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Australian Journalism Review, 2014; 36(1):57-68

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Eroding the connection?: Web 2.0 and non-metropolitan newspaper journalists

Kathryn Bowd

Abstract

One of the characteristics most widely associated with non-metropolitan news media is a relatively close relationship with both news sources and news audiences. This relationship is generally seen as driving both the nature of news coverage and the broader communication roles played by such news outlets, enhancing the contribution they are able to make to social capital within and outside their primary circulation or broadcast area. However, localised news media are not immune from the pressures facing the news media more broadly, including changing business models and the impact of Web 2.0 technologies. This paper reports on a study of the impact of Web-based communications on journalism practice at three Australian non-metropolitan newspapers. Through qualitative interviews with journalists at each of the three publications – one in New South Wales, one in Victoria and one in South Australia – it explores the impact of interactive communications technologies and questions whether this is breaking down traditional source-journalist-audience relationships in regional areas of Australia.

Introduction

Australia's non-metropolitan news media are widely perceived as having a closer relationship with the people in their primary circulation or broadcast area than do their metropolitan counterparts. Regional newspapers, in particular, tend to be highly localised in their news coverage (Vine, 2012) and their interaction with people within their geographical range: not only is their coverage focused mainly or solely on local news, but the newsroom is often physically located in the main street of the town of publication, providing a highly visible reminder of the newspaper's presence.

Regional newspapers in Australia were typically established as a local "voice" (Kirkpatrick, 1996) and many have a long association with their town or region. They have been identified as central elements of local communication networks (see, for example, Kirkpatrick, 1984; 1996; Ewart, 2000; Pretty, 1993; 1995; Bowd, 2010), and play a key role in facilitating communica-

tion between groups and individuals within their circulation area. This facilitation role can help to build social capital (Richards, 2013; Bowd, 2010; 2011) – “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19) – and strengthen local communities. While it should be noted that the vast majority of regional newspapers have an online presence – primarily through a website, e-edition and/or Facebook page – their geographical circulation area remains a primary definer of their footprint. They may be no longer bounded solely by geography (Hess & Waller, 2014), but physical location is central to their news focus and their geographical area of interaction with news sources and audiences.

For journalists employed by regional newspapers, interaction with news sources and audiences occurs in both a professional and a personal capacity (Alysen et al., 2011, p. 10). The relatively small population of most regional areas of Australia means that the local journalists tend to be well known in their region, and encounters with community members occur not only during working hours, but also during what might otherwise be thought of as “private” time – for example, while shopping or playing sport (see, for example, Bowd, 2010). Another point of intersection between the professional and personal reflects the impact of local issues and events – issues that affect people in the region are also likely to affect the journalists at an individual level. This blurring of professional and personal boundaries has been identified as fostering closer links between journalist and community (Kirkpatrick 2001; Alysen et al. 2011; Pretty, 1993). While it may also be problematic for journalists – presenting challenges for fair and balanced reporting – it can benefit the reporting process by helping to open up lines of communication between news audience and journalist and broadening news sourcing options.

However, relationships between regional newspapers and their communities may be being affected by changes to the news industry more broadly, where “radical shifts in journalism are changing virtually every aspect of the gathering, reporting and reception of news” (Franklin, 2012, p. 663). The immediate impact on regional areas of falling advertising and readership, consolidation of ownership and resources and the shift of news online does not appear to have been as severe as in metropolitan areas, but such newspapers are under pressure (van Heekeren & Wood, 2012). For example, in May 2014, Fairfax Media was reported to be considering closing at least 30 of its regional titles (Markson, 2014). Elsewhere, printing facilities have been consolidated and increased content sharing is occurring, particularly on news websites. Regional journalists, along with their metropolitan counterparts, are being called upon to do more with less, putting greater pressure on them to obtain information in ways that are quick and easy but which may jeopardise their established community connections.

