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Your News? Your Views?
Interactive Features and User-Generated Content Initiatives in
Online Newspapers from Australia and New Zealand

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Abstract

As online newspapers increasingly offer users an interactive news consumption experience and adopt a rhetoric which celebrates the visibility of “ordinary” voices, they project an impression of a democratised news environment where users are granted better representation than ever before. This thesis investigates and critically assesses the current deployment of interactive features and user-generated content (UGC) initiatives by a number of online newspapers in Australia and New Zealand, two countries which have received little attention in this field of research to date. After establishing the range of theoretical concerns informing the study, the thesis adopts a primarily qualitative analysis of the websites of these online newspapers in order to assess the opportunities provided for user participation. Through an examination of interactive features and initiatives, the language of the surrounding texts (including moderation policies), and a close analysis of two noteworthy cases (Stuff.co.nz’s “From the Newsroom” editorial blog and NZHerald.co.nz’s “Your Views” feature), the thesis evaluates the extent to which relations between news producers and users and their respective identities appear to be shifting in the online news environment.

The study finds that the online newspapers studied follow a standardised approach towards interactivity and UGC, with the majority of features and initiatives operating in line with traditional journalism practice which functions to distance users from both news producers and news production processes. This thesis argues that there has not been a dramatic shift in the ways these news outlets approach their relationship with and responsibilities to the audience. There appears to be some reluctance to adopt features and policies which might be perceived to challenge professional standards or require an alteration of work routines. While some of the study’s findings resonate with existing international research, the thesis adds new value to the field by addressing the gap in coverage of user participation by online news media from Australia and New Zealand. The thesis concludes by proposing a number of potential directions for change if online newspapers are to facilitate user engagement in more effective and civically responsible ways and encourage enhanced modes of citizen participation in the news process.

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Introduction

Driven by the growing popularity of “Web 2.0” technologies, a broad category of internet applications which support user-generated content (UGC) and participatory modes of communication, online newspapers are increasingly expected to offer an interactive experience for users to engage with online content. One simply has to scan the front pages of online newspapers to get the impression that the news environment has become more “democratised”, with attention-grabbing features and enthusiastic, welcoming language offering users the chance to customise their personal news consumption, communicate with one another and contribute content. We are invited to subscribe to news topics of interest and asked “What do you think of X?” by sidebar polls. We are encouraged to “join the conversation” on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook and to submit breaking news tip-offs and multimedia content. Alongside these invitations for users to participate, articles detailing the latest reader poll results or tables containing the most popular links appear to serve as evidence that online newspapers are in touch with and value the opinions of the reader community. Through both providing an increasingly interactive news consumption experience and accentuating the visibility of “ordinary” voices in the news environment, the impression created suggests that online newspapers are granting citizens numerous chances to speak back and therefore, have a greater degree of access to representation than ever before.

However, the representation of an ostensibly user-centred and egalitarian environment projected by online newspapers raises a number of questions which are crucial to explore in order to understand the implications for mediated civic engagement and public communication. Is the growing provision of interactive opportunities by online newspapers an acknowledgement of the citizen’s potential dual role as both consumer *and* producer? The internet’s many-to-many mode of communication grants online newspapers the ability to facilitate user interaction with news content, other users and news producers, however, the principles of interactivity (participation, engagement, responsiveness) could be seen to be at odds with journalism’s traditionally gated practices and top-down approach to communication. Does the presence of UGC alongside professionally-produced content in

online newspapers highlight the potential implications for the gatekeeping role of journalism? Or does the framing and moderation of UGC in these spaces reflect the degree to which journalistic norms continue to dominate? In the instances where online newspapers provide opportunities for users to contribute towards the news production process, are such initiatives focused on empowering users to perform as citizen journalists or perhaps indicative of other motivations, such as recognising the range of potential benefits of UGC to their own product? Are the interactive features of online newspapers involving UGC simply a technologically-updated version of the more traditional forms of audience participation in the news (such as letters to the editor, vox pops and talk back radio) which often serve to reinforce the boundary between amateurs and professionals?

This thesis addresses the above research questions through an examination of the current uptake and facilitation of interactive features and UGC initiatives by a number of online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand. The primary focus of this thesis is to investigate the notion that users are empowered by their engagement with the interactive and participatory features of online newspapers, by looking at the opportunities that users are provided with and how these are facilitated to determine the amount of agency users are given in the environments studied. Through a qualitative analysis of both the features provided and the surrounding discourses, this thesis also evaluates the extent to which the relations between journalists and users and their respective identities appear to be shifting in the online environment. This thesis argues that the majority of the features and initiatives facilitating user participation are structured and managed in keeping with traditional journalism practice and this works to maintain a degree of distance between news producers and users *and* between users and news production processes. The increasing proliferation of interactive spaces provided by online newspapers makes research in this area particularly pertinent and relevant for issues surrounding the future of newspapers and journalism. This thesis builds on already existing scholarship regarding online newspapers and interactivity by closely examining a selection of online newspapers from two countries which have been under researched in terms of how user engagement is facilitated in such sites. By drawing on these examples, this thesis aims to enhance our understanding of both the current role and potential future of online news media in providing new modes of citizen participation in the news process.

Chapter One identifies and contextualises scholarship from a range of theoretical areas to establish a framework of the current understanding of online journalism and user participation in online newspapers informing the study. The literature review explores how “the voice of the people” has historically featured in news media and also considers how the relationship between newspapers and the public has come to be understood through a range of theoretical positions. In order to think about how online newspapers might facilitate public communication in the online environment, the chapter also addresses how citizenship and civic engagement have been theorised by a number of scholars, acknowledging and evaluating both new forms of thinking about online participation and already established models which still hold relevance in the so-called “digital age”. The chapter examines how online newspapers are engaging with the “former audience” (Gillmor, 2006), drawing on a number of studies which conclude that online journalism is struggling with its potential role in harnessing the interactive and communicative capabilities provided by the medium they inhabit. Chapter One concludes by considering a range of scholarly assessments of why online newspapers’ interactive potential is currently limited.

After establishing the models and concepts informing the theoretical framework adopted by the thesis, Chapter Two outlines the study’s research design by describing the scope, research techniques and methods of analysis selected in order to effectively address the research questions noted earlier. The chapter begins by justifying the decision to focus on online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand and the reasons for which papers were chosen to form the sample studied. Although the study adopts some small scale quantitative methods to indicate what kinds of features are being provided by the selection of online newspapers studied, the primary focus of the analysis is qualitative, employing discourse analysis to examine how the language featured across online newspaper sites reflects the shifting relations and identities of journalists and users in such environments. Chapter Two explains how the framework for measuring interactive features and UGC initiatives was developed, informed by both theoretical understandings of interactivity and previous academic studies with a similar focus on assessing interactive menus. The methods carried out are described in detail in order to convey the criteria through which texts were identified and analysed. The

chapter concludes by providing some reflections on the research design developed for the study, justifying the decision to conduct online research of media texts rather than adopt an alternative option such as research interviews.

Chapter Three examines the range of interactive features and UGC initiatives offered by the online newspapers studied, reporting on both the levels of uptake and the way in which they are structured and facilitated. These features and initiatives are separated into three different categories –user as *filter*, user as *respondent* and user as *source*– and are assessed in turn according to the levels of agency imparted on users. From the analysis carried out in Chapter Three, I observe that there appears to be a relatively standardised menu of interactivity offered by the online newspapers examined and discuss the democratic implications of the limited range of participatory opportunities provided. This discussion raises two issues of concern. Firstly, there are worrying gaps in the provision of interactive features and UGC initiatives by the papers studied; opportunities for users to filter and customise news menus were plentiful, but there were few spaces for users to engage with other users and newspaper staff and even fewer instances whereby users were invited to take up an active role in the news production process. But the second issue of concern is that many of the most commonly adopted features lack effective management and facilitation, an issue which is explored in more depth in Chapter Four.

Through examining the discourses surrounding the spaces of user participation and the interactions between journalists and users, Chapter Four reflects on shifting the roles of, and relationship between, news producers and users in the participatory spaces of online newspapers. The chapter contains a close analysis of the language used in attracting users to participate and in the rules, guidelines and moderation policies which police the resulting participation. In addition, it analyses the instances of journalist-user interaction across the papers studied and explores the ways in which news producers draw on UGC and users' news consumption habits in order to project representations of user opinion. Chapter Four features two case studies of features which stand out from the standardised menu provided by the online newspapers studied. The first looks at an editorial blog, Stuff.co.nz's "From the Newsroom", and the second focuses on a "Have your say"-style opinion feature called "Your Views" hosted by NZHerald.co.nz. The analysis carried out in the chapter finds that the

provision and management of interactive features is designed in favour of news producers who are able to obtain (relatively) free content which can then be mobilised to give the impression that the paper is in touch with the user community.

The final and concluding chapter of the thesis assesses how online newspapers are coping with and addressing the challenges posed by the online environment in terms of user engagement. The chapter begins by situating the study's findings in a wider context through a comparison with other studies concerned with how online news media facilitate user engagement in their sites. It reengages with many of the themes explored in the literature review, considering these in relation to the research carried out for this study. Chapter Five examines the reasons behind the cautious approach towards adopting interactive features facilitating interpersonal communication and considers how scholars, bloggers, journalists and regular users see the value and potential of online discussion. The chapter evaluates the extent to which the roles and responsibilities of journalists are changing in the online environment to engage with and be responsive to the user community. It also considers the degree to which users are empowered by their participation in online newspaper sites, noting the complex and varied user attitudes towards the roles and relationship between news producers and users. At the end of this concluding chapter, I suggest some directions for future research and also propose a number of initiatives media outlets could adopt in order to facilitate user engagement in more effective and civically responsible ways. These suggestions focus on the need for online newspaper producers to better live up to the celebratory rhetoric by facilitating more effective interactive methods for users to engage in dialogue with news producers about both the news *and* news making processes in order to both present a sense of accountability and transparency and to assist users in developing media literacy skills relevant to the exercise of active citizenship.

Chapter One

Literature Review

This chapter establishes a framework for the current understanding of the role of online newspapers and user engagement by outlining and contextualising a range of scholarship from various theoretical backgrounds. It begins by outlining the ways in which “the voice of the people” has been generated, constructed and represented in news media, drawing on scholarly writing about a number of media practices aimed at capturing public opinion. Then the established functions of the newspaper in relation to its readership or “public” are examined, assessing the continuing expectations of the press’ roles in acting as a public watchdog, as a platform for public discussion, in community building and as a commercial enterprise. The increasing centrality of the internet in the social, cultural and political practices of daily life has sparked numerous debates surrounding how citizenship and civic engagement is to be understood in this “digital age”. This chapter discusses a number of scholarly interpretations of online citizenship and civic engagement, highlighting the tension between theories which advocate new ways of thinking about political participation on the internet and already established models which, despite their numerous criticisms, continue to be drawn on by scholars analysing the internet’s democratic potential. The chapter then explores the interactive potential available to newspapers which have adopted an online format, discussing how interactivity has been theorised in relation to online news media and considering current academic assessments of how online newspapers have responded to the interactive opportunities available to them. The majority of studies conclude that interactivity is limited across online newspapers; the final section of the literature review seeks to illuminate the potential reasons behind online newspapers’ reluctance to provide interactive features, drawing on scholarship concerned with interactivity, online newspapers and the changing role and functions of journalism in the online environment.

News media’s representation of “the voice of the people”

Scholarly work points to the routine practices of journalism as a key factor in shaping the ways in which publics are configured and how “the voice of the people” is represented in news

media (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts, 1978; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002a). Far from suggesting that news media's representations of citizens and public opinion are part of an institutional strategy designed to make Joe Public look like Joe Shmoe, this thesis supports the view of Shoemaker and Reese who see the "patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs" as a major influence on the way they frame citizens and public opinion (1996, p. 105). Similarly, Hall et al.'s discussion of the social production of news highlights the way in which the "*routine structures and practices* of the media in relation to news-making serve to 'frame' events within dominant interpretative paradigms" (1978, p. 65; original emphasis). As noted by Wahl-Jorgensen, the routine practices of media workers serve to favour particular modes of expression (2002a, p. 70). For instance, the low level of interaction with citizens means that news media workers tend to rely on their own perceptions of the audience, perceptions that are "developed and reinforced within the culture of the newsroom" (Lewis, Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005, p. 27). In his case study of daily newspaper editors' evaluation of news values for their readership, Sumpter notes that the editors in his study had a lack of community ties and, therefore, little firsthand knowledge of the readers they claimed to represent (2000, p. 388). This observation resonates with Street's assertion that although journalists and editors may imagine themselves to be reflecting their audience, they are, in effect, "imagining and constituting them" (2001, p. 53). Myers' discussion of the ways in which public "talk" is represented in news media outlines the processes through which "the voice of the people" is reconfigured through editorial processes: "This talk can then be packaged (not just collected), mediated (not just spoken), and related intertextually (it doesn't have meaning on its own, but in a chain)" (2004, p. 223).

News media mobilise representations of public opinion in a number of different ways, ranging from general statements of public feeling to poll data on specific issues. Scholars suggest that news media often make reference to citizens and public opinion without providing substantial evidence to support their claims (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 131; Lewis et al., 2005, p. 19). This is often the case when news media make general inferences about public opinion (using phrases such as "some people believe...") or to "attitudes that exist within the public sphere, without specifying who holds such attitudes or how widespread they might be" (Lewis et al., 2005, p.

19). However, even the inclusion of seemingly more representative and evidential material such as poll data also constructs a problematic version of public opinion. A number of scholars raise concerns about the problematic representation of opinion poll data in the press (Haas, 2007; Lewis et al., 2005; Schudson, 1995; Street, 2001; Welch, 2002; Yeric & Todd, 1996). Welch argues that although newspapers rely heavily on polling information to represent public views, they reveal little information about how polls are conducted and, therefore, undermine the credibility of the reported data (2002, p. 112). Welch asserts that “a wise reader should dismiss the polls altogether” (2002, p. 112).

Other scholars criticise the normative model of public opinion polling, arguing that it generates only a mere snapshot of public opinion through providing a format of predetermined questions with no emphasis on the discussion of opinion with others (Haas, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). After discussing Fishkin’s work on deliberative opinion polls,¹ Sunstein concludes that such features are a more productive and democratic way to generate public opinion, as “people’s views are recorded only after diverse citizens, with different points of view, have actually been brought together to discuss topics with one another” (2001, p. 84). For Haas also, deliberation is the missing factor in how the majority of polls are conducted: “public opinion polls run counter to the very notion of a deliberating public engaged in a process of common deliberation” (2007, p. 78).

Scholars writing about the inclusion of citizen voices in radio and television broadcasting assert that although many programmes give citizens an opportunity to provide feedback or express personal opinion, their voice is contained within a pre-determined editorial agenda. Writing about early broadcasting practices in the United States of America, and specifically the radio programme *Vox Pop* which ran from 1932 to 1948, Loviglio notes that the popularity and success of programmes which incorporated audience participation was a reflection of the

¹ In *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy*, Fishkin describes the process of deliberative polling, which involves bringing together a random sample of people into a single location, immersing them in the relevant issues through providing “carefully balanced briefing materials”, encouraging intensive discussion and then polling the participants in detail at the end of this process (1995, p. 162). Of the difference between standard polling and deliberative polling techniques, Fishkin argues: “ordinary polls model what the public is thinking, even though the public may not be thinking very much or paying much attention. A deliberative poll attempts to model what the public *would* think, had it a better opportunity to consider the questions at issue” (1995, p. 162; original emphasis).

“self-consciousness with which network radio and its new mass audience came to think about the role that radio should play in national life” (2002, p. 89). *Vox Pop*, which at its inception was concerned with gathering the opinions of the “forgotten man in the street” by interviewing members of the public with portable microphones, often posed political questions to interviewees which on the surface “seemed to hail a politically engaged public”, but in effect “represented these people as confused bystanders” (Loviglio, 2002, p. 96). In his discussion of talk radio, Hutchby argues that although the agenda on talk radio is not always fixed and therefore, the caller is able to raise issues of importance to them, the host has access to a “more powerful set of argumentative resources” than the caller (1996, p. 41). The notion of the host or presenter as occupying a more authoritative position in the hierarchy of discussion is understood by Scannell to be reflected in the physical form of the studio, which he views as the “institutional discursive space of radio and television”, “a public space in which and from which institutional authority is maintained and displayed” (1991, p. 2). Gans’ assertion that citizens have traditionally been cast as spectators at televised political debates reflects Scannell’s notion of the uneven power distribution within the studio setting, as citizens are sometimes granted the opportunity to pose questions but are unable to interact spontaneously with the candidates (Gans, 2003, p. 59).

Similarly, scholars concerned with the representation of “the voice of the people” in television news coverage, particularly in the “vox pop” feature, highlight the problems inherent in the act of capturing public voices and mobilising them to fit with news content. The vox pop, which takes its name from the Latin phrase *vox populi*, meaning “voice of the people”, is an impromptu interview conducted with people on the street, usually associated with television news.² The interviewee’s reaction to the questions posed by the journalist is intended to appear spontaneous and unrehearsed; however, the presentation of vox pops in the news is carefully managed in order to maintain the division between professional reportage and citizen reaction. Lewis et al. note that vox pops never feature at the beginning of a news item and, drawing on Hall et al.’s work in *Policing the Crisis*, argue that this means they are not given the “opportunity to be ‘primary definers’ who provide the framework through which a

² Lewis et al. argue that although the vox pop convention is associated with television news, it is also part of print journalism, with quotes from members of the public found at close range employed to flesh out news stories (2005, p. 17). As evident in the previous paragraph from the discussion of the radio programme *Vox Pop*, similar devices are also employed in radio broadcasting.

news event is interpreted” (2005, p. 74). Myers maintains that vox pops call for experience not opinion and that they are “defined by what they may lack: identification, questions, follow-ups and responses, and the possibility of challenge” (2004, p. 205).

