses. Tompkins (2002, [http://www.poynter.org/centerpiece/043002\\_intro.htm](http://www.poynter.org/centerpiece/043002_intro.htm)) suggests weblogs, or online community forums, can work for media outlets in a number of ways, including by bringing 'in new voices'. Their interactive nature means 'they bring in more audience participation'. While he suggests increased web traffic should translate to increased subscriptions, this has yet to be borne out by sustained, longitudinal studies. However, many online newspapers appear to have been slow to provide online discussion forums for readers. Some of the newspapers which have developed web sites have concentrated on using them for advertising rather than online forums (Schultz, 2000, pp. 208-209). In his examination of the amount of attention journalists at the New York Times paid to email from readers and to their own newspaper's online forum, Schultz (2000, p. 216) finds that 'still more efforts could be made to really take reader response and reader-to-reader communication seriously'. Significantly, his research (Schultz, 2000, p. 216) indicates that 74 per cent of the newspaper's readers who use its online forum 'could not remember having received any feedback from the newspaper's staff'. Importantly, Schultz (2000, p. 217) points out that many online newspapers have failed to adequately cater for their publics. He (2000, p. 217) suggests that the media's attempts to address people as publics should not be limited to 'elitist' products like the New York Times'. Rather, local media and journalists could use the Internet, websites and associated technology to interact with the public. He explains (Schultz, 2000, p. 217): 'The plea here is that mass media online still have to improve in offering real participation to their audiences. The majority of online newspapers do not even offer interactive options other than email to the newsroom'. In this area, research shows that members of the public are eager to enter public discussions on issues they consider important (Hollander, 1994, p. 60). Hollander (1994, p. 60) believes that: 'People want to be heard. They want to ask questions. And they want to talk to each other'. Newspapers play an important role in this process.

Other developments in the use of websites by news media include combined efforts where a range of news organisations have joined forces in an effort to improve access to information and, ultimately, the quality of journalism. Examples include the establishment of combined media websites as part of a partnership between television, radio stations and newspapers. Some media



organisations in the USA have, through the provision of websites which combine sound, vision and print, ensured the public can access a range of information that would otherwise not be available (Tomkins 2002: [http://www.poynter.org/centerpiece/043002\\_intro.htm](http://www.poynter.org/centerpiece/043002_intro.htm)).

As the presence of newspaper web sites has become, at least internationally, less of a curiosity and more prevalent, a new phase in their development appears to be underway. Newspaper executives 'in the USA are planning more aggressive, more creative strategies to link the printed newspaper with its online cousin: to make them more complementary for readers, users, and advertisers' (Casale, 2000, p. 22). However, it appears that many Australian online newspapers, or those newspapers which have websites, have yet to follow this path. Certainly no information is available that indicates regional newspapers in Australia might be following international trends in creating more interactive online sites which are linked to print editions through the provision of online forums which allow readers to discuss issues covered in the print edition. Clearly, much more could be done by Australian newspapers, particularly regional newspapers, in developing interactive websites, linking them to print editions and using them as a community development tool. Such facilities would be useful as Australian regional communities are often geographically isolated although their members tend to form close ties to each other.

Online newspapers, or newspaper websites, would be well placed to provide forums that could encourage and facilitate the kind of community debate that is required as part of the re-energisation of democratic process. Hollander (1994, p. 60) suggests the services provided by newspapers could extend to community forums which he describes as 'the place where the community communicates with itself, where ideas are debated, policy is discussed, problems are confronted'. Hollander (1994, p. 60) identifies newspaper websites as places where people could come 'together in ways similar to talk radio'. Such forums could also provide readers and members of communities with the opportunity to participate in discussion and debate about the problems and issues facing them and their communities.

In Australia, the number of newspapers with websites is increasing. The World Association of Newspapers indicates that in 2000 there were 172 daily newspapers with websites in Australia (<http://www.wan-press.org/ce/previous/2001/congress/forum>). This represents an increase of 50 Australian newspapers with websites on the previous year's survey.