Journalism practice and Web 2.0

Journalists’ use of interactive and online technologies has been a growing area of research focus in recent years. Research has identified major and ongoing impacts on professional practice, such as the development of convergence culture (Deuze, 2010), the emergence and growth of cross-platform content production (Quandt & Singer, 2009) and the influence of social media (Hermida, 2010; Broersma & Graham, 2013). Much of the research to date has focused on news distribution (see, for example, Ju et al., 2013; Hille & Bakker, 2013), with a lesser focus on newsgathering. Where research on newsgathering has occurred (see, for example, Franklin, 2008), it has for the most part focused on metropolitan areas, with little research conducted on the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on regional and community journalism. This metropolitan focus is nothing new – there is a limited body of research on journalism outside major cities in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, reflecting the tendency of journalism scholarship and research to examine a portion of journalism and allow it to stand in for the whole (Zelizer, 2004).

However, previous research has identified a number of key issues relating to the impact of Web 2.0 on journalism practice that may be relevant in regional, as well as metropolitan, settings, even though the effects in regional areas may not be the same as in cities (see, for example, Richards, 2013). Regional newspapers' position as the primary – and sometimes only – source of local news means they are not necessarily subject to direct competition from other media outlets. At the same time, however, they may have fewer resources to invest in Web-based technologies or strategies. There are also questions about the extent to which regional news audiences are demanding, or interested in, interactive technologies. This paper focuses on one of these issues – whether increasing reliance on online communication is breaking down traditional newspaper-audience-source relationships in regional Australia.

The study

The impact of online communication on professional practice at regional Australian newspapers was explored from the perspectives of journalists employed by three publications – one each in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. While this is not a representative sample, it provides a snapshot of professional practice at publications reflecting a broad cross-section of characteristics typically associated with regional newspaper journalism. The newspapers are a mix of locally owned and corporate publications and vary in publication frequency. They are published in regional centres of varying size and distance from major metropolitan areas, although none is in an area that could be described as outer suburban.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted over one day at each location, and all of the journalists in the office on the day (plus one who was on leave) agreed to take part. At one newspaper, this represented all the journalists employed by the publication; at the others, one or more journalists was out of the office. The editor or most senior journalist present was also interviewed. At each site the interviews were conducted in an interview room or separate office on the newspaper premises, to minimise the impact on newsroom operations while allowing for privacy and confidentiality to be maintained. In total, 14 interviews were conducted with interviewees ranging from a cadet journalist a month into her first job to a sports editor with more than 30 years' experience.

Confidentiality was a key element of the research design, so journalists who participated are identified in reporting by a general description of their newspaper and individual role/experience. For this purpose, NP1 is a locally owned weekly publication; NP2 is a tri-weekly that is part of a locally owned newspaper group; and NP3 is a tri-weekly publication that is part of a major news organisation.

The research project explored journalists' use of Web 2.0 technology at a broad level – including online research, social media, their newspaper's website and other facets of their use of technology – but this paper focuses on one element of this: the impact on source-journalist-audience relationships of changing communications technologies.

Findings

The fundamental tools

To provide context for discussion of Web 2.0, the journalists were first asked about their use of what could be considered the basic tools of online newsgathering – the Web and email. O'Sullivan and Heinson's study of European journalists found that "journalists as a group are not only more than comfortable with the Internet ... but now view it as essential" (2008, p. 367), and the comments of journalists in this latest study support this. All identified the internet as crucial to day-to-day news research, with several mentioning that they "didn't know how" journalists could

have operated without it. For most, it was the standard starting point for background research on any news topic or source.

Email was also identified as fundamental to professional practice, often as a first point of contact and where possible followed up with a phone or face-to-face interview. It was noted as particularly useful where it might otherwise be difficult to contact news sources: “I use phone first to contact people but if I can’t get a hold of them I’ll send them an email” (cadet journalist, NP2), and could provide a reliable means for people in isolated areas to contact the newspaper: “Because the nature of this regional area, some people are fairly, living in fairly isolated areas, they can’t always drive in to town for any particular reasons. ... And so email could potentially be their only way of contacting people if phone lines are not great in the bush ... ” (cadet journalist, NP3). This last perspective echoes the findings of Hutchins’ study of regional news media which indicated that technology had enhanced coverage of people in outlying areas (Hutchins, 2010, p. 587), and suggests a valuable role for email in geographically dispersed regions.