Similarly, Dahlgren argues that the vox pop feature represents citizens as responding to issues and events, but they “are almost never portrayed as offering political suggestions or other constructive thoughts” (2009, p. 131). The idea that vox pops address people as consumers rather than citizens, evident in the work of Myers, Dahlgren and Lewis et al., relates to Blumler’s argument that political communication is adopting an increasingly populist tone and features like vox pops, which claim to showcase unfettered instances of public opinion, generate the image of “a ‘bystander’ public rather than an active citizenry” (Blumler, 2001, p. 204). While these scholarly concerns about the representation of public opinion generated through the vox pop feature are justified, the notion put forward by Lewis et al. that they “depoliticise the public sphere” through encouraging citizens to speak from a personal and reactionary perspective rather than one of rationality (2005, p. 71), is problematic as it assumes that citizens must adopt a rational-critical stance if they are to act as political subjects. Citizenship is exercised in many ways which do not qualify as rational or critical according to the standards of formal deliberation, as argued by scholars who emphasise the civic value of informal everyday talk (Barber, 1984; Bohman, 1996; Dahlgren, 2009) and in feminist critiques of rationality (Fraser, 1992; Young, 1987). Therefore, the opinions expressed in vox pops, whether emotionally-charged or lacking in complex argumentation, are by no means devoid of civic value.

Like vox pops, letters to the editor are not representative of current public opinion but are the result of editorial selection; although unlike vox pops, they offer citizens a space to discuss issues of concern and have the potential to host debate amongst citizens, journalists and politicians. McNair asserts that the letters page is an inaccurate reflection of public opinion as letter-writers are “unrepresentative of the public as a whole, few of whom ever get round to expressing their anger or concern about politics in print” (2000, p. 111). Further, Wahl-Jorgensen notes that even if citizens submit letters for publication, there is no guarantee they will feature on the newspaper’s letters page, as “editors agree on what makes good and bad

letters, and by following these conventions they standardise the public debate of letters to the editor” (2002a, p. 70). As noted earlier, Sumpter’s study (2000) of the construction of the audience by daily newspaper editors suggests that editorial staff operate according to an imagined perception of their audience, not one based on any firsthand experience of them.

While Sumpter’s work reflects the problematic situation of newspaper staff with little knowledge of the concerns and characteristics of their own readership, Wahl-Jorgensen’s ethnographic study of editorial-page staff at a regional American newspaper indicates the potential danger in journalists drawing conclusions about the letter-writing public through editing the letters section (2002b). Wahl-Jorgensen found that the editorial staff in question adopted a “mocking, ironic idiom of insanity” in relation to their letter-writers and through constantly invoking this notion in everyday newsroom practices, “the staff created a distance between themselves and the public, and delegitimized the letters section as a public forum” (2002b, p. 200). Despite the limitations posed by editorial constraints on letter-writers, McNair highlights the opportunity afforded by the letters page to sponsor a dialogue between citizens and public figures (2000, p. 109). However, Wahl-Jorgensen notes the uneven balance of power in that letter-writers are expected to respond to issues covered by the newspaper and therefore have little chance to nominate agendas for discussion (2002a, p. 73). While Wahl-Jorgensen’s assertion once again highlights the limited nature of the letters page as a forum for discussion, it also fails to acknowledge the other traditional avenues for citizens to contribute to the news agenda by providing material for journalistic reportage, acting as sources, suggesting story ideas and giving eyewitness accounts.

The newspaper and its relationship with the public

The proposed democratic functions of the newspaper outlined by various theoretical frameworks highlight the press’ central role of serving the public’s interest. In addition to their tasks of informing, acting as a kind of “Fourth Estate” and serving as a public watchdog, the press is expected to facilitate public discussion and represent the opinions and shared values resulting from this deliberation. In his discussion of the liberal theory of press freedom, Curran notes that according to liberal theory, the press has four key functions: “informing the

public; scrutinizing government; staging a public debate; and expressing public opinion” (2003, p. 346). In addition to these, Curran lists three “supplementary” functions which are often associated with the press in liberal theory: “expressing the shared values of the public, assisting society to adapt to change, and exposing wrongdoing” (2003, p. 346). McNair notes that in liberal theory, journalism is expected to form “the cultural space, or *public sphere*,” where an informed citizenry, “capable of making rational choices” and “reasoned judgements”, could be guided through political information (2008, p. 113; original emphasis).

The functions outlined by liberal theory clearly show a responsibility to the public, as the public gives journalism a reason for being, a notion echoed in the work of Carey (1997):

The "public" is the God term of the press, the term without which the press does not make any sense. Insofar as the press is grounded, it is grounded in the public. The press justifies itself in the name of the public. It exists, or so it is said, to inform the public, to serve as the extended eyes and ears of the public. The press is the guardian of the public interest and protects the public's right to know. (p. 218)

Carey proposes that the newspaper possesses the ability to amplify the conversation that society has with itself and could potentially serve to facilitate the “equivalent of an extended town meeting” (1997, p. 220). But he argues that the press simply views its role as “limited to informing whoever happens to turn up at the end of the communication channel”, and, therefore, it neglects the potential capacity to encourage and reflect “the conversation of the culture” (1997, p. 220). In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey describes the potential journalism has to encourage the local community to become a “Great Community”, with citizens engaged in deliberation with one another and, therefore, actively participating in democracy (1927, p. 184). As explained by Haas (2007, p. 7), Dewey asserted that the daily newspaper could encourage a more active citizenry by “educating the public about political problems, helping form the public by reporting on the connections between political decisions and their consequences, and assisting the public with acting on its understandings”.

Dewey’s ideas about the role and responsibilities of the press in relation to its public in democratic societies resonate with the central arguments of the public journalism movement,

which developed in the United States in the late 1980s subsequent to the 1988 U.S. election (Haas, 2007).³ In *Doing Public Journalism*, Charity describes the movement as stemming from widespread feeling of professional dissatisfaction amongst journalists who were unhappy with the low quality of their work and public journalism provided an opportunity to embrace a redefinition of working practices for journalism in order to “*make it as easy as possible for citizens to make intelligent decisions about public affairs, and to get them carried out*” (1995, p. 2; original emphasis). Although public journalism began at an operational level, with the principles described by Charity being put into practice by the editorial staff of a few local newspapers, the movement was bolstered by the involvement of a number of academic activists including Charity (1995), Merritt (1998) and Rosen (1996). Rosen describes the principles of public journalism in terms of what news organisations need to operationalise the ideas of the movement: viewing people as citizens “rather than spectators, readers, viewers, listeners or an undifferentiated mass”, lessening the barriers to entry for citizens to become engaged in and informed about “public life, local culture and politics proper” and encouraging “active and interested” citizens to deliberate together, “in the hope that a more engaged, interactive and informable public might result” (2000, p. 680).

Rosen describes those news organisations adopting the values of public journalism as reflecting a clear reconfiguration of their professional roles, which involves making a “conscious decision to pursue a civic good not previously honored in conventional practice—not honored enough, that is” (2000, p. 681). Although public journalism has been criticised by scholars who say that the movement lacks a clear conceptual framework and the differences between the practices of public journalism and that of mainstream journalism are unclear (Voakes, 1999), Haas and Steiner convincingly argue that public journalism presents “a marked contrast and challenge to conventional, mainstream journalism” because of its “emphasis on listening to citizens and figuring out what they want to know, incorporating the perspectives of citizens rather than politicians, experts, and other elite actors, and attending to how citizens could address issues in practice” (2006, p. 240).

³ One of the leading proponents of the movement, Rosen, directly acknowledged Dewey’s central role in informing the theory of public journalism, noting that the shortest definition of public journalism is “what Dewey meant” (1999, p. 24).

Despite the numerous expected functions for the press to perform outlined both by liberal theory and by advocates of public journalism, many of the aforementioned scholars maintain that the press does not adequately fulfil these functions in relation to its public, and that such ideas about the role of journalism in society need a critical rethinking. Curran questions the adequacy of the liberal conception of the press in the current media landscape, arguing that they can no longer claim to be representative institutions (often inadequately representing public concerns), agencies of information (as news is increasingly entertainment-driven) and independent watchdogs (as the ability to scrutinise those in power is hindered by the mutually beneficial relationship between governments and the corporations which own newspapers) (2003, p. 347). Carey highlights the development of opinion polling and the public opinion industry as contributing to the disappearance of a “conversational public” and public life (1997, p. 218). Rosen also finds the strong emphasis on public opinion in news reportage problematic, arguing that public opinion should not be represented by the press as a kind of verdict on societal matters, but rather should be seen as “a process by which a political community comes to understand and debate its choices” (1992, p. 26). He argues that if journalism was to see public opinion as a process rather than a set of percentages, they could potentially “improve the chances that public opinion will evolve into public judgment” (Rosen, 1992, p. 26).

Other scholars argue that news values have become increasingly “sensational, local and personal” and therefore less about news, providing fewer opportunities for citizens to learn about how “to exercise informed choices” and “more about scandals and attracting audience attention” (Seaton, 2003, p. 317). While the increasing popularisation of news values sparks accusations of the press “dumbing down” news and political information, scholars like Dahlgren argue that there remains a potential for civic value to be found in contemporary reporting: “democracy can still be nourished if the mix continues to contain relevant information that is useful to citizens, regardless of what forms it may take” (2009, p. 46). However, Dahlgren further notes that if the press fail to provide citizens with a relevant and valuable news selection, including what he deems “serious news”, then “the warning signals should rightly go off” (2009, p. 46).

Although scholars are sceptical about the ability of the press to encourage an actively involved citizenry, newspapers are associated with constructing an “imagined community” of readers through the rituals of news consumption and the rhetoric adopted in order to address their perceived audience, both of which contribute towards “public opinion”. In *Imagined Communities* (1991), Anderson is centrally concerned with the creation and global spread of the concepts of nations and nationalism and argues that citizens do not need to know each other on a face-to-face basis in order to feel a sense of belonging to a wider community. He views print culture as integral to this process of belonging, as people learn to imagine themselves as part of socially constructed groups through the ritual of reading the newspaper, understanding news consumption as part of mass ceremony:

[T]he newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. (1991, p. 35-36)

Tarde suggests that “dispersed crowds” of readers constitute themselves as a public when coming together to discuss what they read about in newspapers, which in turn leads the newspaper to “create an immense, abstract, and sovereign crowd, which it will name opinion” (1969, p. 318). Carey’s ritual view of communication sees news writing and reading as a ritual act, arguing that reading a newspaper should be viewed “less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed” (1989, p. 20).

Similarly, in his work on mediarituals, Couldry argues that media operate as a “highly centralised system of symbolic production” which he terms the “myth of the mediated centre”, arguing that media communicate a sense of social reality, which is represented as based upon naturally-occurring truths and, therefore, work to construct and validate normative values and ways of being (2003, p. 45). Gans also notes the role played by news media in instilling a sense of social continuity, likening the routine structure of news delivery to the sun: “its daily appearance as scheduled is a sign that social life will go on as before” (2003, p. 71). Newspapers construct a sense of shared values and interests through addressing their readers as a community, claiming to speak with the public’s voice through taking on the perceived

everyday rhetoric of their readership in order to sustain continuing appeal. Conboy emphasises the way in which rhetoric is employed by the popular press to “create and reinforce the community of the nation or of the newspaper readership from within” (2002, p. 161). Conboy argues that through adopting a “truncated and ventriloquized” version of the people’s voice, the press often work to support the status quo (2002, p. 170), an idea which links with Couldry’s notion of the myth of the mediated centre (2003).

As commercial entities, newspapers have to establish a relationship based on credibility and trust with their readers to maintain sales, but also need to supply audiences to advertisers in order to survive. Blumler and Gurevitch argue that media power develops out of a bond between the news provider and the audience they purport to serve, a bond that is “based on the fulfilment of audience expectations and the validation of past trust relationships” (1995, p. 22). As noted by McNair, features like the letters page serve as a form of proof that the newspaper is engaged with the citizens it claims to serve, an essential part of maintaining its brand identity (2000, p. 109). Meech notes that the function of newspapers has always been twofold: “to inform and to advertise” (2008, p. 236). Conboy and Steel argue that the primary objective of newspapers is not to produce news but readers, through “creating a selection of news tailored for a particular readership to create profit and/or exert influence on that readership” (2009, p. 22). Similarly, in the opening sentence of his study of the shifts in newspaper advertising expenditures, Picard notes that from “a business model rather than journalistic standpoint, the primary function of the newspaper is an advertising delivery system” (2009, p. 75).

However, recently the advent of online news and the corresponding decline in circulation figures of print newspapers has problematised the relationship between news producers, readers and advertisers. Scholars note that the business model for offline newspapers cannot be appropriated by their online incarnations and is therefore undergoing a period of change (Berte & De Bens, 2009; Franklin, 2008; McNair, 2009). Franklin asserts that the business model for print newspapers does not translate easily to online news and this is evident from the “controversial and problematic” nature of the attempts to generate online revenues via

subscription (2008, p. 25).⁴ Online newspapers are now struggling with the dilemma of operating as viable commercial products while serving citizens who, through access to the wealth of information available on the internet, increasingly view their regular intake of free news content as a given.

New media, news and citizenship

New media technologies, and specifically the internet and Web 2.0 applications, have expanded the opportunities for citizens to produce, distribute and engage with content, which has the potential to influence the way in which people interact with news and political information. A number of scholarly articulations of the citizen have developed in response to the issues surrounding how citizens engage with information and other citizens in the new media environment. We are no longer simply referred to as readers, watchers or consumers of media content, but acknowledged as active users, or “producers” in Bruns’ definition, whose work argues that the “role of ‘consumer’ and even that of ‘end user’ have long disappeared, and the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance” (2008b, p. 2). Citizens involved in the process of amateur news production have been deemed the “former audience” (Gillmor, 2006) and “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) by advocates of citizen journalism, labels which suggest a shift in agency and, therefore, a degree of empowerment for those previously imagined to be on the receiving end of mass media content. Online writing environments (including discussion boards, blogs and collaborative projects such as wikis) are deemed to act as “potentially valuable tools for the creation and maintenance of a critical public sphere” (Barton, 2005, p. 177).

By drawing on Web 2.0 technologies, social media support interactive information-sharing and present user-centred design, placing a clear emphasis on the participatory potential and value of user contributions by allowing users to rate, comment on, tag, upload and redistribute content as desired. Goode notes that interactive technologies such as blogs, social

⁴ There have, however, been some successful attempts to charge for online content from newspapers with a reputation for quality or niche coverage, including the online versions of *The Wall Street Journal* or *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (McNair, 2009, p. 146).

news sites and sites encouraging citizen journalism generate “new possibilities for citizen participation at various points along those chains of sense-making that shape news” (2009, p. 5). Bruns describes this kind of citizen participation in news consumption as “gatewatching”, which he argues “works by harnessing the collective intelligence and knowledge of dedicated communities to filter the news flow and to highlight and debate salient topics of importance to the community” (2008a, p. 177). Bruns asserts that the practices of social media in response to news material signal a shift in agency “from the journalistic profession to anyone interested in getting involved in the process” (2008a, p. 177).

While Bruns’ notion of gatewatching communities is a convincing assessment of the ways in which citizens are able to filter and annotate the news flow, it is important to highlight the significance of his description of gatewatchers as those who are “interested in getting involved in the process” (p. 177). Although the interactive and participatory nature of online technologies presents us with opportunities to be “gatewatchers”, “producers” and “citizen journalists”, our involvement in such practices depends largely on levels of interest and motivation. Addressing the issue of user involvement in the internet environment, Lovink refers to the “so-called 1% rule”, which argues that within a group of 100 internet users, 89 people will simply view content, 10 will interact with it and only one will decide to create their own content (2008, p. xxvii). The studies of both Ye and Li (2006) and Thurman (2008) appear to support this notion, pointing towards low levels of interest in the more active forms of citizen participation in online news sites. How, then, can we work towards an understanding of the forms of engagement in online spaces which do not involve the sustained level of effort and commitment required for gatewatching or producing citizen journalism?

In his discussion of citizen behaviour in the contemporary media environment, Deuze argues that the notion of the “informed citizen” is no longer appropriate and offers Schudson’s “monitorial citizen” as an adequate alternative for describing the ways in which people engage with their information environment (2009a, p. 17-18). Schudson asserts that citizens can be “monitorial rather than informed” and by this he means that they “scan (rather than read) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of

issues for a very wide variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways” (1998, p. 310). Schudson describes the monitorial citizen as engaging in “environmental surveillance” more than “information-gathering”, and argues that these citizens are potentially better informed than those of the past, but the knowledge they have is fragmented: “somewhere in their heads, they have more bits of information, but there is no assurance that they know at all what to do with what they know” (1998, p. 311). While the monitorial citizen’s fleeting attention and brief moments of participation (perhaps voting in a sidebar opinion poll or rating a user comment) demand less time and effort than that of producing news or opinion pieces (such as writing a blog critiquing mainstream media), these engagements are increasingly common and possess a degree of civic value, making them worthy of academic attention.

Scholarly work exploring the internet’s potential for invigorating civic engagement and public discussion often addresses the arguments of deliberative democracy and, in particular, Habermas’ notion of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; Zhou, Chan & Peng, 2008). Although Habermas’ work on the public sphere has been subject to extensive critique,⁵ the amount of scholarly interest suggests there is still much to be drawn from the concept in the examination of civic engagement in online spaces. As the internet is not an inherently democratic medium, attempts to create the conditions for Habermas’ public sphere –of a “reasoning public” coming together to discuss public issues, with guaranteed access to all and an emphasis on rational-critical debate (1974)– would require rigorous structured facilitation, similar to that necessary for deliberative polling. Dahlberg argues that the public sphere will not arise simply through the arrival of new technology as citizens “must be drawn into rational-critical discourse before new technologies can be successfully employed to extend the public sphere” (2001, p. 630).

However, measuring public communication along deliberative democratic or rational-critical lines ignores the realities of everyday conversation; therefore, it is important to keep in mind that people do not always “[make] use of their reason” (Habermas, 1989, p. 51). As noted

⁵ See Cammaerts, 2009; Cottle, 2006; Fraser, 1992; Garnham, 1992; Schudson, 1992. However, those critical of Habermas’ public sphere simultaneously emphasise the concept’s continuing relevance, describing the model as “indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice” (Fraser, 1992, p. 111) and further, “indispensable as a model of what a good society should achieve” (Schudson, 1992, p. 160).

earlier in the chapter, a number of scholars argue that even though everyday talk might fail to meet the conditions of formal deliberation, it forms a crucial part of civic identity (Barber, 1984; Bohman, 1996; Dahlgren, 2009). Dahlgren argues that “zeroing in too tightly on strict political deliberation risks losing sight of everyday talk and its potential relevance for democracy” (2009, p. 89). In both offline and online civic talk, people do not all share the public sphere’s commitment towards mutual understanding and consensus. As Stromer-Galley notes, discussion can be both “uncivil and ideological”, but “people still engage in it; it still matters to people who want to engage in political discussion” (2000, p. 114).