Another website indicates that 262 Australian newspapers have created websites, including dailies and non-dailies (<http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/npapers.inc>). The extent of these sites varies. Some are limited to classified advertisements while others offer a more extensive range of information and services. Of these, 25 are based in Queensland and this study examines 15 which are classifiable as regional daily newspapers. Overall, Queensland regional newspapers websites remain underutilised and under-developed from a non-commercial perspective. Given the ongoing circulation woes of regional dailies (Kirkpatrick, 2000, pp. 84-85), merely replicating the print editions of these titles in the online environment would serve little purpose. It is even possible that such an approach would further diminish the circulation of these newspapers. Newspapers throughout the world continue to experience difficulties in making online newspapers profitable both in respect of advertising and subscription revenue. Thottam's suggestion (1999, p.220) that online versions of newspapers 'should complement the primary product and persuade the readers to pick up the print version' would seem a reasonable approach for Queensland regional newspapers to adopt. However, the Queensland regional newspapers examined in this study appear to have made little attempt to value add to their print products through the use of the Web. One way of doing this would be for newspaper web sites to include the day's headlines and pointers to more in-depth feature articles in the print edition. This may prompt web site users to explore the story through the print product as Thottam (1999, p. 220) explains: 'The trick is to use the Web edition as a bait or teaser to draw the reader to the print product'.

A recent conversation (May 1, 2003) with APN's director of creation and innovation, Gary

Sutcliffe, revealed the newspaper group was re-developing its regional newspaper web sites. Later this year (2003), the group will reveal its new approach to the use of the web with the relaunching of regional newspaper web sites across the group. The relaunch promises a corporate look and feel to the web sites. While information provision will be the primary focus of the new sites, new ways of revenue generation will be incorporated. Long term consideration of the role of web sites for APN regional newspapers would include a focus on provision of a service to the community. Sutcliffe said a key consideration in the redevelopment of the sites was the creation of connections between advertisers and clients. However, APN research revealed that only 47 per cent of regional newspaper readers had access to the web, which compared unfavourably to the access levels of readers of metropolitan newspapers. Sutcliffe said that would influence the redevelopment of the group's newspaper websites. He said the group was not considering incorporating online facilities such as web logs and forums into the new sites.

It is significant that none of the newspaper websites examined in this paper, with the exception of the Daily News, offer dedicated facilities through which members of the public can engage in public debate and discussion about issues of common interest and concern. The web offers huge potential for regional newspapers, such as those examined in this paper, to facilitate public debate in constructive and innovative ways. Newspaper websites could help foster public debate, in the process creating new links between newspapers and their communities and publics. This would also help members of the public to form connections with each other. In an era characterised by editorial space restrictions caused by increasing advertising to editorial ratios and associated pressures on journalists (Ewart, 2000, p. 254), regional newspapers have, for the most part, been unable to provide the space required to foster public discussion by involving members of the public in dialogue. Examples of ways in which this might be done include printing the public's comments about issues outside of the traditional spaces reserved for this, for example letters to the editor, and involving the public more as sources in stories that affect them. Thottam (1999, p. 217) explains the benefits of the web in this respect: 'The Web is a medium freed from the constraints of time and space experienced by print' (Thottam, 1999, p. 217). As well, the web facilitates the free flow of public discussion unhindered by the production time required to produce the print version of a newspaper.

The significant advances in the use of online sites by newspapers such as the development of web logs and community forums being made in the USA would benefit the Queensland regional newspapers examined in this paper. Such facilities would provide these newspapers with one method of developing connections to the geographically and socially isolated communities and publics they serve. The process of facilitating public discussion and debate about issues of concern to the community would serve to strengthen the place and space they fill in those communities. Web logs, where members of the public can post ideas, suggestions and thoughts about current events or issues of importance to them and their communities, would help regional newspapers and journalists to develop connections with communities and enhance newsgathering opportunities. Those connections may be based on geographical areas or communities of interest, that is, communities of people wanting to discuss a particular issue.

Thottam (1999, p. 217) believes the web has 'broken down traditional deadlines imposed by print newspapers'; more importantly, it can also be used to break down the barriers that exist between journalists and their publics. In combination with a website, regional newspapers could use existing information technologies such as the fax, phone and text messaging to engage members of the public in public discussion. Community members could leave their comments on message banks or fax them to the newspaper and they could be entered into the newspaper's computer system and easily transferred to a community weblog. That way, those without regular access to the Internet would still be able to have a voice within the debates which occur and are posted on the websites. Topics for discussion might focus on issues drawn from stories in the newspaper, another method of gaining readers for the print version. Alternatively, weekly topics or questions might be posted to draw comment and discussion from members of the public.