However, while most of the journalists used email regularly, and for institutions such as government it was the preferred form of contact, views on its value as a newsgathering tool were mixed. So while one reporter noted that it could make her work easier – “... sometimes I just find, oh well, it’s just easy enough to send them an email and get them to send some comments and write it up that way ...” (journalist with three years’ experience, NP1), others highlighted the necessity of balance between technology and local networks:

... I am still a big believer in that – that local contacts and local knowledge will always hold you in very good stead. You cannot rely on the internet entirely to have a story fed to you. I think that’s a very important aspect – particularly of local journalism ... It’s a blend – you use the internet; you use your local contacts. (senior journalist, NP3)

Reich’s (2013) study of journalists in Israel found that the developing 21st century journalist may be the “telephone aficionado, who keeps talking to news sources inside – and increasingly outside – the newsroom, while using newer devices for complementary functions” (p. 428), and the comments of journalists in this latest study similarly suggest that journalists are blending newsgathering practices.

Social media as a newsgathering tool

Social media are also part of this blend, but while Broersma and Graham (2013) argue that journalism and social media “have entered a convenient marriage” (p. 446), the question of social media use among participants in this study generated a broad range of responses from both early-career and experienced journalists, suggesting they are not as comfortable with it as with more established Web-based newsgathering tools. One trend that was evident across the participant group, however, was that they engaged with few forms of social media. Asked what social media they used and how, the journalists identified only two platforms – Facebook and Twitter, although later prompting elicited some awareness of other platforms. The dominance of Facebook could be seen as reflecting its broader pre-eminence among social media platforms (Duggan & Smith, 2013), while Twitter is a platform with a strong association with news (Mitchell & Guskin, 2013), which may go some way to explaining its prominence among the journalists interviewed.

Some of the journalists identified social media as valuable to their professional practice, while others viewed it as having limited benefit. In some cases, they expressed awareness of its potential as an information-gathering tool while also indicating a lack of interest in it. As one experienced journalist (NP3) suggested:

I don’t use it [social media] a great deal as a work tool. I’m not even on Facebook personally – the [newspaper] is and we do get some story leads from there but again

you have to be pretty cautious about what's coming over there ... Twitter – I am on Twitter and I often look on that for things like emergency information – police, RFS – any incidences that are going around town. I wouldn't say Twitter is a great source of stories for us though

The younger reporters tended to be more active users of social media, but even among this group there was variety in patterns of usage, with some engaging with it extensively both professionally and personally, and others using it in a limited way: “I certainly am a big user of Facebook, both on my mobile phone and on the computer, at home, not so much at work ...” (NP3) But another young reporter (NP1) said that in the past couple of years: “I might have written on our Facebook page 4 or 5 times. ... I've only got a Facebook page last year so it was easier to invite people to my 21st ...” Hermida et al identify social networking as an “evolution of the public sphere” (Hermida et al, 2012, p. 816), and the journalists' comments suggest that as with any evolution, adoption and adaptation are occurring over time and not necessarily in any kind of planned manner.

Facebook

The influence of Facebook is widespread – it is the leading social network in almost every Western country, and serves a primarily young audience (Hille & Bakker, 2013, p. 663). Facebook was the form of social media most widely used by the journalists in both professional practice – as one said, “just about everyone is on Facebook” – and their private lives, but some posted regularly on their newspaper's Facebook page, and others little if at all. All of the newspapers had a Facebook presence, and the journalists' comments suggested it was primarily used to locate potential contacts and seek public comment on news topics, reflecting its nature as a platform for social interaction and the exchange of information (Hille & Bakker, 2013, pp. 664). But there were negatives associated with using Facebook to source contacts and information: “... sometimes I think we almost rely on it a little bit too much and don't go back to going out and really talking to people face to face and things like that ...” (NP1)

In most cases, the adoption of Facebook as a newsroom tool had developed organically, and one pattern that emerged from the responses was a high degree of individual choice around engagement with it. As an editor (NP1) pointed out: “... it's probably only been within the last 18 months that we've ramped up our Facebook page, and that has become more and more of a source of information.” However, in this newsroom the initial slow pace of adoption had for a time shifted to a degree of enthusiasm that had overwhelmed the newspaper's followers: “We had an issue probably about six months ago where we got some feedback that their [the reporters'] status updates were just too much, like they'd be – all four of them would do a status update saying, can you please be in the story about blah, blah, blah, blah. And they'd update it like four times a day. ” The solution had been a simple one – for the journalists to communicate with each other about planned status updates – but this demonstrates the ad hoc nature of social media introduction in newsrooms. This lack of strategising around social media has also been apparent in other research, such as Hille and Bakker's (2013) study of Dutch news outlets' introduction of social media.