Despite the plethora of information and opportunities for discussion available within online spaces, scholars highlight that citizens are most likely to engage with both content and people from familiar discursive arenas (boyd, 2008; Dahlberg, 2001; Sunstein, 2001; Witschge, 2004). In addressing the potential for social network sites to enable political action, boyd highlights that “in an attention economy, people pay attention to what interests them, regardless of what is technically available” (2008, p. 243). Writing about the internet’s potential as a space for deliberative democratic practices, Witschge notes that citizens are most likely to discuss politics with people who have similar views and a similar background to themselves (2004, p. 109). There are clearly positive outcomes to the internet’s networking capabilities as people are able to assemble together in virtual communities, giving voice to those who may feel voiceless in offline spaces and building a sense of belonging. However, Dahlberg’s work on online deliberative forums highlights the potential down side of the interaction between like-minded individuals in online settings, arguing that this often encourages the reinforcement of values and prejudices (2001, p. 618). Cammaerts’ study of hate speech in online spaces addresses this very concern, exploring the flipside of the internet’s potential to support independent public spaces and provide a platform for counter-hegemonic discourses (2009).

Other scholars emphasise the danger of the “echo chamber-effect” occurring in online spaces, with the sharing and amplification of similar ideas, information or beliefs generating an unrealistic impression of the societal representativeness of particular arguments (boyd, 2008; Sunstein, 2001). Sunstein argues for the importance of “unanticipated, unchosen exposures

and shared experiences” to counteract the echo chamber-effect occurring in many online communities (2001, p. 8-10). He describes Negroponte’s idea of “The Daily Me” (1995, p. 153), a virtual daily newspaper customised to an individual’s preferences, as “the furthest thing from a utopian dream”, arguing that “it would create serious problems from the democratic point of view” (Sunstein, 2001, p. 22). However, the personal customisation of news content and layout, which has become a standard interactive feature of online newspapers, has also been associated with a degree of user empowerment (Kenney, Gorelik & Mwangi, 2000; Pavlik, 2001), as people are able to highlight issues of salience to them and, therefore, renegotiate aspects of the news agenda according to their interests.

Online newspapers and “the former audience”

Online newspapers are increasingly expected to take advantage of the interactive capabilities afforded to them by the medium they inhabit, and scholars emphasise the potential for a reconfiguration of roles for journalism in regard to its public through providing features which support interactivity and UGC. Hermida and Thurman’s study (2009) asserts that the growth in the provision of interactive features and UGC initiatives across British newspaper websites has been somewhat driven by the fear of being marginalised in an online environment dominated by user-centred media. The views expressed by the senior news executives interviewed in their study reflect this concern over the potential marginalisation of online newspapers which neglect to provide interactive spaces and opportunities for UGC. One of the interview participants, Richard Burton, editor of Telegraph.co.uk, stated that the “idea of becoming a forum for debate was an area that newspapers had to get into, otherwise they’d get left behind” (Hermida & Thurman, 2009, p. 223). The news website producers interviewed in Chung’s study also emphasise the importance of adopting interactive features to stay current and competitive in the contemporary news industry; one interviewee noted that online newspapers who fail to provide interactive features are “missing a huge opportunity” and another added that interactive communication makes online news websites “a hell of a lot better” (2007, p. 50). Boczkowski argues that online newspapers which have been successful in exploring the internet’s participatory capabilities have acknowledged their readers as “technically savvy information producers” who want to produce content through

engaging with interactive features rather than simply consuming professional news content (2004a, p. 13). Rosenberry asserts that the power and promise of online journalism is interactivity, “tapping in to an audience that is already actively engaged in construction of meaning in the messages and doing some of the gatekeeping for itself” (2005, p. 64).

Studies addressing the way interactivity has been adopted by online news sites identify two key areas of focus: the way interactive features enable users to engage with news content and how they encourage a dialogue amongst users and between users and journalists. As McMillan notes, interactivity is not exclusively a new media phenomenon, however new media technologies provide the ability to facilitate interactivity in new environments and in new ways (2006, p. 206). From the literature on interactivity and online journalism, the potential range of interactive practices is commonly separated into two broad dimensions covering the way users interact with content and with one another. The first is content interactivity⁶ which Bucy describes as “the control that news consumers exercise over the selection and presentation of editorial content, whether story text, audiovisuals, multimedia, or other aspects of the interface” (2004, p. 55). In online news sites, features that present content interactivity include hyperlinks and site search engines which allow users to navigate through site content and also those which enable users to personalise their news menu (for example, rearranging the layout of the online paper’s front page in order to highlight sections of particular interest). As previously noted, features of content interactivity allowing users to filter content according to personal preferences have been linked with notions of user empowerment (Kenney et al., 2000; Pavlik, 2001). The second dimension of interactivity referred to by scholars writing about online news sites is interpersonal interactivity,⁷ present in features which facilitate communication between human beings (Bucy, 2004; Massey & Levy, 1999; Zeng & Li, 2006). Features relevant to online news sites that fit with the category of interpersonal interactivity include email links to invite feedback from users, message boards or discussion forums and articles with spaces for user comments.

⁶ Content interactivity is also referred to as “customization” (Pavlik, 2001) and “user-to-system interaction” (McMillan, 2006).

⁷ Interpersonal interactivity is also termed “user-to-user interaction” (McMillan, 2006).

Most studies conclude that online journalism is struggling to fulfil the interactive and communicative potentials presented by the online environment (Chung, 2007; Domingo, 2008; Oblak, 2005; Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo & Quant, 2007; Quandt, 2008; Rosenberry, 2005; Singer & Ashman, 2009a). Although online newspapers appear to have a surface-level enthusiasm for interactivity, Gunter states that they “do not always use the new technology to its full potential” (2003, p. 72). Rosenberry’s study similarly concludes that the “promise of online journalism to create conditions for improved political communication appears to be largely untapped” (2005, p. 67). As a number of scholars note, most mainstream news sites offer plenty of content interactivity, providing a wealth of features which allow users to navigate paths through site content (Bucy, 2004; Deuze, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Zeng & Li, 2006).⁸ While this kind of interactivity may seem like an increasingly standard feature of online news consumption, it is important not to dismiss the significance of content interactivity as its presence foregrounds the active role of the user in selecting their own pathways through site content.

However, the limited adoption of interpersonal interactivity is highly problematic, as features belonging to this type present the most potential for facilitating civic engagement and the possibility of an ongoing dialogue between users and journalists, which is most desired by those advocating for interactivity as having the potential to contribute to a kind of Fourth Estate role revival for journalism through forging a path to a more participatory style of journalism (Rosenberry, 2010). Chung concludes that the news site producers interviewed in her study are both “interested and enthusiastic” about what interactivity can do for online news sites, but the majority are wary about interactivity in terms of human-to-human exchange (2007, p. 50). Along the continuum of approaches and attitudes toward interactivity outlined by Chung, the majority fit into the category “cautious traditionalists”, as they are neither “innovators”, those keen to embrace the potential opportunities of online interactivity, nor “purists”, who are “true to the dominant paradigm of the traditional mass media’s one-way communication model” (2007, p. 52).

⁸ Deuze actually terms this kind of interactivity “navigational interactivity” in his attempt to describe “the ways in which online journalisms apply the distinct features of the web to their ‘storytelling’ capacities” (2003, p. 214).

Scholars highlight that online newspapers appear to replicate many of the structures and practices of their offline counterparts (Chung, 2007; Deuze, 2003, 2008; Domingo, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2009). In *Digitizing the News*, Boczkowski writes about the early movements of newspapers into electronic spaces, arguing that they “neither ignored nor wholly embraced electronic publishing”, and he asserts that many online newspapers have “embedded as much sameness as possible while building something supposedly new” (2004a, p. 20). While Boczkowski’s assertion of “sameness” is in reference to the prominent repurposing of content originally intended for a paper’s print edition (2004a, p. 55), Deuze argues that online newspapers not only reproduce the content of their offline equivalents, but also their “journalistic culture” (2003, p. 219). In a later article, Deuze further explains that online newspapers replicate the production processes of their original print product, “including, but not limited to, its established ways of doing things, its news culture, and its occupational ideology” (2008, p. 856). Similarly Chung asserts that the “traditional paradigm of one-way, top-down news with centralized control of power is still going strong” in online news media (2007, p. 57-58). Domingo argues that newsroom routines reproduce mass media models, in which journalists are the producers and audiences are consumers (2008, p. 692). He further asserts that the concept of the active media user is at odds with the traditional culture of the newsroom and, therefore, to embrace the notion would require “a complete redefinition of working routines” (2008, p. 692). From the studies addressed so far in relation to online news production and interactivity, it is clear that the surface level enthusiasm for interactivity does not mean that the provision of interactive features is guaranteed; therefore, it is necessary to work towards a better understanding of why newspapers are hesitant to take full advantage of interactivity in their online editions.

Factors influencing online newspapers’ limited adoption of interactivity

Scholarly work examining the range of interactive features provided by online newspapers suggests that the limited adoption of such features reflects the desire of news producers to retain journalism’s gatekeeping role and professional standards (Chung, 2007; Deuze, 2003; Gunter, 2003; Hermida & Thurman, 2009; Paulussen et al., 2007). Deuze points towards journalism’s fear of interactivity contributing to a partial loss of its gatekeeping role: “a

mainstream news site embracing connectivity must consider the impact that this will have on its established culture of doing things, its monopoly on content, its understanding of what is 'public', its roles in community" (2003, p. 220). In their study of how journalists at Britain's *Guardian* newspaper and its online version, *Guardian.co.uk*, understand and include UGC in their practices, Singer and Ashman note that journalists with a commitment to maintaining a degree of professional distance could potentially find the ability to participate in comment threads alongside users slightly unsettling (2009a, p. 17-19). They conclude that most of the journalists interviewed for the study acknowledged a theoretical value in interactivity but that "the reality presented a more profound challenge to their professional sensibilities than they had perhaps anticipated" (Singer & Ashman, 2009a, p. 19).⁹

While McNair notes that "the democratisation of the public sphere by way of online forms such as citizen journalism and UGC is a good thing" (2000, p. 151), he also shares the potential concern held by online newspapers about the threat to professional standards that such "democratic, diverse and decentralised" practices of online journalistic discourse could bring (2000, p. 153). McNair asserts that the necessary responses to this threat is to establish rule books or guidelines for UGC and gatekeeping and screening procedures to keep "erroneous reports, malicious rumours, downright lies and offensive rants" out of content (2000, p. 153). McNair's concern about the importance of moderation is supported by other studies which highlight the need to filter out duplication and retain standards of spelling and grammar as well as newsworthiness when providing opportunities for UGC (Thurman, 2008). However, McNair adopts an overly pessimistic stance towards user contributions, viewing them as a problem for professional journalists who need to monitor such content religiously in order to retain credibility, rather than emphasising the value of online publications which manage to effectively integrate UGC alongside professionally-produced content.

McNair's discussion leads to another possible contributing factor to the limited provision of interactive features by online newspapers: the spaces for user feedback and UGC are often

⁹ However, it must be noted that at the time of Singer and Ashman's study, there were no clearly stated policies for journalist-user interaction at *Guardian.co.uk* although "informal guidelines were emerging" (2009a, p. 17). This situation has since changed, with *Guardian.co.uk* presenting a comprehensive range of policies associated with user participation and discussion which include their moderation aims and guidelines for maintaining the site's desired community standards ("Community standards," 2009).

viewed as a problem rather than an opportunity, manifested in the various moderation and separation strategies adopted in order to overcome the potential threats posed by allowing contributions from the public. The results from Domingo's ethnographic study suggest that, "despite the diversity of definitions and strategies regarding interactivity among the studied online newsrooms", interactivity is still viewed by online newspapers as a problem to tackle rather than an opportunity for change (2008, p. 681). An online news organisation's decision to adopt pre- or post-moderation of UGC in comment and debate features reflects the degree of concern they have surrounding the risk of discriminatory, potentially libellous or spam material tarnishing their image. Pre-moderation of material allows site producers to maintain authorial control more easily, but it is also criticised for hindering opportunities for healthy debate through stalling the flow of conversation (Domingo, 2008). Harrison argues that post-moderation is not necessarily suitable for all mediated online spaces, but rather for "mature online communit[ies], or for discussions that are not likely to elicit extreme views or overly aggressive responses" (2010, p. 250).

Studies also show that in the instances where UGC is hosted by an online newspaper site, there is often a clear separation between content produced by journalists and that produced by users (Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007; Domingo, 2008; Örnebring, 2009). Örnebring highlights the low levels of direct user involvement in the news gathering, selection and production processes of online newspapers, and in the cases where such involvement does occur, he argues "it is not displayed in the same way as articles produced by the regular journalists of the paper" (2009, p. 154). Domingo also notes the distinction in the way UGC is often presented in relation to journalistic material, noting that "users' contributions as producers were restricted to special mini-sites" (2008, p. 697). Online newspapers which adopt UGC initiatives but choose to publish them in a separate, user-focused section reap the double benefit of appearing enthusiastic about user contributions and public discussion while simultaneously maintaining a degree of distance between their core product and content which may present a threat to their reputation, risk them losing audience trust and/or bring about legal problems.

While online newspaper producers are cautious about the potential risks posed by providing spaces for user contributions on their sites, many papers tailor the interactive features presented in order to generate opinions from their reader community which can then be mobilised to suggest a direct connection between the paper and “the people”. The findings of Hermida and Thurman’s study of UGC in British newspaper websites show that “news organisations are facilitating user participation, by filtering and aggregating UGC in ways they believe to be useful and valuable to their audience” (2009, p. 230). The “innovators” of Chung’s study, those site producers who were keen to embrace the communicative possibilities of interactivity in their sites, viewed interactive features as providing potential value to their users in terms of community building (2007). While online newspapers may indeed want to provide interactive features that their readers will find useful and valuable, and potentially play a role in fostering community, these features also present online newspapers with the opportunity to capture and publish user opinion so as to show that they are dedicated to granting a platform to feature what the “common man” has to say.

Features like sidebar polls with pre-set options and “Have your says”,¹⁰ which seek to capture user opinion through asking questions specifically engineered by journalists to encourage responses, appeal to journalism’s tendency towards populist discourse (Blumler, 2001). Conboy notes that the press often draws on everyday language to suggest a connection with the people (2002), and this connection can be made all the more convincing if news producers acquire written responses from users and mobilise this UGC in order to represent “the voice of the people”. In his discussion of the interactive features provided on theSun.co.uk, the website of UK tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, Conboy notes that the “rhetoric of dialogue and the strategies aimed at building an effect of nationalism through the paper are reinforced by the use of interactive feedback from the readers” (2002, p. 158). Therefore, many online newspapers are able to employ interactive features in order to claim to represent “the voice of

¹⁰“Have Your Says” are described by Hermida and Thurman as areas in which journalists nominate topical questions for readers to respond to and journalists then select a number for publication, often editing them through this moderation process (2009, p. 221). In outlining the range of interactive features available to online newspapers, Hermida and Thurman make the distinction between “Messageboards” and “Have Your Says”, emphasising the difference between the former’s user-led conversational mode and the latter’s journalist-driven, user-as-respondent mode.

the people” while simultaneously offering users no role in the production process of the site, and according to Örnebring, no real control and influence over content (2009, p. 154).

The economic cost of managing interactive features is continually highlighted as a significant factor in the limited provision of such features by online newspapers (Beyers, 2004; Chung, 2007; Massey & Levy, 1999; Thurman, 2008). UGC and other forms of reader input are not without benefits; they can offer contributions to the news production process (providing tip-offs or ideas for stories, as well as written and multimedia content), some of which can potentially provide internal and external syndication opportunities (Thurman, 2008, p. 149). Despite the potential benefits in hosting interactive features, online newspapers must dedicate a great amount of time and money in order to maintain the effective moderation of user forums and UGC. In her study of the BBC’s management of UGC and gatekeeping, Harrison puts it frankly: “UGC is not a cheap option” (2010, p. 244), especially if you want to do so effectively, retaining both the trust of the reader community and the brand identity of the paper. Massey and Levy highlight the relation between levels of interactivity and staffing, as well as the fact that “revenue streams, or the lack of them, have some influence over a Web newspaper’s level of interactivity” (1999, p. 147).

For a number of site producers interviewed in Chung’s study, the reluctance to provide discussion forums stemmed from the heavy demand on resources required to moderate such spaces (2007, p. 57). Studies also report that a number of online news sites which once provided forums for user discussion have since taken them away due to the labour intensive process of moderating them (Beyers, 2004; Chung, 2007; Thurman, 2008). In addition to the cost of managing interactive features, journalists may also find themselves under increased workload pressures through receiving feedback from readers via email and faced with the expectation that they take part in discussion forums (Chung, 2007, p. 57; Schultz, 2000, p. 212). However, journalism, and specifically online newspapers, needs to recognise these kinds of tasks as a vital part of showing a sense of accountability and responsibility in reportage; adopting interactive features like email links to journalists and enabling comments on articles provides users with an outlet for engaging with, and perhaps critiquing, the news they consume.

Conclusion

The internet's many-to-many mode of communication has afforded print media new opportunities to mediate public communication, with citizens able to interact with content and with one another in ways which were previously unavailable in traditional printed versions. However, according to the studies addressed in this chapter, rather than seeing interactive features and UGC as a positive addition to the role and function of journalism in contemporary society, the limited provision and ineffective facilitation of such features reveal a degree of reluctance on the part of online newspapers who simultaneously understand that interactivity is a growing necessity. Although the growing prevalence of user opinion incorporated into online newspaper content gathered through interactive means might on the surface suggest a blurring of the line between amateur and professional journalism, it is essential to examine the power relations amongst users and journalists in these spaces. Metykova asserts that the current opportunities available for citizens to provide input and commentary into the news flow may represent little more than a "technological updating of more traditional forms of interaction" (2009, p. 133).

Could it then be, as Metykova suggests, that the interactive features of online newspapers involving UGC are simply updated versions of the traditional forms of audience participation in the news flow described earlier in the chapter, such as vox pops, talk radio and letters to the editor? According to the scholarly work discussed in reference to these established forms of citizen participation in news media, such interactivity often serves to reinforce the boundary between citizens and journalists, between amateurs and professionals (Gans, 2003; Hutchby, 1996; Lewis et al., 2005; Scannell, 1991). Though new media technologies allow for new modes of interaction and communication between journalists and users, the scholarly work discussed in relation to online newspapers and interactivity highlights the potential concern felt by journalists surrounding the potential loss of their gatekeeping role in the news production process. While the arguments concerning the necessity of professional standards of journalism are warranted, it is also crucial to acknowledge the danger in overestimating the degree of agency imparted on users in online media spaces which may actually work to reproduce already existing hierarchies and formats. As the UGC published by online

newspapers may be subject to moderation or editing, and is mobilised according to the paper's requirements, professional media outlets remain in control of framing the public's voice and representing "public opinion"; this has potentially significant democratic implications which are necessary to explore.