These newspapers could use their print editions as a kind of cross-promotional platform. Debates and discussions occurring via web logs could be promoted through the print edition while the website could be used to attract readers to the hard copy of the newspaper. The websites could also be used to facilitate conversations between members of the public and journalists. Importantly, Thottam (1999, p. 217) recognises that online newspapers need to do more than merely publishing the email addresses of journalists in order to facilitate 'a real dialogue between the reader and the reporters and editors, something the limited letter-to-the-editor pages could not do'. Indeed, reporters and editors would be able to provide information in addition to that contained in their stories via a web log. Such interactivity between members of various publics, geographical communities and communities of interest, editors, reporters and sub-editors via the web, represents one way of addressing the continuing disconnection between media and their publics. However, in order for this to occur, a significant change is required as Thottam (1999, p. 219) suggests 'in the content and organizational culture of newspapers'. He continues (1999, p. 219): 'Interactivity with readers should become the major hallmark of the journalistic process. That is possible only if the newspapers are willing to give up some of their control and elitism which comes from being the first to report news. They can no more be sole gatekeepers of news and information'. Thottam (1999, p. 220) provides an example of how small newspaper organisations, much like those operating regional newspapers in Queensland, have used the Web innovatively:

Sunline, a chain of small dailies and weeklies has focused on building an interactive electronic community through its Web edition (<http://www.sunline.com>). It has set up Web pages for all clubs, organizations, musicians, nonprofits and government agencies in the community. Sunline also provided computer training for its readers to use the Web.

Given the uptake of the Internet, and more specifically the web, by young people, newspapers could use their online sites as a method of creating new readerships, particularly in the youth area where readership has been declining for some years (Kirkpatrick, 2000, p. 98). Online competitions, stories and issues aimed at youth may attract young site users although there is no strong research evidence to indicate that they will become readers of the print product. Contributions of stories, photos and features might also be garnered for the online site from young people as a further means of developing this readership. Currently, the regional newspapers on which this paper focuses have minimal content aimed at youth readerships.

## **Conclusion**

While by no means an exhaustive study, this paper has explored some of the potentialities the web offers for regional newspapers struggling with declining or static circulations and for creating connections with the public. With the focus of debate in this area in Australia shifting to the disconnection between the media and its publics, regional newspapers would be well placed to capitalise on the opportunities, such as those explored here, which the web offers. Issues which require further consideration include the economics of web site creation for regional newspapers. Facilities such as web logs and discussion forums suggested by this paper would require additional work by regional newspaper staff and anecdotal evidence indicates many regional newsrooms are under-resourced with limited staff. However, regional newspapers should also look beyond the immediate costs of creating such online facilities and approach the establishment of interactive web sites as an investment or reinvestment in their region.

This paper has shown that regional daily newspapers in Queensland could use information technologies such as but not limited to the web to improve their relationships with communities, particularly those geographically or socially isolated communities which they serve. For example, websites could be used in conjunction with other information technologies to facilitate the public's access to public discussion through online forums where issues of concern and interest

could be featured. The cost of providing these types of media services to regional communities is an issue which requires further exploration. However, communitybased organisations such as the one mentioned here, Capricornia.org, are well placed to assist regional newspapers in this area at little cost. Given that online newspapers have largely failed to make a profit and the economic imperative that drives news media, it seems unlikely that regional newspaper organisations will be able to provide independently the kinds of services suggested in this paper.

Finally, it is important that developments in the USA are not merely replicated in the Australian context. While Australian regional media can learn much from the innovative ways in which the Web and Internet are being used by newspapers at an international level, significant attention must be paid to the unique Australian media and cultural environment by media organisations adopting technological developments for use in Australia. Indeed, the focus should be on adapting the application of information technologies to suit Australian conditions. Further exploration of this topic, in particular in relation to how regional newspapers might do this, is needed. For regional newspapers dealing with circulation declines and editorial space restrictions, the establishment of comprehensive, integrated websites, in combination with other information technologies, offers newspapers the chance to facilitate wide-ranging and informed public debate, connect with geographically and socially diverse populations and link journalists with members of a variety of publics. The challenge is for regional newspapers not only to take up but also to capitalise on the opportunities offered by these technologies.

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