It can also be seen in the journalists' comments about the way they manage the public and private elements of their engagement with Facebook. Many of the journalists had personal Facebook pages, but the extent to which these overlapped with their professional presence varied. Some kept the two separate, but others used their personal Facebook pages to help build their networks of contacts. One editor (NP1) said: “I guess myself with my own Facebook, I have thought to myself when people request to be my friends, I'm like, hmm, I'm not really a friend, but I could potentially use you for work.” This suggests a degree of differentiation around types of friends, with different Facebook “rules” for different friends (Bryant & Marmo, 2012). Some did not see

separation as an issue, with one commenting that: "... it's a social network. It's no different really to me being out of work – it's not different to me just being at the pub. It's no different to me just being in the street" (journalist with five years' experience, NP3). But both of these comments highlight one of the challenges of Facebook for journalists: navigating the complexities of public and private. For example, Bryant and Marmo (2012) suggest that "Facebook users can choose to use components of a public (e.g., wall posts and photo comments) or private (e.g., private messages and chat) nature" (p. 1018). But where "friends" might be news contacts rather than actual friends, there may be few conventions around interaction, which presents challenges for journalists in managing the dual public and private nature of the platform.

This duality appeared to be less problematic when journalists used their newspaper's Facebook page to undertake activities such as locating people to interview: "We find people to interview through our Facebook page, so it really, it's a starting point for me personally, unless someone calls in expressing an interest in an article ..." (journalist with three years' experience, NP1). This method of sourcing contacts could be particularly useful for journalists new to an area: "... as I'm quite new still people don't really know me ... I'm trying to use Facebook as much as I can to get – network more ..." (cadet journalist, NP3). Another reporter suggested that sourcing contacts would be more difficult without Facebook: "... you don't just have a database of people that are interested on each topic so I guess it would be so much harder without it" (journalist with six months' experience, NP1). These perspectives indicate that the journalists use Facebook in part to broaden their networks, reflecting Broersma and Graham's claim that social media offer easy access to a large range of interesting or otherwise hard-to-approach sources (2013, p. 447).

Another key use for Facebook identified by the journalists was facilitating public comment on issues. Its value as a means of gauging opinion was highlighted by one journalist through the example of controversy over whether a particular artwork should be displayed in the town's art gallery: "... so far we've got twenty people saying yes it should just stay in the Art Gallery and then one person saying no. ... But it's a good way to use Facebook to get people from the community to give their opinion" (cadet journalist, NP2). What was not acknowledged, however, was the unrepresentative nature of such opinion.

Using Facebook to source contacts and information within a relatively small population base had its own issues: "You don't always get what you want, we don't have as ... many followers as you would in the city so you've got a smaller pool to work from and they are often the same people commenting ..." (NP1). The same reporter noted that community response to Facebook requests for information was mixed: "... people are obviously aware now that when you put something up you're often looking for comment and that might get published, some people use that to their advantage and want to be published ... but other people won't write on there for that reason." Another reporter, at a different newspaper (NP3), also noted that people were not always keen to comment through Facebook because it required them to identify themselves: "We do a lot of polls and that gives them the chance to be anonymous." These responses also tap into questions around public and private in relation to Facebook, suggesting a degree of awareness in regional communities about the potential implications of commenting publicly through social media.

Overall, the journalists' comments suggest Facebook is becoming increasingly central to newsroom practice – reflecting the growth of social media more broadly (Lysak et al., 2012) – but that its use raises a number of issues, particularly about navigating the public/private divide. While it was seen as valuable for sourcing contacts and information, the ad hoc nature of its introduction and use in newsrooms meant journalists were not always confident in dealing with its complexities. This presents challenges that are not confined to regional areas – for example, Lysak et al. (2012) recommended in their study of US television newsrooms that policies be introduced around social media use (p. 204) – but are nonetheless relevant in a non-metropolitan setting.