Chapter Two

Research Design

While the previous chapter established a number of theoretical concerns informing the study, this chapter describes how the research was designed and carried out in order to effectively address questions surrounding the levels of agency imparted on users by the online newspapers studied. The chapter begins by defining the scope of the study, justifying the choice to study online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand and describing how and why the sample was selected for research. The chapter subsequently outlines the research methods adopted for assessing the provision and facilitation of user engagement and participation in the sites studied and concludes by offering some reflections on the study's research design.

Scope

Many recent studies investigating online news media's facilitation of public engagement and interaction in their sites adopt a geographical focus, looking at a range of media outlets in one country or comparing media outlets from different countries.¹¹ However, the way in which online news media from Australia and New Zealand provide opportunities for user participation has received little scholarly attention.¹² By exploring the interactive and participatory opportunities presented by a selection of online newspapers from these two countries, this thesis addresses the need for an examination into an area which is currently

¹¹ Countries featured in these studies include (but are not limited to): Belgium (Beyers, 2004), Germany (Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010), Slovenia (Vobič, 2010), Spain (Domingo, 2008), Sweden (Bergström, 2008; Karlsson, 2010), United Kingdom (Harrison, 2010; Hermida & Thurman, 2009; Thurman, 2008), the United States of America (Chung, 2007; Rosenberry, 2005; Schultz, 1999; Zeng & Li, 2006), China (Zhou, Chan & Peng, 2008) and India (Chattopahyay, 2010). Other studies adopt a wider focus by looking at online news media from a number of countries belonging to a larger geographical area, including Massey and Levy's study of online newspapers from Asia (1999), Paulussen et al.'s examination of online news media in a number of European countries (2007) and Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer and Vujnovic's international comparative study of participatory initiatives in online newspapers (2009).

¹² In my research, I came across one study that uses content analysis to examine the interactive potential of a selection of Australian online newspapers (Hashim, Hasan and Sinnapan, 2007). However, it is primarily focused on the theoretical dimensions of interactivity and whether or not these are present rather than commenting on the shifting roles of and relationship between users and news producers in the online environment. During this research, I found no equivalent coverage of the strategies adopted for user engagement by online news media in New Zealand.

under researched. Media ownership in both countries is highly-concentrated, with 80 per cent of Australia’s newspapers owned by four major media organisations and New Zealand’s newspaper market dominated by three companies (World Association of Newspapers, 2010). The twelve online newspapers examined in this thesis are owned and operated by one of three media companies: APN News and Media (Australian-owned), Fairfax Media (also Australian-owned) and Allied Press (New Zealand-owned).

Table 1.

The sample of online newspapers in the study

Online newspapers	Media organisation	Geographical region
NZHerald.co.nz	APN News and Media	Auckland/upper North Island
theAucklander.co.nz	APN News and Media	Auckland
BayofPlentyTimes.co.nz	APN News and Media	Bay of Plenty
SunshineCoastDaily.com.au	APN News and Media	Sunshine Coast, Queensland
theChronicle.com.au	APN News and Media	Toowoomba, Queensland
Stuff.co.nz	Fairfax Media	New Zealand
DomPost.co.nz	Fairfax Media	Wellington/North Island
thePress.co.nz	Fairfax Media	Christchurch/South Island
NationalTimes.com.au	Fairfax Media	Australia
SMH.com.au	Fairfax Media	Sydney, New South Wales
theAge.com.au	Fairfax Media	Melbourne, Victoria
ODT.co.nz	Allied Press	Dunedin/Otago

Note: With the exception of the two online newspapers that do not exist in a print format (Stuff.co.nz and NationalTimes.com.au), the geographical region(s) attributed in this table reflect each paper’s offline circulation area.

The selection of online newspapers studied are not representative of the entire range of online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand but are intended to highlight some of the ways in which interactivity and UGC is being solicited, facilitated and represented by a number of mainstream news outlets in these countries.¹³ Although the three companies own a greater number of titles than is represented in this study, an effort was made to select a range

¹³ The way the sample of online newspapers were selected for this study is in accordance with the practice of qualitative research, which “tends to use small samples which are generated more informally and organically than those typically used in quantitative research” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 45).

of online newspapers covering different sized readership areas (including metropolitan and regionally oriented publications) and varying levels of online dominance in terms of readership figures (with some ranking highly according to website traffic data¹⁴). ODT.co.nz, owned by Allied Press, was included on the basis that it is owned by a small company (relative to the two larger media companies in the study) but holds a strong position in the Otago region of New Zealand's South Island in terms of both online readership and offline circulation. It is also important to note that two of the online newspapers in the study are technically online-only newspapers as they do not have an offline equivalent. The first is Stuff.co.nz which has its own editorial staff but acts as a kind of portal for content linked from other Fairfax newspapers (mainly from New Zealand, but also from SMH.com.au and theAge.com.au).¹⁵ The second online newspaper which does not exist in an offline format is NationalTimes.com.au, an online publication which hosts analysis, commentary and opinion from a range of Fairfax Media's newspapers in Australia but is branded as a standalone outlet and has some content not available on other sites.¹⁶

Methods

Developing a framework to measure and assess opportunities for user engagement

Past studies examining the interactive dimensions of online newspapers highlight the notions of responsiveness and control as central issues surrounding the role of professionals and citizens in the online journalism environment (Kenney et al., 2000; Massey & Levy, 1999; Schultz, 1999). In his quantitative study of interactive options in U.S. online newspapers, Schultz argues that the mere provision and use of technologies is not interactive but is dependent on levels of responsiveness (1999). The studies of both Massey and Levy (1999), and Kenney et al. (2000), investigate the responsiveness component of interactivity through

¹⁴ NZHerald.co.nz and Stuff.co.nz hold the top two rankings of newspaper and magazine websites in New Zealand (Nielsen NetRatings, 2008) and in Australia, SMH.com.au occupies the number one spot, with theAge.com.au in third place (World Association of Newspapers, 2010).

¹⁵ Stuff.co.nz is also NZHerald.co.nz's biggest rival in New Zealand and, therefore, it is important to examine both of these papers to identify the differences and similarities in their provision and facilitation of features involving user engagement.

¹⁶ Unlike Stuff.co.nz, NationalTimes.com.au is based on a newspaper which once existed in print but closed down in 1987 ("About", 2010). It was relaunched online by Fairfax Media on 14 September 2009.

emailing newspaper staff and recording the number of emails received in response. In his study of UGC in online tabloid newspapers, Örnebring (2009) praises Massey and Levy's conception of content interactivity for placing issues of power and control at the centre of the research agenda and seeks to follow a similar line of enquiry in relation to UGC, asking "to what extent users have control over the UGC provision in the studied newspapers, and what types of content it is that they are given the opportunity to create" (p. 143). This thesis poses similar questions about interactivity and UGC, and in addition, emphasises the issues of power and control which arise from the way in which interactive features and UGC initiatives are structured and facilitated.

The framework developed for assessing the provision of interactive features and UGC initiatives in study's selection of the online newspapers was constructed with the notions of responsiveness and control in mind. The list of features and initiatives for examination was developed through consulting previous academic studies concerned with online newspapers and interactivity or UGC (Hermida & Thurman, 2009; Kenney et al., 2000; Massey & Levy, 1999) and selecting those which were deemed suitable for the research requirements of this study –ones involving active engagement with news content, other users and news producers. After defining the features and initiatives for examination, they were then separated into three categories of user engagement with online news media.¹⁷ The first is user as *filter*, involving features supporting customisation, filtering and distribution of news content by users. The second is user as *respondent*, associated with features which invite user reaction and comment on news content and allow them to engage with others (either other users, news producers or public figures). The third and final category of user engagement which features and initiatives are grouped under is user as *source*, involving UGC initiatives which invite users to participate in the news gathering process.

¹⁷ The initial stimulus for the idea to separate these three separate categories of user engagement according to the differing levels of agency imparted on users came from Chung's study of interactivity and online newspapers (2008) which plots features along a continuum of interactivity relative to the degree of agency each feature provides for users. Chung defines interactivity as "a multi-dimensional construct that is on a continuum of medium to human interactivity", meaning that features involving users interacting with the medium are considered to possess lower levels of interactivity than those sponsoring human (or interpersonal) interactivity such as email links and message boards (2008, p. 661).

The features and initiatives categorised into these three strands of user participation were searched for and examined across the sample of online newspapers in order to give both quantitative (in terms of commonality) and qualitative (in terms of management and facilitation) descriptions of each feature. Each of the twelve online newspapers were assessed individually against the developed framework, acquiring data by checking if a feature or initiative was present and capturing a screenshot of each for future reference. As online newspapers operate in an ever-changing technological environment, this element of the research was conducted over a two month period (May-June 2010) and, therefore, provides an assessment of what the selected online newspapers offered in terms of interactivity and UGC during this time.¹⁸ From this exploration of the online newspaper sites and coding of the different features and initiatives, I was able to interpret these findings to see both the similarities and differences in the interactive menus provided by the selection studied.

Examining the discourse of online newspaper sites

The thesis employs discourse analysis as a guiding framework in the examination of the participatory spaces of online newspapers in order to explore how the roles of and relationship between users and news producers are embodied in the use of language in these spaces. As Deacon et al. note (2007, p. 150), discourse analysis takes many forms and has been used by a number of scholars who all differ in their approach towards analysing the language of media texts.¹⁹ The methods of linguistic analysis used in this study do not subscribe to any one version of discourse analysis but adopt it as a broad approach towards studying media texts which is considered both appropriate and productive in the context of the research. Deacon et al. argue that the:

critical scope and potential of discourse analysis resides most of all in its examination of how relations and structures of power are embedded in the forms of everyday language use, and thus how language contributes to the legitimisation of existing social relations and hierarchies of authority and control. (2007, p. 154)

¹⁸ However, although the features and initiatives were counted over this specific time period, the thesis often refers to dates outside of this period in its wider analysis of the discourses articulated on the sites.

¹⁹ Those mentioned by Deacon et al. which were consulted as part of this study's research include Bell (1998), Fairclough (1995), Kress and van Leeuwen (1998) and Richardson (2007).

The study uses discourse analysis to denaturalise the kinds of language used by news producers in promoting and facilitating interactivity in their sites in order to understand how the relations between, and identities of, both news producers and users are created and maintained through language use. As Conboy notes, if newspaper language is understood and examined as discourse, researchers are able to “view news production and dissemination as creating new forms of power as well as new forms of access to representation” (2007, p. 10).

Analysis was carried out on range of different texts surrounding the interactive features and UGC initiatives provided by the online newspapers studied. This included an examination of both the attention-grabbing rhetoric surrounding features as well as the more formal rules and guidelines stated in the terms and conditions or frequently asked question sections (FAQs). The language expressed in the spaces of interpersonal interaction such as comment threads and social media was also subjected to close analysis in order to identify and critically examine the nature and frequency of journalist-user interaction occurring in such spaces. This analysis also studied the way user interest and opinion was mobilised by the online newspapers to represent “the voice of the people”, as reflected in site content like popular links lists and articles reporting on user opinion featured in polls or gathered from comment threads.

In addition to this, an in-depth examination of two noteworthy features, an editorial blog and a “Have your say”-style discussion space, was undertaken. As the only features of these types to be represented amongst the group of online newspapers studied, both were considered to be crucial sites for analysis as they present opportunities where users are invited to contribute towards an unfolding discussion and where the boundaries of the journalist-user relationship can be negotiated or maintained. The first, Stuff.co.nz’s “From the Newsroom” editorial blog, was closely examined to observe the kinds of interaction taking place between editors or journalists and users, looking at the sentiments expressed in both blog posts and user comments and highlighting the common themes emerging. Secondly, NZHerald.co.nz’s “Your Views” opinion feature was subjected to critical scrutiny in order to assess how effectively it functions as a tool for public discussion. This analysis focused on how user discussion was staged and facilitated, including a small-scale content analysis of 100

questions/topics to determine whether these served to encourage an open and engaged discussion (with open-ended phrasing) or whether they functioned to set an agenda for discussion (those with a closed nature), working to polarise user responses.²⁰ Additionally, the analysis assessed the way internal features such as the “like” and reply functions operate within the threads of user comments.

Reflections on research design

Studies investigating the attitudes of online news producers and/or users towards interactivity and user participation in the news environment tend to be based on the findings of research interviews (Chung, 2007; Domingo, 2008; Singer & Ashman, 2009a; Thurman, 2008) or surveys (Bergström, 2008; Chung, 2008; Schultz, 2000). These methods allow researchers to ask direct questions tailored to their research concerns and the answers given provide insight into how interactivity is understood and perceived by news producers and/or users (depending on the nature or focus of the study). The absence of such methods in this study may be perceived as a limitation as the research conducted here can only make inferences about why particular features are offered and why others are not by drawing on the findings of other studies. However, this thesis is less concerned with how news producers and users perceive the interactivity of online newspapers than with how interactivity is projected, how UGC is mobilised to represent “the voice of the people” and what this tells us about how empowered users are through their participation. This thesis views the internet as a “*context of social construction*” and recognises the benefits of using the medium as a tool for research which “facilitates the researcher’s ability to witness and analyze the structure of talk, the negotiation of meaning and identity, the development of relationships and communities, and the construction of social structures as these occur discursively” (Markham, 2004, p. 97; original emphasis).

In the context of this study, the online environment provides a rich research ground for examining the ways in which interactivity is projected by the online newspapers studied alongside which features and initiatives are actually present and how this reflects the

²⁰ See Appendix 1 for a list of these questions/topics.

attitudes or motivations behind the facilitation of interactivity and UGC. The different components making up the methodological framework adopted for this study work together effectively as they help to identify both the projection of interactivity and the actually occurring relations and opportunities provided. By combining quantitative indications highlighting the kinds of features and initiatives that are commonly provided (as well as those which are not) with qualitative analysis which illustrates how the features function in practice, the research design enables the study to draw some conclusions about the levels of agency imparted on users through their participation in such spaces. The qualitative analysis also works to show how the structure and facilitation of interactive features and UGC initiatives suggests what kinds of roles and identities are being maintained or negotiated in the participatory environment. The website analysis and the subsequent numerical indicators help to identify which features are worthy of further investigation and the close analysis of the noteworthy features extends this. All of the elements of the research design work together to contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of how user engagement is structured and facilitated in the online newspapers examined, assisting the study in addressing the research questions of the thesis which are focused on the degree to which users are empowered in this environment and the extent to which journalistic norms dominate.

Chapter Three

Analysis of Interactive Features and User-Generated Content Initiatives

Unlike their print counterparts, online newspapers are able to harness the potential of online technologies through offering a range of interactive features and UGC initiatives which provide new opportunities for customisation, communication and contribution in the processes of news production and consumption. But aside from the celebratory rhetoric surrounding interactivity and UGC, it is essential that we examine the kinds of tools that users are being provided with to interact with news content, journalists and one another. This chapter outlines and describes a number of interactive features and UGC initiatives divided into three categories –user as *filter*, user as *respondent* and user as *source*– in relation to a selection of online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand. These three strands are addressed in order by the chapter, from features which invite users to customise and distribute the news content they receive, to those which encourage monitorial engagements with news content involving user reaction, interpretation and communication, and finally, initiatives which allow for user contributions in the news production process, utilising the potential for users to act as news gatherers or citizen journalists. Drawing on results from the analysis conducted across the online newspapers chosen, this chapter provides figures to illustrate the popularity of the features and initiatives measured and discusses the various ways in which certain features are designed and facilitated by the analysed online newspapers in order to illustrate both the nature and levels of agency imparted on users.

The latter part of the chapter discusses the areas of interactivity and UGC commonly provided by the online newspapers examined and those which are less common, exploring the potential reasons behind the enthusiasm or lack of enthusiasm for specific or related features. The democratic implications of the limited range of participatory options are discussed, drawing on scholarly work to illustrate how the gaps in the provision of features are of significant concern but, concurrently, how commonly adopted features can also be problematic if they are not framed or facilitated effectively. The last section also addresses the types of content users are being invited to comment on or produce themselves, arguing that these established limits which shape user agency within these spaces are reflective of the analysed online

newspapers' approach towards interactivity and UGC, which seeks to uphold the gatekeeping role and professional standards of journalism.

Interactive features and UGC initiatives: Results

User as *filter*

Features supporting customisation, filtering and distribution of news content by users

The online newspapers examined provided various customisation features presenting a basic level of interactivity in the news consumption process, including navigational hyperlinks to enable users to direct themselves through site content and a search function to assist users in finding desired content in papers' online archives (see Table 2). Navigational hyperlinks represent what Deuze defines as navigational interactivity, where "the user is allowed to navigate in a more or less structured way through the site's content (through "Next Page" and "Back to Top" buttons or scrolling menu bars, for example)" (2003, p. 214). All of the online newspapers studied had navigational hyperlinks, providing users with opportunities to interact with content in the form of hypertext, including sidebar links featured in or alongside articles which present a wider sense of narrative context by suggesting connections to previous and/or related articles. While the ubiquitous presence of navigational hyperlinks across online newspaper sites (and indeed websites in general) may make them seem unremarkable, they function as the most basic and necessary tools for interacting with content, helping aid user engagement around site content in a non-linear fashion, meaning that users can construct their own viewing narratives according to their interests. This is not to suggest that readers of print newspapers are unable to construct their own personal reading narratives, as both online and offline newspapers allow readers to navigate themselves around news content according to their interests. However, one measure of interactivity not possible with offline newspapers (at least not with the click of a button) is the ability to search archived site content. All of the papers in this study enable a search feature, most commonly located near the top of the page at the right hand side of the screen, enabling users to search for previously published material using keywords. A search feature is an easy to use archive, providing users with a tool to access and search through an extensive database

of content and it requires a significantly less amount of time and effort than having to use an index card collection at a library or contact the newspaper for assistance.

Table 2.

Interactive features from the user as *filter* category present in the sample of online newspapers

Online newspapers	Navigational hyperlinks	Archival site search	RSS feeds	Customising homepage layout	Share via email	Share via social media
NZHerald.co.nz	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
theAucklander.co.nz	✓	✓	✓		✓	
BayofPlentyTimes.co.nz	✓	✓	✓		✓	
SunshineCoastDaily.com.au	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
theChronicle.com.au	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Stuff.co.nz	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DomPost.co.nz	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
thePress.co.nz	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
NationalTimes.com.au	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
SMH.com.au	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
theAge.com.au	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
ODT.co.nz	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

Note. Sourced May-June 2010.