Twitter

While Hermida suggests that Twitter has been rapidly adopted in newsrooms as a means of fast distribution of breaking news (Hermida, 2010, p. 299), this adoption does not appear to have flowed through to regional newsrooms. This may to some extent reflect the fact that the three newspapers included in the study were all non-daily publications, which are less reliant on breaking news and immediacy – one of the key uses of Twitter in journalism (Broersma & Graham, 2013, 448) – but it also suggests that uptake of Twitter in newsrooms is not uniform. Twitter was used by only a few of the journalists in this study, with most of those who didn't use it saying they had no interest in doing so. For those who did, it was primarily a source of information rather than an opportunity for active engagement: "I have Twitter. I don't actually Tweet anything, I just use it to find news." (cadet journalist, NP2)

Typical of the comments of the non-Twitter-users was that "I don't know I just think, it's just stupid. I mean, I'm on Facebook so but I don't feel the need to hear one-line statements about everyone and I wouldn't even know where to start ..." (NP1) Another more senior journalist (NP2) noted that for her purposes, Facebook was adequate: "I personally don't see the point in Twitter, I don't see how and where it would – I mean Facebook is just as instantaneous as Twitter." A junior journalist at the same paper expressed a similar view: "Oh – I hate it. I haven't got my head around it." Employer expectation could be an influence: "... one thing that the company made us do was a thing about social networking and about social media ... so my Twitter account is basically for work purposes but I don't use it because I don't really care." (NP3)

Twitter was seen as limited in capacity for communication compared with Facebook: "I think it's because Facebook has the whole package, Twitter 140 characters, sometimes you can't ask what you want and you can't put it across in the way that you want" (cadet journalist, NP3). It was also noted as being less widely used in regional areas, particularly when compared with Facebook: "... there's not much of a Twitter community in [the town], people don't use it too much" (NP3). With limited uptake in regional communities to date, the value of Twitter as a news source – particularly to non-daily publications – may continue to be limited, although further research is needed to explore this area in greater detail.

Personal contact and networking

While the preceding comments suggest a growing emphasis on use of social media, the participants noted that "drop-ins" to the newspaper office and phone calls from community members remained a widespread practice. As one reporter said: "... actually that just happened to me a second ago. A guy just came in and he told me about a doctor from the [local] Medical Group, he's recently climbed the highest mountain in South Africa" (cadet journalist, NP2). An editor (NP1) pointed out that people dropping into the office to buy a copy of the paper sometimes used this as an opportunity to pass on information: "... people like to come into our office and get the paper from us and they might tell us a story ..."

The links between newspaper and community reflected in the literature on regional journalism can be seen in the variety of ways people provide information to journalists:

... the older generations just show up with their camera and their media [storage] card and handwritten note of their account of something ... people do post things on our Facebook page like they do say, hi I'm so and so and I think you need to do a story about this because this is really annoying me, or so people do come to us like that and then people ring. A lot of people ring in but usually because it's a small town you just kind of hear about it ... (journalist with six months' experience, NP1)

One reporter said she had been surprised at the number of "walk-ins" to the newspaper office (NP2), but at the same paper, the sports editor with 30 years' experience said he had noticed a decline compared with contact via email or other electronic forms: "For story ideas, you still get the

odd person who'll physically come in and speak to you about things or over the phone, but a lot more is via email ...” However, overall there was a sense that people in regional areas were more likely to make direct contact: “In Melbourne I can't imagine someone picking up the phone – I would imagine them to email. But it's just the way – it's our demographic, like you've – everyone's old here ...” (NP2)

The fact that people still take the opportunity to pass on information to journalists indicates the continuing central role of local newspapers in regional communication networks. This can be further seen in the view widely expressed by journalists that local networks are crucial to effective professional practice. The more experienced and senior journalists in this study were the most emphatic about the importance of network-building: “I tend to not to be a stay-at-home journo. ... I like to get out and meet people face-to-face, do interviews face-to-face ...” This senior journalist (NP2) said he preferred the “old fashioned journalism values” of talking to people directly, and other senior journalists offered a similar view. The acting editor of the same paper was particularly scathing about the trend towards government and other organisations only being willing to respond to emails, saying “that will never, ever replace the face to face interview”.

But even many of the younger journalists noted the importance of networks. One who had grown up in the town in which he was employed said although he hadn't previously known many of the news sources he now encountered, having a local background had helped him build networks: “I mean you can go to the pub on a weekend and pick up little story ideas and things like that ...” (NP1) Others also noted the value of the intersection of professional and private in establishing networks: “... just because someone is the contact for a particular type of story, they're also your mate you went to high school with's dad or it's one of your – it's also the guy you have a beer with on Friday afternoons.” (NP3) The crossover between public and private applied even to journalists new to the region: “I've only been here 16 months, but I feel like my contacts are just incredible, like I can call – I've got people everywhere.” (NP2)

Impact of change

Although Pavlik argues that technological change is “fundamentally reshaping the relationships between and among news organisations, journalists and their many publics” (2010, p. 234), the extent to which technological change was seen as having an impact on journalists' relationships with news sources and news audiences varied among the participants in this study. The participants indicated that they and their colleagues were capitalising to varying degrees on the capacities of social media, email and the internet to gather information quickly and easily and to identify and seek comment from a broader range of sources. One reporter suggested Web 2.0 had broadened the story focus of the newspaper by increasing the range of ways in which contact could be made with people and the opportunities to explore different areas (cadet journalist, NP3).

But many of the views expressed about the impact of changing communications technologies were negative. Trust was seen as one casualty of reduced direct contact with news sources and audiences, as without this contact it was difficult to build trusting working relationships: “You need to be out there shaking their hands and you know talking with them and having a beer or sharing just 10 minutes of your time” (sports editor, NP 2). This was particularly problematic given the move by organisations such as government away from personal interaction with journalists:

... you can't sit down and have a face-to-face interview with someone. And I think that's absolute tragedy, it really is just absolute tragedy ... I guess it's a safety net, but again, there's nothing that will ever beat, sitting down and having an interview as a conversation between two people ... (acting editor, NP2)

Another journalist similarly suggested: “If you give me one line in an email that's all I can print ...” (cadet journalist, NP2), saying this form of communication reflected both a lack of trust and the conventions of public relations, which “always says control this”.

People's expectations around interactions with journalists were also noted as changing: "Not so much the older generation but certainly the younger baby boomers and Gen Ys and Gen Xs, all those sort of people. Their expectations are not as high, I suppose you could say, in terms of actually needing to meet them or talk to them face to face" (cadet journalist, NP3). This reduced opportunities for the personal contact that was not only important for effective reporting but also one of the most satisfying elements of the journalists' work: "A lot of people won't pick up the phone, they will send a Facebook message or they will send an email. ... We're losing, yeah, losing the personal side of journalism ... which is what I love" (NP1). One of the senior reporters noted demographics as influencing the ways in which people interacted with journalists: "... we do have an ageing readership ... They're the ones who will most likely come through the door and want to talk to somebody face to face and you can't beat that" (NP3).

The contrast between "old school" journalism and current practice was highlighted by an editor through the example of a reporter who had been at the paper (NP1) for about 30 years: "... She was great at her job but she would spend a lot of time on one interview. Like she would go out there and spend a couple of hours with them and whatever else whereas I don't think that these guys have time for that these days." Expectations were changing – journalists were able to access information immediately – "they all know before they get to work, oh did you see such and such" – and they expected to work more regular hours, but this did not allow time for relationships to be built.

Conclusion

Pavlik argues that technology has exerted a fundamental influence on how journalists do their jobs, on the content of news, on the structure of newsrooms and the news industry and on the relationships between news organisations and their publics (Pavlik, 2010, p. 236). But technological change is only one of the factors influencing journalism practice. Franklin highlights competitive and fragmenting markets, the collapse of the traditional journalism business model, the growth of social media, changes in government policy and audience demand as factors that are also reshaping journalism (2012, p. 663). He argues that these influences have significant implications for "journalists' jobs, their workplaces, products and perceptions of their professional roles, ethical judgements and day-to-day practice" (Franklin, 2012, p. 663). The asymmetric nature of connection through social media (Ju et al., 2013, p. 4), for example, influences the nature of communication in the newspaper environment, while Hermida suggests that social media technologies are contributing to the disintermediation of news and the undermining of journalists' gatekeeping function (2010, p. 300).