Real Simple Syndication (RSS) proved to be the standard avenue through which users were encouraged to customise and personalise their news consumption across the selected group of online newspapers. Zeng and Li assert that customisation features like RSS feeds assign a larger role to user interests in “shaping the model of news and the related information flow”, with the potential for users to select their own news, “judging the news worthiness and setting up their own news collections” (2006, p. 143). All of the papers offered users the opportunity to subscribe to RSS feeds, which involves users selecting topics to follow in order to receive regular updates on news content as it is published in a standardised format on a web-based, desktop-based or mobile-based RSS reader or aggregator. Online newspapers supplying RSS feeds allow users to subscribe to topics of personal interest and, therefore, to an extent users can circumvent the traditional news flow by pre-selecting desired content, avoiding the need to visit a paper’s front page and begin searching from there. The majority of online newspapers examined offered a wide range of topics for users to subscribe to via RSS feeds. For instance, both SMH.com.au and theAge.com.au provided RSS feeds for “Top Stories”, “National”, “World”, “Business”, “Entertainment”, “Technology” and “Sport”.

Despite the apparent enthusiasm for the customisation of content presented by the widespread adoption of RSS feeds, Stuff.co.nz was the only newspaper to offer a feature allowing users to reallocate sections of the homepage layout (see Table 2). Customising homepage layout involves moving around the boxes containing news sections in order to shift the priority of certain news topics above others, and if a user is logged in to their profile, the layout arrangement is saved for subsequent visits to the site. There are many potential explanations for the almost non-existent level of interest in allowing users to personalise their news consumption through offering them the ability to redesign the homepage layout. Online newspapers could be deterred by the costs involved in adopting the required technologies, or may perhaps consider RSS feeds a more useful tool for enabling users to filter news according to personal preferences. Furthermore, it is quite possible that such a feature is viewed with caution as it imparts a significant degree of agency to the user in allowing for a renegotiation of front page layout and, therefore, could be considered a threat to the traditional role of trained professionals establishing hierarchies of newsworthiness.

In addition to offering RSS feeds for users to filter their news menu, the online newspapers examined commonly supported opportunities for news content to be distributed by users via email and social media links (as evident in Table 2). All of the online newspapers provided users with the ability to share news content with others via email, typically through presenting an online form for users to enter details such as the recipient's email address, the user's name and email address and an optional message (to perhaps note the significance of the article content to the recipient). Other interactive distribution features often placed alongside the email-to-a-friend option are links to share newspaper content on social media sites. The majority of online newspapers examined (ten of the twelve) offered links to share articles via social media sites, including the social network site Facebook, the micro-blogging site Twitter, social bookmarking sites such as StumbleUpon and Delicious, and social news sites like Digg and Reddit. These links appear in the form of small icons, placed either near the headline or below the main body of the article, and when clicked on, users are invited to log in to their profile on the particular social media site and share the associated content, often with the ability to provide annotation to the link.

There are clearly distribution advantages for online newspapers advocating for users to share news content via social media links but it can also potentially work to strengthen the brand of the paper through reflecting that they are up-to-date with new technologies and using such technologies to extend the news “conversation” into social media spaces.²¹ The three Australian online newspapers owned by Fairfax Media examined in the study (SMH.com.au, theAge.com.au and NationalTimes.com.au) highlight Twitter as the destination for users to become part of a wider discussion of the news, adopting Twitter’s slogan “Join the Conversation” in the left-hand side banner of most articles with links alongside to visit the site to “tweet” about the article and to read other related “tweets”.

Although not featured in any of the newspapers examined in this study, a running tally of the number of times an article has been shared by users via the social media links provided often appears next to the links themselves.²² News sites such as HuffingtonPost.com and Guardian.co.uk which choose to display such figures can reflect the degree of interest in an article; however these numbers should not simply be read as a popularity contest. Circulating content via social media links gives users the opportunity to comment on the material in external spaces, an opportunity which, if desired, affords users the ability to critically reframe material. By adding text alongside links to news articles on social media sites, users are able to frame such material in whichever way they see fit according to their personal interpretation of item referred to, whether to show approval or disdain for the story presentation, tone of coverage or any of the actors in the story.

²¹ Although it must also be noted that enabling content to be shared via social media sites can also lead to potential disadvantages for online newspapers because of the practice of deep linking, with hyperlinks transporting users directly to the page containing the cited content and, therefore, bypassing the newspaper’s front page. As an online newspaper’s front page is central to its brand identity and functions as the main site for generating advertising revenue, encouraging news consumption via deep linking has significant implications for advertising opportunities and the way in which news content is perceived by users, as merely content to be consumed rather than having a strong association with a particular news outlet.

²² Since the period of research conducted for this chapter, this feature has increased in popularity and is now featured on the following sites used in this study: NZHerald.co.nz, theAucklander.co.nz and BayofPlentyTimes.co.nz.

User as respondent

Features inviting user reaction and comment on news content and engagement with others

The use of polls to capture user reaction was popular among the papers studied, with ten of the twelve online newspapers in this study including polls in their range of interactive features (as shown in Table 3). Hermida and Thurman argue that polls are considered advantageous for online newspapers wishing to encourage contributions from the public as they “provide instant and quantifiable feedback to readers” and are also “easy to set up and run automatically, being inexpensive and risk-free” (2009, p. 221). Polls are always associated with a particular news item covered by the paper and typically feature either alongside the related article or on the site’s front page. Across the newspapers studied, all site visitors were able to submit a vote (not just registered members) and after voting, the current results of the poll were displayed.²³ Poll topics were not confined to the realms of current affairs and politics, but covered a wide variety of topics, ranging from sport-oriented questions (asking which of two teams would triumph in an upcoming game) to entertainment-focused polls (asking for user opinion on the attractiveness of a particular celebrity).

Table 3.

Interactive features from the user as *respondent* category present in the sample of online newspapers

Online newspapers	Polls	Byline email links	Message boards	“Have your says”	Q&As	User comments on selected content	Links to associated social media sites
NZHerald.co.nz	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
theAucklander.co.nz		✓					
BayofPlentyTimes.co.nz		✓					✓
SunshineCoastDaily.com.au	✓					✓	✓
theChronicle.com.au	✓					✓	✓
Stuff.co.nz	✓					✓	✓
DomPost.co.nz	✓					✓	✓
thePress.co.nz	✓					✓	✓
NationalTimes.com.au	✓					✓	✓
SMH.com.au	✓					✓	✓
theAge.com.au	✓					✓	✓
ODT.co.nz	✓	✓				✓	✓

Note. Sourced May-June 2010.

²³ In some cases, the “View Results” link was displayed alongside the voting options, meaning that users could view the poll’s representation of reader opinion on the matter without being required to submit a vote.

While all of the papers offering polling features adopted a similarly inclusive approach toward poll topics, there were clear differences in the way in which they chose to communicate poll data and organisation to users. As with many of the interactive spaces involving user reaction and comments, polls are strongly tied to notions of immediacy and, therefore, have a limited lifespan, arising when the issue is fresh and ceasing to exist after the associated news topic begins to lose its newsworthiness. The polls featured on a number of the papers studied displayed a breakdown of the number of votes cast²⁴ and/or the amount of time left in each poll's duration,²⁵ bestowing polls with a sense of accountability for the levels of opinion represented through providing numerical data behind the percentages shown. NZHerald.co.nz's polls, however, had a more ephemeral quality, popping up in the sidebars showing the percentages of votes cast but not providing any information about the total number of votes cast or the length of a poll's duration.²⁶

Although polls proved popular for capturing user responses across the online newspapers studied, the provision of direct email links with journalists were less common, with only one third of the group (four of the twelve) providing an email address for the reporter alongside article content (see Table 3). Online newspapers which display byline email links are seen to be encouraging two-way communication between users and journalists, and, therefore, the potential to support one of the key dimensions of interactivity, responsiveness. Making journalists available to users through email contact gives users a chance to act as fact and quality checkers, pointing out incorrect information or highlighting bad coverage, and bestows an air of transparency on the newspaper, with journalists appearing more engaged with their readers and public concerns. Of the four online newspapers in this study that provided byline email links, either a journalist's email address was displayed under their article or their name appeared as a link to an online form for users to submit their details and query or comment. The format of the NZHerald.co.nz's email links appears as "By [Jane Bloggs](#) [Email Jane](#)"; by clicking the first link, the reporter's full name, users are linked to an archive of

²⁴ The breakdown of votes cast is displayed by Stuff.co.nz, DomPost.co.nz, thePress.co.nz, SMH.com.au, theAge.com.au, NationalTimes.com.au and ODT.co.nz.

²⁵ Poll time limits are displayed by SMH.com.au, theAge.com.au and NationalTimes.com.au.

²⁶ Since the period when this analysis was conducted, NZHerald.co.nz have adapted their poll presentation slightly to display an indication of the number of total votes cast, within a margin of 50 votes (i.e. 7800-7850 votes).

articles by the journalist, but through selecting the second link, “[Email Jane](#)”, users are provided with an online form to fill out.²⁷

However, the papers which did provide byline email links did so inconsistently; many stories written by staff journalists had no direct link to the journalist responsible, showing that this feature was obviously enabled depending on each specific journalist’s willingness to be contacted or if the story lent itself to requiring such a feedback mechanism. Studies which have interviewed journalists and editors regarding their attitudes towards interactivity in online newspaper environments outline a number of factors which could potentially explain the reason behind the low provision of byline email links by the papers in this study. Inviting user feedback via email is alleged to increase journalists’ workload demands and expose them to a fair amount of “hate” and “spam” emails (Chung, 2007; Domingo, 2008; Schultz, 2000), both possible factors contributing to a sense of caution about this form of interaction. While not all of the online newspapers examined provided a link for users to communicate with specific journalists via email, every one of them presents one or more generic email addresses for users to submit feedback, usually directed to the members of the editorial team or to the news desk.

The online newspapers in this study seemed more willing to receive user feedback via a comments feature, with ten of the twelve online newspapers hosting moderated user responses under selected articles (see Table 3).²⁸ The majority of sites enabling comments on site material required users to register with the site, asking for name and contact details and adopting a username in order to comment; this is standard practice across online news media, as there is concern about the legal implications of publishing user responses. Unlike the other papers, Stuff.co.nz does not require users to register in order to post comments, however, it still asks for an email address and also promotes the benefits of registering, including not having to sign in each visit and the extra features available to registered site members. All of

²⁷ The form requires users to include their name and email address, has an attachment option so users can include a photo or video and space for users to comment (with a maximum length of 1200 characters).

²⁸ The two papers which did provide space for the display of user comments on news content, theAuckland.co.nz and BayofPlentyTimes.co.nz, gave the appearance of interest in user responses to news content through providing a link titled “Have Your Say” but the resulting comments did not appear to be posted anywhere on the site. This means the feature functions solely as a feedback mechanism for journalists, rather than an interactive discussion tool.

the online newspapers examined adopted the strategy of pre-moderation for reviewing user comments, meaning that all material submitted by users must be deemed suitable for posting by a site moderator before it can be made visible to all website visitors.²⁹

The preference for pre-moderation by the online newspapers in this study matches that of other studies which have investigated online news producers' feelings about managing user contributions in their sites and found that the majority of those interviewed consider the risks of posting unmoderated user submissions too risky to put into practice (Chung, 2007; Singer, 2010). On Stuff.co.nz, DomPost.co.nz and thePress.co.nz, users are made aware of the possible delays associated with pre-moderation alongside the online form for posting comments: "These comments are moderated. Your comment, if approved, may not appear immediately". NZHerald.co.nz provides some additional features to their commenting system not present in the other sites studied: users can choose to "like" comments (displaying the total number of "likes" underneath each comment), reply to other comments and report comments (flagging them for inappropriate or offensive content and thus providing a degree of moderation on the part of users). However, a common characteristic of the online newspapers enabling user comments was the decision to restrict the amount of news content made available for user to comment on. Articles made available for user responses across the sites were typically opinion-based, with users given the opportunity to comment on very few breaking news stories. Allowing users to comment primarily on opinion-based material further distinguishes the realm of news reportage from that of opinion and comment and suggests an assumption that news articles communicate "truth" and, therefore, need no input or questioning from non-professionals. However, rather than holding to a naïve epistemology like this, it is more likely that journalists and editors are not as open to having their objectivity or impartiality questioned when it comes to news (as opposed to opinion).

Despite the numerous opportunities presented for users to comment on newspaper content, the instances of dedicated spaces for users to enter into discussion with other users, journalists or public figures were low across the selection of online newspapers examined (as evident in Table 3). Following the distinctions drawn out in Hermida and Thurman's study

²⁹ The main alternative to pre-moderation is post-moderation, where a moderator views user responses after they have been posted, and then decides whether the material is suitable to remain on the site.

(2009), this study divided spaces for user contributions which might ordinarily be considered discussion forums into message boards, “Have your says” and “Q&As”. The most distinguishing features of message boards is that the topics are initiated by readers, content is reactively moderated (checked after posting) and threads stay open for weeks or months (Hermida & Thurman, 2009, p. 221). None of the papers studied contained message boards, an unsurprising result when considered alongside studies of online newspaper producers’ views on interactivity which express a degree of anxiety about the risks and costs involved in hosting forums for public discussion (Chung, 2007; Thurman, 2008).

An alternative option to message boards, and one which enables online newspapers to remain in control of facilitating user discussion, is what Hermida and Thurman describe as “Have your says”, “areas where journalists post topical questions to which readers send written replies”, replies which are moderated and those fitting with comments policies are published on the site (2009, p. 221). Unlike message boards, topics or questions posed in “Have your says” are only open to user submissions for a limited amount of time, sometimes only days depending on the amount of responses received. NZHerald.co.nz’s “Your Views” was the only example fitting this description among the group of papers examined. Topics or questions elected for discussion in Your Views are always linked with a corresponding article and have a limited lifespan, with the editorial team selecting when debate on the issue is closed. There were also no clear instances of Q&As, which Hermida and Thurman define as “interviews with journalists and/or invited guests, with questions submitted by readers” (2009, p. 221). Although Chung argues that the structured and controlled nature of Q&A forums may cause frustration for users through failing to provide a fully interactive experience (2007), they can potentially provide opportunities for civic engagement through supporting interaction between journalists, public figures and users (Rosenberry, 2005); therefore, this feature’s absence from the interactive menu of all members of the group of online newspapers examined is worth noting.

The majority of online newspapers examined were represented across social media spaces, clearly recognising the benefits of sites like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube as both effective external avenues for news distribution and as additional arenas for discussion. As shown in

Table 3, all but one of the papers in the study have manifestations in social media, boasting a Twitter account, a Facebook fan page and/or a YouTube channel. Through examining the way in which the online newspapers studied utilised a range of social media spaces, it is easy to see how different social media sites present distinct advantages and functions for online newspapers choosing to adopt a presence in such spaces. Twitter seems primarily beneficial for promoting breaking news stories, functioning in a similar way to RSS feeds by delivering news updates to those who “follow” the paper’s Twitter account, with the added distribution advantage of users being able to circulate information more widely through “retweeting” the paper’s original “tweet”. Some of the papers have multiple Twitter accounts for different news topics, enabling users to filter and follow news content of interest in a way similar to papers offering multiple RSS feeds. It has also become popular for journalists and editors to create Twitter accounts in order to post news content and personal opinion and enter into exchanges with other journalists, public figures or citizens. The site makes visible information and conversations in a way not previously seen in other online applications, and in addition, increases public accessibility to journalists and editors who adopt Twitter profiles as other site users can directly “tweet” at them.

Creating a Facebook fan page is also an avenue through which online newspapers can distribute news content to users, posting links to articles on the paper’s “Wall” which Facebook users who choose to “like” (become a fan of) the page are able to comment on. “Fans” of the page can also directly comment on the “Wall”, adding news tips, criticism of the reporting or expressing opinions about the issue or event in question, or alternatively, initiate debate with other users through posting a topic inside the “Discussions” tab. Stuff.co.nz’s Facebook page regularly posts questions regarding news topics in order to generate user comments, facilitating interaction in a similar way to “Have your says”. Like Facebook, YouTube also presents users with the opportunity to submit comments and potentially enter in to discussion with other users. Although newspapers have not traditionally been associated with video content, the multimedia capabilities afforded to online newspapers by the medium they inhabit has meant that video footage has become an additional storytelling device

alongside text and photo content, and, therefore, YouTube can serve as an outlet for this content.³⁰

User as source

UGC initiatives inviting users to participate in news gathering processes

As perhaps the most basic entry point for citizens to participate in the news production process, all of the analysed online newspapers featured requests for story tip-offs (see Table 4).³¹ Journalists cannot be in all places at all times and thus asking the public for story tip-offs has always formed a routine part of traditional journalism practice. Although newspapers have always relied on tips from the public to investigate and create the daily news agenda, online technologies have provided new avenues through which online news media can obtain information from sources quickly and communicate with ease. The online newspapers in this study offered users a selection of ways to contribute story tip-offs to editorial teams, some supplying an email address and telephone number to contact the news desk for breaking news information, others providing an online submission form for users to enter contact details and news tips. The majority of the requests for tip-offs were reminiscent of news hotline advertisements traditionally displayed in print newspapers, with short and snappy requests such as Stuff.co.nz's "Breaking news?" casting users in the conventional role of information source without explicitly acknowledging the importance of their contributions in the news gathering process. However, two of the online newspapers examined emphasised the essential role played by users in offering contributions to the news production process within their requests for story tip-offs in order to encourage submissions. The sidebar promotion for "Your News", NZHerald.co.nz's catch-all initiative for sourcing UGC for news production, encourages users to "[b]e part of the news" through submitting tip-offs, story suggestions or multimedia news content through an online form. Similarly, in the text requesting story tip-offs for theAge.com.au's "Investigations" section, the importance of user

³⁰ Of the online newspapers featured in the study, the following had YouTube channels: NZHerald.co.nz (nzheraldtv), SunshineCoastDaily.com.au (sunshinecoastdaily), Stuff.co.nz (NZStuffVideos), thePress.co.nz (ThePressVideos), DomPost.co.nz (DominionPost) and SMH.com.au (smhmultimedia).