Seen within this broader context, a shift in the way regional newspaper journalists and their news audiences and sources communicate may appear a relatively minor concern. However, Reich points out that of all the facets of journalism that can be shaped and reshaped by new technologies, news reporting is of special interest as it is at the core of journalistic activity (Reich, 2013, p. 417), so a shift in elements of news reporting has the potential to affect journalistic activity more broadly. In addition, given the traditional closeness between regional newspapers in Australia and their communities of circulation (Kirkpatrick, 2001; Pretty, 1993), anything that impacts on this relationship is potentially problematic at such a turbulent time. Reduced personal contact has the potential to negatively affect broader relationships between newspapers and communities, which may spill over into effects on social capital and the role of newspapers in fostering this (Bowd, 2010).

The participants in this study clearly identified concerns about what they perceived as negative impacts on journalist-community relationships from increasing reliance on Web 2.0 communications technologies. Email and social media were noted as having had a positive effect on ease

of communication – and the capacity to broaden the base of news sources – but a negative impact on the nature of communication. They were seen as less personal than face-to-face or phone contact and as providing fewer opportunities to develop ongoing professional relationships, while at the same time breaking down established communication conventions. While it was the older and more experienced journalists who expressed the greatest concerns, younger journalists also indicated reservations. However, given that most of these younger reporters have grown up with the Web, the extent to which this reflects their own experiences or what they have been told by their more senior colleagues is unclear.

The reduction of personal contact is more evident in some areas than others. The reliance of government on email communication, for example, has reduced opportunities for direct interaction in this area, but there appears to be a continued willingness on the part of the general public to make contact with journalists by dropping into or phoning the newspaper office. Nonetheless, the suggestion that it is often older people who make direct contact indicates an element of generational change.

While the impact of reduced personal contact is not limited to regional newsrooms – O’Sullivan and Heinonen noted in 2008 that the centrality of the internet to newsgathering was altering relationships with sources (p. 359) – it is also evident from the responses of participants in this study that journalists at regional newspapers are not necessarily using Web 2.0 communication tools in the same way as their metropolitan counterparts. For example, Hermida et al. suggest that one of the key impacts of Web 2.0 has been the way the public have become involved in the “observation, selection, filtering, distribution and interpretation of events (Hermida, Fletcher et al. 2012, p. 816). However, it could be argued that some level of public involvement in the news process has long been apparent in regional media, even if journalists have retained their traditional gatekeeper role. Newsroom convergence is frequently highlighted as one of the major shifts in journalism practice, with Deuze suggesting this occurs through the integration of formerly distinct operations into combined journalism units and the integration of citizen journalism into news operations (2010, p. 268) and Hermida et al. arguing that “social media are becoming ever more ingrained in the news experience, both from the perspective of audiences and the journalism profession” (2012, p. 822). But the comments of participants in this study suggest such shifts are occurring in a much slower and more limited way in their newsrooms.

Nonetheless, the influence of Web 2.0 technologies on journalism has been profound, and continues to unfold, although Reich points out that the influence of technology on news reporting is becoming more enigmatic (2013, p. 417). The responses of the journalists in this study strongly suggest that relationships with communities are being affected by changing communication practices, and that the journalists regard this as a cause for concern. Although the scope of this study meant it was possible to obtain only a snapshot of the views of journalists at three regional newspapers, the fact that so many of the research participants highlighted local networks and local relationship-building as essential to effective professional practice suggests that continued emphasis on direct and personal contact with news sources and audiences is highly valued, reflecting the findings of similar studies (see, for example, Richards, 2013). The relationships that are at the heart of professional practice (Broersma & Graham, 2013, p. 448) not only encourage the establishment and maintenance of networks, but also help to maintain the local news focus that characterises Australia’s non-metropolitan newspapers, and through these to support the development and maintenance of social capital. Some ongoing dilution in this contact appears inevitable because of the influence of Web 2.0 communications and increasing demands on journalists’ time, but the extent to which the journalists emphasised the importance of these relationships also suggests a reluctance to shift too far from traditional communication models. Nonetheless, commercial and other pressures on journalists to produce as much material as possible as quickly and cheaply as possible may make these relationships difficult to maintain in future.

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This project was funded by a mid-career research grant from the Journalism Education Association of Australia.