³¹ As NationalTimes.com.au features opinion-based articles and not breaking news, users were not asked for tip-offs in the traditional sense but rather encouraged to nominate "hot issues" for columnists to address, but these were coded as equivalent to tip-offs.

input to nominate leads to pursue is clearly highlighted: “Many of our best stories come from tip-offs from the public” (2010).

Table 4.

UGC initiatives from the user as *source* category present in the sample of online newspapers

Online newspapers	Story tip-offs	Crowdsourcing projects	Multimedia content	News or opinion-based content	User mini-sites with reader blogs
NZHerald.co.nz	✓		✓		
theAucklander.co.nz	✓				
BayofPlentyTimes.co.nz	✓				
SunshineCoastDaily.com.au	✓		✓		
theChronicle.com.au	✓		✓		
Stuff.co.nz	✓	✓	✓		
DomPost.co.nz	✓		✓		
thePress.co.nz	✓		✓		
NationalTimes.com.au	✓		✓	✓	
SMH.com.au	✓		✓	✓	
theAge.com.au	✓		✓		
ODT.co.nz	✓		✓	✓	

Note. Sourced May-June 2010.

During the period of analysis, Stuff.co.nz was the only online newspaper to feature a crowdsourcing project across the online newspapers studied. In the widest sense of the term, crowdsourcing “taps into the collective wisdom of crowds” (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p. 48), by outsourcing tasks traditionally carried out by an employee to a large number of people through open calls inviting their participation.³² Taking its inspiration from a similar project carried out at Guardian.co.uk, Stuff.co.nz’s crowdsourcing project concerning politicians’ expenses experimented with extending the tip-off capabilities of users by inviting them to examine scanned pages of credit card transactions and receipts in order to identify those worth investigating and those of no interest. The article announcing the crowdsourcing project emphasised that users were being given the opportunity to be part of the news gathering process: “Today, Stuff.co.nz provides readers with the chance to absorb contentious MPs’ expense claims and receipts and determine what is worthy of further investigation. ... [W]e are placing thousands of receipts and documents online for you to see if you can spot

³² The term was first coined by Howe in an article entitled “The Rise of Crowdsourcing” (2006), who noted that the practice of tapping into the productive potential of masses of unpaid volunteers is “not outsourcing” but “crowdsourcing” (para. 9).

anything we missed" ("Help keep," 2010, para. 1). Although the project's instructions stressed the importance of user contributions, users were offered little incentive to take part other than the chance to participate in the muckraking process and the tasks they were invited to carry out were clearly defined as providing assistance to the practice of journalism rather than performing as part of it. Asking users to contribute tip-offs, for both story ideas and in crowdsourcing projects like the one hosted by Stuff.co.nz, can be viewed as imparting a degree of agency on users by offering a direct link to newspaper staff through which to nominate matters of interest. However, practices like tip-offs and crowdsourcing still fit with the traditional model of news gathering; users may provide the initial stimulus for the story or serve as information processors but journalists retain their professionalised role in gathering, selecting and presenting news content.

Invitations for users to submit photographs and videos were common across the online newspapers studied, with multimedia UGC requested as part of the general news gathering process and in some cases, for publishing in reader photo galleries separated from professional content. As with the importance of tip-offs to the news gathering process, newsworthy photographs taken by readers have always been of interest to newspapers, but with new technologies the opportunities for readers to produce and for newspapers to source such material have multiplied and allow for instantaneous transmission of multimedia content. Advances in mobile phone technologies have enabled people on the street to act as portable news gatherers, with both photo and video footage capable of being transmitted from the location where it was taken to the news desk and then to the site in a matter of minutes. As shown in Table 4, ten of the twelve online newspapers examined displayed requests for users to submit multimedia material to the site editors via email or an online submission form. Of these, the majority of the online newspapers examined asked for multimedia content as part of general requests for story tip-offs, with papers seeking to harness the potential wealth of photo and video content captured by their portable news gathering readership in order to enhance news coverage.

However, both ODT.co.nz and Stuff.co.nz provided spaces dedicated to hosting multimedia UGC in the form of reader photo galleries, which Hermida and Thurman term "Your Media"

(2009, p. 222), with content primarily focused on simultaneously shared events, featuring photos sent in by users of naturally-occurring events such as wild weather or staged events like music concerts or sports games. ODT.co.nz provided two sections fitting the description of “Your Media”, called “Your Slideshows” and “Your Pics”, with the bulk of content featuring photographs taken by registered users of local news or extreme weather events. Two of the analysed online newspapers also provided space for users to submit photographs of their pets, with ODT.co.nz’s “Reader pet pictures” within the “Galleries” section and Stuff.co.nz’s “CuteStuff”, featuring different galleries for user pet photos called “Your Cats” and “Your Dogs”. The multimedia content requested from users for reader photo galleries is similar to the findings of Örnebring’s study of online tabloid newspapers and UGC (2009), with users encouraged to provide images and videos relating popular culture or everyday life-oriented content rather than news-oriented content.

Fewer opportunities existed for users to have written news or opinion content published by the online newspapers in the study and there were no instances of papers providing user mini-sites for hosting user-authored blogs. In contrast to the enthusiastic approach towards user contributions in the form of story tip-offs and multimedia material, only three of the twelve online newspapers appeared open to publishing UGC in the form of written articles. Two of these invited users to submit opinion-based user-authored articles, with NationalTimes.com.au publishing such content alongside the work of regular columnists and SMH.com.au featuring UGC in a daily column called “The Heckler”, a space which invites readers to submit 450 words on “what makes their blood boil” (2010).³³ Both sites include a list of guidelines for submission which clearly state the standards expected for users to meet in order to have their work showcased by the papers. Only one of the three papers offering spaces for user-authored articles allowed users to submit both news content and opinion-based pieces to be published. ODT.co.nz adopted the UGC initiative which Hermida and Thurman term “Your Story”, providing “sections where readers are asked to send in stories that matter to them”, stories which are then subject to editing by journalists before being

³³ This quote features at the bottom of articles posted by The Heckler with a link to the relevant email address to submit columns to. On the main page of The Heckler column, it is described as so: “From the serious to the stupendous, controversial or trivial, all manner of issues are fertile ground for The Heckler. Issues considered off limits to others, are standard fare for the Heckler, whose daily reports add an authoratative [*sic*] and independent voice - championing cures for society's ills” (2010).

posted in the areas dedicated to user-authored content (2009, p. 222). Calling on “all local citizen journalists” in a subsection of the “News” section titled “Your News”, ODT.co.nz invites users to submit news articles for publishing and, in addition to this, “Your Say” —a subsection within the “Opinion” section— serves as a location for opinion-based content. Both sections focus on local issues and events, although the pieces published in “Your Say” also feature opinions relating to matters of national and global significance.

Providing dedicated UGC sections is one way for online newspapers to publish news and opinion written by users, but another option is to construct mini-sites which enable users to create profiles, start blogs and contribute stories which other users can read and comment on. Hermida and Thurman describe theSun.co.uk’s user mini-site MySun.co.uk as a space which is “editorially separate from the news site, making a distinction between professional and amateur content” (2009, p. 226), but nevertheless gives users the opportunity to have their views represented in an online space associated with the main site.³⁴ However, this option was adopted by none of the online newspapers in the study, once again illustrating the consistent lack of provision of UGC initiatives which encourage users to take up an active role in contributing to the news site.

Discussion and implications

After examining the range of interactive features and UGC initiatives offered by the group of online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand, it is necessary to discuss both the commonalities and differences emerging from the research and to consider the implications of these for public discussion and for journalism. By adding up the number of ticks each online newspaper received across the three tables measuring the opportunities for users to act as filters (Table 2), respondents (Table 3) and sources (Table 4), three papers –NZHerald.co.nz, Stuff.co.nz and ODT.co.nz– share the place of first equal with twelve ticks each. However, it is

³⁴ The user blogs posted on MySun.co.uk are overwhelmingly personal in nature and are “more ‘disconnected’ from the rest of the content available online” than discussion in the forums which has a closer link to the news content on the main site, theSun.co.uk (as noted by Örnebring, 2009, p. 151-152). While there are clearly benefits for users in creating blogs of a personal nature (supporting identity development, community belonging and so on), such content is still premised on its amateur status and does not operate as part of the main site’s news production process; this means that MySun.co.uk gives users a space to express their opinions without those opinions necessarily being formally acknowledged by theSun.co.uk editorial team.

problematic to come to a conclusion about which online newspapers or which news organisation appears to be the “best” simply through tallying up the numbers of features and initiatives they presented during the period of analysis. Instead, this section adopts a more constructive strategy by considering the commonalities and differences emerging from the analysis in order to examine whether the analysed online newspapers reflected a diversity of approaches toward interactivity and UGC or alternatively, a sense of cohesiveness in terms of interactivity and UGC across the papers studied. From the analysis carried out in this chapter, it can be argued that the online newspapers studied reflected a commonly shared, standardised approach to interactivity and UGC: one that allows users to customise, distribute and react to news content but provides fewer opportunities for users to partake in facilitated discussions with other users and journalists, and even fewer opportunities to act as news producers.

Yet amongst this relatively standard approach toward interactivity and UGC adopted by the online newspapers examined, there were a few noteworthy instances where each of the three “winning” papers appeared to be facilitating interaction in a way distinct from all others in the study. Features and initiatives signalling a notable divergence from the standard approach included the only “Have your say” amongst the group studied, NZHerald.co.nz’s Your Views, Stuff.co.nz’s option to let users customise the paper’s homepage layout and ODT.co.nz’s interest in publishing UGC concerning both news and opinion. Although all three of these online newspapers come from different media organisations, one factor they share in common is that they are from New Zealand. However, the existence of these noteworthy features says more about the characteristics and assumed functions of each media outlet than their geographic location. As Stuff.co.nz is an online-only newspaper and functions as a portal for news content from associated Fairfax online newspapers, the site producers might be more receptive towards the idea that news sections can be shifted around according to users’ personal preferences. Even though the main circulation area of its print version is Auckland, NZHerald.co.nz seems to aspire to the role of paper of national record and, therefore, casts a role for itself in expressing national public opinion. Adopting a “Have your say”-style feature seems appropriate for NZHerald.co.nz because it allows them to host issues of national relevance on a grand scale. Furthermore, ODT.co.nz’s open approach towards user

contributions could be argued to be more a reflection of the paper's commitment to local news than because of its "New Zealandness".³⁵ These suggestions entail some speculation and are not intended as definitive explanations for variations in interactive features. However, they illustrate that it is problematic to suggest that these outlets reflect something about the New Zealand media environment that inherently favours innovation and uniqueness compared with that of Australia, even though this may be a tempting conclusion to draw at first glance.

Aside from these few uncommon features, the selection of online newspapers all provided a high level of interactive features from the user as *filter* category, offering users various opportunities for customising and distributing news content. The widespread provision of such features by the analysed online newspapers is in keeping with other studies which argue that mainstream news sites offer a lot of *content interactivity* (Bucy, 2004; Deuze, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Zeng & Li, 2006). All of the features from the user as *filter* group represent content interactivity, with RSS feeds, site search functions and email and social media links enabling users to, as Bucy describes, exert a degree of control "over the selection and presentation of editorial content" (2004, p. 55). The correlation between features involving customisation and distribution and the notion of control associates them with a sense of empowerment on the part of the user, as such features allow users to renegotiate the traditional sender-receiver model of news media in order to highlight and share news topics of personal interest (Kenney et al., 2000; Pavlik, 2001). On the other hand, opportunities for users to privilege some content above others through personally-designed news menus is also said to encourage a fragmentation of both knowledge and debate which could potentially restrict the democratic imagination (Sunstein, 2001). Domingo argues that features like RSS feeds which sponsor content customisation "can remove from the news diet of the citizens those current events that editors believe to be of general interest from journalistic criteria" (2008, p. 686).

³⁵ The editorial staff made this openness towards UGC and community-focused news clear in an announcement of the site's redesign in 2008: "Don't be scared to contact us. We want both your feedback and your contributions – stories, photos, events – and we now have the cyberspace to publish what we receive. The ODT is rightly known for the depth of our local coverage, and we'll carry that even further online. ... Most of the towns in our area get their own home-page, complete with news stories, photographs, events, photo slideshows and weather. If your school is staging a play and you've taken some photographs, send them in" ("Welcome to our new site", 2008).

While it is important to acknowledge these arguments concerning the possible pitfalls of personalising news menus, the evident enthusiasm for customisation and distribution features on the part of the online newspapers in this study means that users are being provided with the necessary tools to renegotiate the ways in which they receive news and share content with others. The high level of provision of links for users to share content via social media sites suggests the online newspapers studied are open to the possibility of news content being challenged; through encouraging content to be annotated and redistributed in social media spaces, these links present users with further opportunities to critically engage with the news they receive. Such opportunities, according to Goode, can be considered part of wider definition citizen journalism, where users are able to select, distribute and potentially reframe news items in social media spaces, thereby “rendering the agenda-setting processes of established professional media outlets radically provisional, malleable and susceptible to critical intervention”(2009, p. 7). Sharing news content via social media links involves users in the process of “gatewatching”, with users able to potentially offer an “alternative interpretation of the day’s events” which “enabl[es] readers to better assess for themselves and by themselves the quality and veracity of mainstream news stories” (Bruns, 2008a, p. 177).

While the online newspapers studied appeared enthusiastic about the features involving content customisation and distribution, the gaps in the ways users were able to respond were clearly evident through the low levels of byline email links and the lack of provision of spaces for discussion (as shown in Table 3). In his work on interactivity and online newsrooms, Domingo argues that through displaying journalists’ email addresses alongside their articles, online newspapers acknowledge their readers as “commentators, critics and collaborators” in the news process (2008, p. 687). However, as only four of the twelve papers in the study provided this feature (and amongst these, its appearance was inconsistent), it seems that not all news producers are prepared to encourage email contact between individual journalists and users. It could be that the potential benefits to be gained through email contact with users (serving as a resource for news reporting as well as a tool to communicate transparency and accountability on behalf of the paper) are perceived to be outweighed by the possible difficulties which could arise, including increased workload pressures for journalists (Chung,

2007; Schultz, 2000) and the difficulty of maintaining a level of professional distance in exchanges with readers (Friend & Singer, 2007, p. 151). Aside from highlighting the number of online newspapers which chose to publish byline email links, it is impossible to determine the amount of interactivity occurring within the exchanges between users and journalists without conducting an email investigation. However, we can look to other studies measuring email response rates from online newspapers which report relatively low levels of responsiveness (Kenney et al., 2000; Massey & Levy, 1999)³⁶ in order to suggest that even though some of the papers studied provide byline email links, this does not guarantee interactivity is present.

On the whole, the online newspapers examined failed to provide arenas such as message boards, “Have your says” and Q&As to encourage discussion amongst users and between users, journalists and/or public figures; a finding which corresponds with other studies which counted low numbers of features involving interpersonal interactivity across the online newspapers examined (Chung, 2008; Kenney et al., 2000; Massey & Levy, 1999; Schultz, 1999). NZHerald.co.nz was the only paper in the study which presented users with an organised discussion space in which to debate news topics and events with other users. However, although “Have your says” like Your Views have proved popular with online newspaper users (Hermida & Thurman, 2009, p. 221), such spaces represent what Deuze describes as a form of “closed” participatory communication, “a site where users may participate, but their communicative acts are subject to strict editorial moderation and control” (2003, p. 207). Therefore, the one instance of a feature sponsoring dialogue in a structured environment is still largely framed by editorial input, meaning that user agency is contained because users are unable to nominate topics and drive debate.

With spaces for user discussion such as message boards absent from the interactive menus of the selection of online newspapers studied, users were instead encouraged to respond to news coverage by voting in sidebar polls and commenting directly on articles; features which were managed and moderated by journalists, with only a select amount of material translated into poll topics or enabled for user comments. Polls appeared to be one of the most popular

³⁶ Massey and Levy had a 18 percent response rate from the standardised emails sent out by the study’s coders to both journalist and generic email addresses published on the sites examined (1999) while Kenney et al. reported that of the 64 sites with byline email links which were contacted, 69 percent did not respond, 28 percent sent a form letter and only three percent sent a personal response (2000).

features for capturing user responses across the online newspapers studied, a problematic finding considering that polls are often criticised for purporting to signify public opinion through methods which encourage spontaneous and reactionary responses. Hermida and Thurman argue that polls offer users very limited interaction in asking them to respond with a simple yes or no answer or pick from a list of multi-choice options (2009, p. 221). The majority of the polls featured by the online newspapers in this study state their unreliability as representations of public opinion within the surrounding text, communicating that they are “not scientific and reflect the opinions of only those internet users who have chosen to participate” (as seen on ODT.co.nz’s polls), or some variation of this statement.³⁷ But in spite of the disclaimers admitting the unscientific representation of public opinion contained in poll results, the online newspapers in the study did not hesitate to include data from these polls in their reporting in order to suggest how reader views were divided on issues.³⁸

Matching polls in terms of popularity across the group of online newspapers studied were features involving user comments on articles, which functioned as designated spaces for user discussion to take place. While the ability to comment on news content expands the opportunities for users to critically engage with and respond to the material they come across, the online newspapers studied all enabled user comments on only a limited selection of material. Through restricting the kinds of news content open to user comments, online newspaper producers reflect the difficulty of trying to strike a balance between making all reporting equally subject to user feedback and discussion and the desire to steer clear of unwanted controversy. A partial solution to this dilemma presented by a number of the online newspapers examined was to facilitate user discussion about news and current events within social media spaces like Facebook, providing opportunities to support discussion around potentially controversial content while maintaining a favourable degree of distance from the paper’s main site.

The lack of opportunities for UGC in the news production process, aside from the traditional avenues like story tip-offs and reader photos, suggests that the online newspapers studied

³⁷ The scientific quality of online newspaper polling is also questionable because most papers have no safeguards in place to protect against repeated votes (Friend & Singer, 2007, p. 164-169).

³⁸ Examples of cases where data from reader polls was drawn on by the online newspapers studied in order to reflect ‘public opinion’ will be discussed in the following chapter.

were not so enthusiastic about casting users as citizen journalists. Rosenberry argues that by featuring news content produced by ordinary citizens alongside professionally-produced content, online newspapers are able to act as effective facilitators of civic discourse, as such a move places “institutional authority behind citizen voices” (2005, p. 67). However, the majority of the online newspapers studied provided limited, centralised UGC production, which Örnebring (2009) describes as present in cases where:

the production is not user-led, nor does it involve large-scale collaboration between users: a typical example of centralized UGC production would be if the news organizations invited users to submit their ‘best holiday video’ - these videos would then likely be produced and submitted by individual users, rather than as a result of a massively collaborative effort by many different users. (p. 147)

The example of centralised UGC production given by Örnebring in this quote is typical of that presented by the online newspapers examined, which featured many requests for multimedia content like holiday or event photos but offered users no real part to play in deciding what was published on the site. This finding is similar to that of Redden and Witschge’s study which concluded that amongst the mainstream news sites studied, there was “no evidence of individuals involved in any of the decision-making stages in news production”, arguing that “for the most part the public is only able to participate in the last phase of the ‘traditional’ news production process by interpreting texts and commenting upon them” (2010, p. 183).

Although the online newspapers studied encouraged users to submit story tip-offs and multimedia content, most instances where this material was requested communicated little sense of where, how or whether the supplied UGC would be published, meaning that once users submitted material they no longer retained control of its framing.³⁹ Alternatively, online newspapers like ODT.co.nz which establish designated sections for user-authored content provide users with a clear expectation of where their material will be showcased and by visiting these sections, users are able to read and view other UGC to understand the expected

³⁹ Legal information and guidelines about the treatment of UGC by the online newspapers studied were often contained in pages outlining the “Terms and Conditions” within the “Contact Us” or “About Us” sections of the sites. Only two papers (NZHerald.co.nz, NationalTimes.com.au) gave users some of the relevant legal information alongside submission forms or email addresses.

standards of such content. Though the separation of professional reportage and citizen journalism might be perceived to further assert the boundaries between news producers and users, the “Your News” and “Your Say” sections of ODT.co.nz represent the most encouraging opportunities for user-authored content amongst the group of online newspapers studied.

On the whole, the online newspapers featured in this study appeared to be harnessing UGC not as a way of acknowledging the capacity for users to act as citizen journalists, but “because of its perceived convenience and availability, its ease of use and the recognition that it can play a role alongside or fit in with pre-existing news styles” (Harrison, 2010, p. 249). Despite the instances of celebratory rhetoric emphasising the importance of “you” in the requests for story tip-offs and multimedia content, UGC was primarily sought to bolster professionally-produced news content not in such a way as to foster the ability for users to act as citizen journalists. Although it is clear that the technological capabilities provided by online technologies have expanded the methods through which online newspapers can receive information from the public, this does not guarantee a more participatory or collaborative method of news production.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a range of interactive features and UGC initiatives and measured these across a number of online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand in order to assess how these encourage and facilitate user interactions with news content, journalists and other users. The online newspapers examined adopted evidently similar strategies in their approach towards encouraging users to act as filters, respondents and sources. This chapter has argued that the established limits set in place by the online newspapers studied in terms of user agency (i.e. what material is made available for user comments or what kind of content users are invited to produce) reflects a general attitude towards interactivity and UGC which sees user contributions as an essential part of appearing up-to-date with technologies and engaged with the users they purport to serve, but if only such features and initiatives are able to fit with the professional standards and gatekeeping role of journalism.

Through adopting an approach which defined areas of interactivity and UGC and measured features and initiatives across a range of online newspapers, this chapter has looked beyond the “myth of interactivity” (Domingo, 2008) online newspaper producers are faced with in their daily work in order to provide both an overview and an in-depth account of how user contributions are being solicited and represented in the sites studied. As interactivity is only ever a *potential* quality of technology and one that is difficult to test for, the preceding discussion has not sought to address whether the provided features are *truly* interactive in practice but the ways in which this potential interactivity is presented by the adopted selection of interactive features and UGC initiatives. While this chapter has focused primarily on identifying the similarities and differences in terms of the provision of participatory features and facilitation of user engagement by the online newspapers studied, the following chapter examines the language employed by the same selection of papers in their management of interactivity and UGC and by users and journalists/editors in their online interactions in order to consider the extent to which the relations between, and identities of, journalists and users are shifting in the current environment.

Chapter Four

“Give us your feedback”: Exploring the boundaries of the journalist-audience relationship

Through offering a range of interactive features and UGC initiatives, online newspapers enable numerous opportunities for user participation in the news consumption process. As online newspaper users, we can subscribe to RSS feeds to customise our news menus, vote in sidebar polls about current events, contribute our thoughts by commenting on opinion pieces and submit photos to the news desk for publishing. The text surrounding the interactive features and UGC initiatives of online newspaper sites aims to capture our attention and encourage us to interact with news content and one another; we are continually asked to contribute *our* view, have *our* say, submit *our* thoughts. As Richardson notes: “the language that journalists use to address the audience (or reader) tells you something about the identities of both the *journalist* and the *audience* and *also* something about the assumed relationship between them” (2007, p. 95-96; original emphasis). Therefore, examining the types of discourse appearing across the online newspapers studied is crucial for understanding the negotiation of power between news producers and users. This chapter discusses a range of representations of online newspapers’ institutional “voice” and “the voice of the people” which surround spaces facilitating interactivity and UGC. Analysing the kind of language articulated by both editors/journalists and users in these spaces conveys much about how online newspaper producers view their relationship with and responsibilities to the audience they claim to serve. Although it is necessary to acknowledge that the average user might not come into contact with some of the content examined (such as sections explaining rules and guidelines for comments or UGC contributions), such material is still crucial for analysis as it forms part of a larger projection of what is being communicated to users about their role in the interactive and participatory spaces of online newspapers.

The first section examines the language adopted by the online newspapers studied in facilitating and encouraging user contributions via interactive features and UGC initiatives and considers what this reflects about both the degree of agency ascribed by such language *and* what is actually imparted to users in these online communicative contexts. The chapter

begins with a discussion of the rhetoric emerging from the text surrounding these interactive features and UGC initiatives and compares the discourses emerging from this language with that of the rules and guidelines for user behaviour and contributions in interactive spaces. The second section examines the instances of journalist-user interaction across the selected online newspapers, addressing the papers' use of social media platforms and blogs as providing numerous opportunities for facilitating communication between journalists or editors and users. This section also considers the potential for editorial blogs to provide a degree of transparency and accountability to users and features a case study of Stuff.co.nz's "From the Newsroom", as the lone example of an editorial blog featuring amongst the group of online newspapers in this study. The analysis of From the Newsroom illustrates how editorial blogs provide users with the ability to engage with and be critical of the paper's rules and rhetoric through commenting on posts written by editors regarding work routines and editorial decisions. The final section of the chapter explores how user interest and responses are represented by the online newspapers examined, ranging from lists of popular links to articles based around communicating the opinion expressed in reader polls or comment spaces. The section discusses how user voices are largely captured and framed through key journalistic processes including selection, filtering and editing which are geared towards simplifying the complex and fragmented nature of user responses. The final section concludes with a case study of "Your Views", NZHerald.co.nz's "Have your say"-style feature, addressing the feature's problematic framing and organisation of user opinion which works to encourage polarised discussion in a "forum" which is not user-led but structured and governed by editorial input.

"You tell us": The language of interactivity

Rousing rhetoric

Across the selection of online newspapers examined, the text surrounding features and initiatives encouraging user contributions keyed in to the celebratory rhetoric of interactivity, with consistent emphasis on the second person pronoun "you", and personal directives, such as "You tell us" or "Have your say". By employing this language, the papers studied linked themselves with the participatory ethos of Web 2.0 applications, invoking the notion that

users have the potential to become politically and socially empowered through their interactive engagement in online spaces. While on a basic level the emphasis on “you” and “your say” is intended to capture attention and encourage users to contribute to the features in question, it also creates the impression that editorial staff are enthusiastic and open to receiving contributions from users. NationalTimes.com.au promote their feature for user feedback with the heading “You tell us” and the accompanying text states: “Give us your feedback – Tell us what you would like us to cover and join the debate”. By adopting this language, the site instructs users of their ability to nominate issues which they consider important for the paper to investigate and as an extension, for users to discuss in comment spaces. Such rhetoric bestows a sense of control upon users in contributing to the shaping of the news agenda, as well as reinforcing the perception that the NationalTimes.com.au values user feedback; invoking the notion of user as *source* as well as *respondent*, to employ the terms used in the previous chapter.

In addition to the consistent emphasis on addressing users as “you”, the phrase “have your say” featured widely across the online newspapers examined. All four of the regional papers owned by APN News and Media in the study featured the words “Have your say” as a link to an online submission form for user feedback.⁴⁰ In addition, NZHerald.co.nz included the phrase in the subtitle for their section featuring user opinion, Your Views: “Have your say on the issues of the day”. As features like polls and “Have your says” are dependent on user input to reflect “public opinion”, the language of such features needs to encourage users to participate. By including a personal address such as “you”, people are encouraged to feel as if they have something at stake in the issue and thus to contribute their opinion on the matter. Poll questions in the sites studied often began with “Do you agree...” or “Do you think...”, again directly addressing users and, therefore, personally implicating them in the issue being raised, all the while reinforcing to the notion that user contributions are valued by the online newspaper.

Alongside personal appeals to “you” and “your say”, a number of the dedicated sections for UGC featured in the online newspapers studied were named “Your”-something, suggesting a

⁴⁰ The online newspapers referred to here are: BayofPlentyTimes.co.nz, theAucklander.co.nz, SunshineCoastDaily.com.au and theChronicle.com.au.

degree of empowerment through granting users their own sections to contribute to while simultaneously demarcating the boundaries of professional and amateur content. In the previous chapter, ODT.co.nz emerged as the paper in the study with the most open approach to UGC, providing a range of areas on its site to showcase user-authored news and opinion articles and multimedia content. All of ODT.co.nz's sections for publishing UGC begin with the word "Your", including "Your News" and "Your Say" (for user-authored news articles and opinion pieces respectively), as well as "Your Pics" and "Your Slideshows". While naming sections in this way clearly foregrounds the amateur nature of the content, thereby distinguishing such content from that which is professionally-produced, it also signals to users that there are designated spaces set aside to showcase their contributions and in the case of written content, to submit material which puts issues on the agenda which may not ordinarily have been covered by the paper. On the main page of ODT.co.nz's "Your News", the text reads: "Calling all local citizen journalists submit your news & photos to ODT online. Let the people of Otago, New Zealand and the world know what's happening in our community" (2010, para. 1). By defining their users as potential citizen journalists, ODT.co.nz keys in to the rhetoric of citizen journalism as involving active, civically-engaged citizens and recognises the ability of users to become (at least a small) part of the paper's newsgathering process through connecting local issues to a wider audience. Although not strictly a feature for presenting UGC but an avenue for obtaining UGC, NZHerald.co.nz's "Your News" also deems the feature as belonging to users in order to generate the impression that through contributing news tip-offs or multimedia content, users are able to become "part of the news".

The language surrounding interactive features and UGC initiatives across the papers studied also made frequent reference to both "we" and "us", which works to project or invoke a sense of "imagined community" (in Anderson's (1991) sense of the term) consisting of the paper and its readers. However, there is some slippage in the way in which the terms "we" and "us" are employed by the papers in their address to users. Sometimes they refer to the paper and its editorial staff, and other times the terms are used to represent a notion of oneness between readers and the paper, united by their geographical location, nationhood or ties to place. When theChronicle.com.au proposes the poll question "Should we have daylight saving in South East Queensland?" the editorial staff are clearly addressing the local community while

simultaneously connecting the paper to that community. Similarly, when NZHerald.co.nz's Your Views asks "Should we arm police?", "we" is used to signify the New Zealand nation and the paper draws on this geographically-located yet "imagined" community to unite itself and its users in a shared sense of belonging. In both of these instances, the language reflects an assumption that those reading consider themselves "South East Queenslanders" or "New Zealanders" and will feel inclined to respond to the issue because of its relevance to them.

However, other instances where the terms "we" and "us" are drawn on are at odds with this sense of imagined community. When ODT.co.nz states "We want both your feedback and your contributions" ("Welcome to our new site", 2008, para. 9) and theChronicle says "We cannot operate without your help" ("Contact us", 2010), the "we" referenced in this instance is clearly the newspaper staff. Likewise, the aforementioned NationalTimes.com.au appeal to users, "You tell us", clearly distinguishes the paper from its readers, but its sentiment works to make it appear that they are engaged with users. Thus while the terms "we" and "us" are utilised to link both users and the paper to a shared sense of national or regional identity or community in order to encourage participation, the terms can also function practically to reinforce a non-reciprocal relationship between service-provider and consumer.

The reality of rules

The language surrounding the interactive features and UGC initiatives of the online newspapers studied placed a substantial emphasis on the need to create the conditions for an inclusive, fair and equal debate amongst users, reminiscent of the requirements for a Habermasian public sphere. The majority of the online newspapers studied featured guidelines or frequently asked question sections (FAQs) regarding user comments and UGC that consistently highlighted the need for fairness and equality in the spaces facilitating interpersonal interactivity. In FAQs or guidelines sections, the moderation process was often highlighted as performing a crucial role in maintaining healthy debate. Most papers required comments to be on-topic, containing no personal abuse, threatening language or discriminatory remarks; material which breached these conditions would not progress past

the point of moderation, which was continually referenced as a safeguard for encouraging a healthy yet civil debate amongst users.

As well as featuring in designated sections which users can refer to in order to obtain the rules on commenting, guidelines for user contributions appeared around comment submission forms to notify users of the necessary requirements for their comments to meet if they were to gain the moderator's approval. The comment submission box for user responses on NZHerald.co.nz states: "We aim to have healthy debate. But we won't publish comments that abuse others", providing a short, summarised version of the guidelines for comments section which succinctly highlights the wish to stimulate vigorous discussion while simultaneously underscoring the importance of the moderation process in achieving this goal. Comment and discussion spaces were also commonly projected as openly accessible environments, where all users were encouraged to take part. ODT.co.nz stated "We invite all readers to contribute"⁴¹ and similarly, the guidelines for the Australian Fairfax online newspapers drew attention towards the open and inclusive approach towards user comments: "We welcome your comments on articles and blogs on Fairfax" ("Comments on Fairfax," 2009). However, a comparable example from NZHerald.co.nz's rules and guidelines for comments – "All readers are welcome to submit comments when invited" – hints at the reality that although all users may be given equal opportunity to comment on material, not all material is made available by the editors for users to post responses to ("Rules for Your Views," 2007).

Although the language used by the online newspapers in the study supports both open participation and civility in the policies regarding user comments and UGC, it also signals elements of restriction which bring further complexity to the egalitarian environment constructed by the surrounding text. As Robinson argues, the commenting policies of online newspapers reflect each paper's "struggle for maintaining journalistic authority", and, therefore, communicate notions of how journalists and editors see their roles and responsibilities to users in the online environment (2010, p. 141). As noted in the previous chapter, the ten papers which allowed user comments on articles placed restrictions on the amount of content available to be commented on by users. While the majority of the papers

⁴¹ These guidelines are only visible to registered users of ODT.co.nz who are logged in and appear above the submission form for comments.

did not address this policy in the stated rules or guidelines, NZHerald.co.nz acknowledged the issue in their FAQ section:

Why can't I comment on every article?

Currently all submitted comments are reviewed by moderators before any are posted online. There are a number of reasons for this. Unfortunately NZ is not as liberal as some countries when it comes to online defamation laws meaning that the owner of the website can be held legally responsible as well as the author of comments and articles put online. We would love to get to the point where we can allow comments to be posted without checks before they go up so that is certainly our long term wish but it will require a law change and there is no sign of that. So it would require a massive staff of moderators to do it for all articles. ("Help and technical support", 2008)

While NZHerald.co.nz's response to the issue rather interestingly states that the paper is in favour of post-moderation of user contributions and that they hold future aspirations to switch from the current process of pre-moderation to post-moderation, it does not provide specific detail regarding the selection process through which articles are approved for user comments. Instead the response adopts an equalising strategy in an attempt to position the editorial team alongside users as jointly frustrated by the restrictions of online defamation law, while failing to acknowledge the uneven balance of power in that the paper still has the final say in selecting which articles are made available for user comments.⁴²

Although there are generic avenues for feedback (such as that on NationalTimes.com.au mentioned earlier), none of the online newspapers studied provided dedicated avenues for suggesting poll questions, or in the case of NZHerald.co.nz, nominating topics or questions to be featured in Your Views. Therefore, despite the enthusiastic rhetoric adopted in regard to user contributions, users were not provided with the opportunity to set the agenda for discussion. Further, when users choose to submit written responses to the select range of material enabled for their comments, the institutional "voice" of the paper reminds them that not all comments will be published. If, as NZHerald.co.nz states, online newspapers "can not [*sic*] guarantee every comment will be posted" ("Rules for Your Views," 2007), then the openly

⁴² Talbot describes an equalising strategy as a "discursive strategy designed to minimise or conceal the asymmetry of a social relationship" (2007, p. 176).

accessible, public sphere-like environment promoted by much of the language is somewhat contradictory to the rules and realities which structure the interactive features and UGC initiatives of the sites. Although this is not to say that the existence of moderation is contradictory to the principles of the public sphere per se, but rather, the lack of transparency and apparent arbitrariness presented by NZHerald.co.nz's moderation policy makes the boundaries of interaction and discussion unclear and not guaranteed.

As well as communicating a sense of editorial authority in deciding what users can comment on or contribute to and what material gets posted, the language adopted by the online newspapers studied further emphasised the uneven balance of power as users had little say over how and where their submitted material was represented. All of the sites enabling comments and/or inviting UGC noted that user responses may be subject to editing during the moderation process. NZHerald.co.nz and ODT.co.nz state that user responses are edited for "length and clarity", reflecting a continuation of norms established in print media's letters to the editor policies. Although there are potentially limitless restrictions on physical space in the online environment compared with print newspapers, readers of online news still expect bite-sized pieces of text and, therefore, it is feasible to expect responses to be cut down if they exceed requested word limits.⁴³ However, editing for "clarity" involves far more subjective decision-making and suggests a reassertion of journalistic standards within the moderation process, a problematic notion as this means user responses could potentially be reshaped and, therefore, may not represent the initial opinion submitted for publication.

The terms and conditions sections of online newspapers also feature assertions of the paper's entitlement to modify content contributed by users, adopting a more formal register in fulfilling their requirement to protect their commercial and legal interests. NationalTimes.com.au's stated terms and conditions in regard to UGC are similar to that featured in the other online newspapers studied, highlighting the number of rights waived by users in the process of submitting material to the site:

By submitting material for publication to the National Times, you grant the Fairfax Media group a non-exclusive, worldwide, royalty-free, irrevocable licence to use, reproduce, edit,

⁴³ For instance, NZHerald.co.nz requested no more than 1200 characters for user comments.

reformat and exploit the content in any form and for any purpose. You warrant that you have the right to grant the foregoing licence. You expressly acknowledge that we retain full editorial control over the National Times and have no obligation to use any content that you submit. You unconditionally waive all moral rights (as defined by the Copyright Act 1968) you may have in respect of the content. (“You Tell Us”, 2010)

The language contained in this excerpt clearly defines the news organisation as having almost exclusive control over all UGC submitted to the paper, but such terms and conditions are to be expected from commercial media outlets which seek to generate revenue out of UGC while simultaneously safeguarding themselves from any legal wrongdoing.

What is problematic is that there is no guarantee all users read and understand the terms and conditions before submitting material (even if they tick the box saying they have done so) in the same way as they read and understand the enthusiastic requests for their opinions or photos and, therefore, users may not be completely aware of the paper’s right to modify and syndicate UGC. The terms and conditions of ODT.co.nz state that the paper “reserves the right to store electronically any pictures sent in by odt.co.nz readers and to use the images free of charge in any of its online and print publications”,⁴⁴ indicating the advantages of not only getting photographic material at no charge from users but also the offline and online internal syndication opportunities available after obtaining such content. Viewed alongside the celebratory rhetoric employed in obtaining user contributions, the terms and conditions of online newspapers remind us that UGC is a way for papers to get free content (Örnebring, 2009). As far more emphasis and visibility is devoted the attention-grabbing “we want you”-style language than to that which explains the rules and conditions of UGC, the online newspapers studied appeared to project the association between user participation and empowerment while downplaying the potential benefits available to papers sourcing contributions from users.

⁴⁴ These guidelines are also only visible to registered users of ODT.co.nz who are logged in.

News as conversation? Examining journalist-user interaction

Interaction in action in social media and comment spaces

By using social media platforms, the online newspapers examined provided opportunities for interaction between journalists or editors and users which were visible to all users and worked to create an impression that the editorial staff were accessible, approachable and engaged with user concerns. While methods for submitting feedback and communicating with journalists such as email and online submission forms are still vital avenues for users to interact with news producers, the use of relatively new platforms like Facebook and Twitter by the papers studied appeared to both support and showcase communication between users and editors or journalists. Newspaper staff used social media spaces to upload links to news articles covered by the site, posting these on the “Wall” of their Facebook page or “tweeting” the links from their Twitter account. On the Facebook pages of the online newspapers studied, links were commonly accompanied with a question posed to users to generate discussion about the issue or event covered in the comments field below the link. The interactive communication methods supported by Facebook and Twitter also provided users with the opportunity to suggest story ideas, request updates on particular news items or critique coverage, all forms of user input which were evident across the social media spaces of the online newspapers studied.

While posting links and surveying user feedback allows editors to gauge user opinion on their news coverage, editors who respond to users via comments or “tweets” communicate a degree of transparency and accountability for their actions and content through appearing engaged with user concerns. The online newspapers examined also utilised the more personalised and less formal nature of interactions sponsored by social media platforms to their advantage, making editorial staff seem more approachable and accessible to users. By employing informal language and slang and allowing user comments to be posted without checks, editorial staff managing social media spaces encouraged an environment less concerned with the journalistic norms of spelling and grammar and more focused on sponsoring dialogue amongst users. In addition to this, it was often made clear which

particular journalists or editors were managing the paper's profile, further personalising the interaction between users and newspaper staff as users could be aware of which specific staff member were communicating with.⁴⁵

In contrast with the relatively frequent interaction occurring between users and journalists or editors in social media spaces, there was little evidence of journalists entering the comment spaces of the online newspapers examined. In one way, journalists refraining from entering comment spaces could be perceived as positive, as journalist input risks imposing a sense of editorial authority in spaces which are essentially cast as the domain of user opinion. However, without journalist input, user concerns expressed in the comments fields can go unacknowledged and unanswered by editorial staff. Across the online newspapers studied, there were many instances of user criticism of news coverage or editorial decisions and none appeared to be met with any defence or explanation from newspaper staff in the comments field. To cite one example, a number of users voiced their disapproval of Stuff.co.nz's decision to allow comments on an article about two morbidly obese women who were turned down for gastric bypass surgery by their local district health boards (Newton, 2010). These users argued that user comments posted in reaction to such a story would inevitably be cruel and discriminatory and contain little material for a reasoned and constructive discussion about healthcare funding (concerns which were justified by the torrent of negative and judgemental comments which were submitted and posted under the article). The user *Old1* responded with sarcasm to show disapproval at the editorial staff's decision to allow comments, saying "Well done Stuff! Open up the comments so that all the fat haters can spit out their vitriol at these women. That's very helpful" (#175).⁴⁶ Another user, *Winters*, also criticised Stuff.co.nz's actions: "I can't believe Stuff opened this up for comments. It doesn't benefit the ladies from the story. All it does is let the anonymous readers show their ugliness" (#111). By choosing not to visibly respond to these users, either through addressing the issues raised by posting in the comments field or taking direct action by closing down the comments thread, the editorial staff failed to acknowledge a number of users who had legitimate concerns about the nature of

⁴⁵ On Stuff.co.nz's Facebook page, social media editor Greer McDonald signs her initials off at the end of her comments when she is using the Stuff.co.nz profile to indicate that it is her that the users are interacting with.

⁴⁶ The numbers in brackets refer to the number attributed to each comment in the discussion thread under the article cited.

user discussion and the site neglecting its purported commitment to rejecting user comments containing any form of discrimination through the moderation process.

While some studies note that many online news producers may “not consider the exchange of ideas between the newsroom and the audience as a powerful advantage to online journalism” (Chung, 2007, p. 52), the ever-increasing emphasis on interactivity means that journalists are expected to be responsive to their publics and within the sites studied, blogs appeared to support such discussion. As the “best-known form of invitation that writers use to initiate conversations with readers online” (Thurman, 2008, p. 145), the blog format is increasingly adopted by online news media to support interaction between journalists and readers, with op-ed columns in particular transitioning into the blog format effectively. Despite the low levels of such journalist-user interaction in the comments sections of news articles, a number of the papers studied contained blogs with evidence of blog post authors engaging in conversation with users through submitting follow-up comments.⁴⁷ The comments by blogging journalists in the NationalTimes.com.au, theAge.com.au and SMH.com.au are surrounded by the colour grey, easily distinguishable from user comments which are featured against the white background of the site. While again, some may see this is a marker to reinforce the professional authority of the journalist, marking them out from the crowd of commenting users, in effect it serves a practical purpose and provides a sense of credibility and accountability through verifying that the author of such comments is a member of the newspaper staff who is visibly engaged with users in comments fields. Matheson asserts that blogs adopted by online news media serve as “evidence of journalism’s attempts to rethink its values and its relations with its publics” (2004, p. 462), and the blog genre which is most effective in doing so is the editorial blog.

Case study: Stuff.co.nz’s “From the Newsroom” editorial blog

After Stuff.co.nz’s redesign in March 2009, the site introduced an editorial blog titled “From the Newsroom” to inform users of the changes taking place and additionally, to support discussion about such changes with and between users. Although Stuff.co.nz was the only

⁴⁷ The papers in the study featuring blogs were Stuff.co.nz, DomPost.co.nz, thePress.co.nz, NationalTimes.com.au, SMH.com.au, theAge.com.au and ODT.co.nz.

online newspaper in this study to feature an editorial blog, supplying such spaces to explain editorial decisions and address reader concerns has become an increasingly common feature of many online newspaper sites across the world, including Guardian.co.uk and NYTimes.com. Attempting to account for the rise in editorial blogs, Singer (2007) notes that there have been a number of interrelated events and trends which have prompted media organisations to “examine and explain themselves”, including:

declining audiences, demanding shareholders and other economic pressures; a string of public embarrassments at major news organizations; highly visible moves toward expanded accountability by industry leaders, such as the management shakeup and addition of a public editor at The New York Times; and a desire to distance “journalism” from the increasingly entertainment-oriented “news media”. (p. 87)

Lasica argues that online news outlets choosing to adopt blogs which discuss newsroom decision-making processes can potentially enhance reader trust through their attempt to “repersonalise” journalism, with the potential to show that “newspapers aren’t monolithic corporations but a collaborative team of individuals with varying viewpoints and who have more in common with their readers than they could possibly know from reading their print articles alone” (2003, p. 72). “Open Door”, the editorial blog of Guardian.co.uk, is described on the site as a space where the “readers’ editor writes about your suggestions, concerns, complaints and other things” but also includes blog posts from a range of editors, including the letters editor, corrections and clarifications editor, crossword editor and a host of others (Elliott, 2010).⁴⁸ Both the content of posts and interaction between editors and journalists in the comment spaces of editorial blogs reflect assumptions and attitudes about news making and the value of user contributions from various corners of the debate.

As the only editorial blog to feature amongst the online newspapers examined, Stuff.co.nz’s From the Newsroom serves as evidence of an editorial team open to exploring the boundaries of the journalist-audience relationship, with an emphasis on transparency, accountability and responsiveness to users. The blog’s description reads: “What’s the story behind the story?”

⁴⁸ In addition to Open Door, Guardian.co.uk has a blog called “Inside Guardian.co.uk” which they use to announce new features and initiatives on the site and facilitate user discussion in response (2010.).

Stuff's newsroom blog is where our editors background the hows and whys of the day's news and commentary. It's our chance to talk about what we do – and it's your chance to have your say too" (Stuff.co.nz, 2010). Since From the Newsroom's inception, blog posts have been written by a wide range of editorial staff and covered several topics including (but not limited to) site design changes, the role of moderation, populism and news judgment and the site's use of social media. After addressing key issues relevant to the subject of the post, post authors frequently invite users to contribute their opinions and suggestions to the debate in the comments field.⁴⁹

As mentioned earlier, From the Newsroom was introduced concurrently with a site redesign, and the first post by Fairfax Digital Editor Sinead Boucher served as an announcement for the new features and alterations of site content. The first line reads: "Welcome to our new revamped and upgraded Stuff site. We hope you like it" (Boucher, 2009a), an expectation of user satisfaction which was not echoed in the 560 user comments published in response to this initial post alone.⁵⁰ Complaints and suggestions in the user comments field related mainly to the navigational user-friendliness and visual appearance of the site, with users claiming that the site had lost its uniqueness ("Looks like you've crossed the Tasman Sea and copied everything from News.com.au!", *Verbatim* #40), threatening to switch to another news site ("Thanks for forcing me to leave your site and pick one of your rivals", *Barry* #33) and expressing that the editorial team had neglected to consider the needs of users in planning the redesign ("You've let your techies loose without really understanding what your readers want", *Paekak* #179). In order to address and potentially quell user reactions to the new site design, Boucher chose to respond with three follow-up blog posts in which she explained how the Stuff.co.nz team were responding to and acting on the concerns expressed by users.⁵¹

⁴⁹ For instance, in the post "Stuff and social media" (2010), social media editor Greer McDonald writes: "I look forward to hearing your thoughts and ideas, and keeping you up-to-date with all the developments!". Similarly, in the post by opinion editor Nick Barnett (2009), he writes "So let's start a thread about threads", before asking a string of relevant questions to stimulate discussion.

⁵⁰ The user comments referred to in this paragraph are from this blog post (see Boucher, 2009a in the reference list) and as done previously in the chapter, the username is in italics and the number of each comment assigned by the site is noted.

⁵¹ The first follow-up entry was posted three days after the first post (Boucher, 2009b), another eight days after (Boucher, 2009c) and the final one eleven days after (Boucher, 2009d).

However, users continued to use the comments section to express their frustration and requests to have the site changed back the way it was.⁵² Some users questioned the enthusiasm expressed on Boucher's behalf about the value of customisation: "I don't want to set up a bunch of fancy personalised settings – I just want to find info quickly" (*Stu* #24). Others demanded that Stuff.co.nz construct a poll to gauge user opinion on the new site design: "Run a poll and let the users speak" (*Craig* #51). As well as criticising the new site design, many users commented on their dislike of the way the paper had chosen to engage with their suggestions and criticism. A number of users quote lines from Boucher's follow-up posts in order to question the legitimacy of her response to user concerns, and others deemed the tone of her delivery both "arrogant" (*Martin* #54, *McP* #60) and "offensive" (*jaydee* #93). Stuff.co.nz's decision to have Boucher address user concerns in follow-up posts rather than engaging with them in the comment fields (which could be viewed as an understandable course of action to take due to the high volume of comments received) angered many users who appeared dissatisfied at the level of transparency and accountability provided in regard to their criticisms of the new site design (some called for a revert back to the previous design while others requested to be able to opt in for a "classic" version). Responsiveness appeared to be a central issue for many users who expressed that journalists and editors engaging with users in comment spaces served as evidence the editorial team were aware of user concerns and accountable to the paper's actions. In this way, editorial blogs containing posts by editorial staff with no sign of interaction with users in the comments field could be perceived by users as a reassertion of journalistic authority and a top-down approach to communication.

By engaging with user concerns in the comment spaces of editorial blogs, editors and journalists are able clarify and discuss issues such as editorial decisions and moderation processes in ways which FAQs or rules and guidelines sections are not able to facilitate. In a From the Newsroom post titled "Why are blogs moderated?", Stuff.co.nz's opinion editor Nick Barnett argued that he viewed Stuff.co.nz moderators as functioning as "censors" to a small extent (only removing one to two percent of submitted posts), emphasising that the majority of the time moderators perform as "enablers": "We're serious about our Terms & Conditions but, generally, we try to let people say what they like" (2009). After a few users responded

⁵² The comments mentioned in this paragraph were posted in response to Boucher's blog post titled "Refining and fine-tuning" (2009d).

with requests that Barnett explain the processes through which site material was made available for user comments, he replied as follows:

Several of you want to know about why some stories aren't opened for comments. Generally, we enable comments on as many stories as possible. Factors that might make us reconsider include:

1. It's a story about a live or possible court case.
2. It's a story that we think is likely to provoke comments that we'd have to withhold for legal or taste reasons – we don't like to invite comments, then turn around and strike them out, leaving an unrepresentative thread.
3. It's a day when we're already busy moderating comments, and if we add to that workload, things will slow down drastically – which nobody likes. Threads that have turned into flame wars or that we think are being manipulated (a rare event) are liable to be closed off. (2009)

Barnett's reply explores the reasons and processes behind why particular stories are not made available for user comments on Stuff.co.nz, referencing legal constraints and work practicalities as the key factors in this. Viewing this response in conjunction with the way in which NZHerald.co.nz addressed the same issue in their FAQ section (discussed earlier in the chapter), it is clear that Barnett's explanation reflects a level of accountability and responsiveness to user concerns not provided by NZHerald.co.nz.

Editorial blogs appear more effective at exploring issues surrounding rules and newsroom processes than FAQs, which predict what questions users are likely to ask rather than allow users to nominate questions themselves in comment fields. Users seemed to respond well to Barnett's involvement in *From the Newsroom*, some thanked Barnett for his post and contribution to the unfolding debate in the comments section, and one user praised his efforts in attempting to clarify the moderation process: "Good idea to have this discussion, I'm pleased at the level of transparency" (*anmar* #16). Although not all of the editors who contributed posts to *From the Newsroom* utilised the potential of comment spaces to engage with users to the same extent as Barnett, the subject matter of their posts makes visible aspects of online news making such as work routines and editorial decisions not ordinarily covered by the day-to-day news delivery. Online newspapers like Stuff.co.nz which choose to

adopt editorial blogs should be viewed as acknowledging the necessity for open dialogue with users about the paper's rules and processes.

“Readers have their say”: The framing of user interest and opinion

Projecting popularity and “public opinion”

The news consumption patterns of users highlighted by the online newspapers studied, ranging from which stories are the most clicked-on to the number of “likes” on an article, construct a representation of popularity which works to uphold a sense of imagined community of like-minded users with shared interests. While all of the papers studied recognised the need to include features like RSS feeds to acknowledge users as potentially desiring individually-designed news menus, other features of the paper are included to provide indications of what is considered interesting and newsworthy by the majority of users. Almost all of the online newspapers studied featured a list of links on their front page which represented the “most popular” articles according to user views, but there were differences in how papers organised and labelled these “popular links” menus. Some displayed only a short list of the most clicked-on or read stories,⁵³ while others adopted a more detailed layout by dividing links into different tabs according to most viewed, most shared and most commented.⁵⁴ The paper with the most complex system for these links was NZHerald.co.nz, which divided the “Most Popular” links into the current top three stories, photos and videos and distinguished these from the list of the “Most commented”-on stories, which were placed under the heading “Community”.

In addition to showcasing user interest in particular stories, the front pages of SMH.com.au, NationalTimes.com.au and theAge.com.au provided a numerical indication of the total users currently accessing the site and also displayed a count of the number of users currently reading each article in the left-hand sidebar. These same three papers also displayed the

⁵³ theChronicle.com.au, theSunshineCoastDaily.com.au and ODT.co.nz listed links under the heading “Most popular” but ODT.co.nz also provided the option to view popular articles according to daily, weekly and monthly time periods.

⁵⁴ Referenced here are NZHerald.co.nz, Stuff.co.nz, DomPost.co.nz and thePress.co.nz.

number of comments on an article in brackets or speech bubble icons alongside the link to the article on the paper's front page, signifying how much discussion had been generated in response to a particular article. A further representation of the popularity of particular articles is illustrated through the use of counters surrounding articles which are associated with social media sites, showing the number of "likes" received by Facebook users or the number of times a story has been "dug" by users on social news aggregator Digg. Through tracking and capturing user movements, interest and interaction with site content, online newspapers could be viewed as privileging users' sense of what is newsworthy to the same level or perhaps above that of journalists and editors. However, reflecting what users deem newsworthy or debatable is perhaps less about user empowerment and more about the news media's central role in portraying and confirming a sense of social reality through projecting representations of what the "average" user is interested in.

As well as providing representations of what users deem popular or interesting, the online newspapers studied often created stories based on user opinions from comments or poll data submitted to the site, claiming to represent the reader community's reaction to an issue or event. Although incorporating "the voice of the people" has always featured as part of the storytelling language of news, with vox pops and poll data serving as source material for articles, the online environment provides further avenues for generating user opinion. Drawing on UGC gathered from opinion polls, comment threads and "Have your says" like NZHerald.co.nz's Your Views to form the basis of stories reflects part of online newspaper producers' attempts to simplify and capture the fragmentation of user opinion on such sites. Articles reporting on a newspaper's own poll results try to create a narrative from unscientific surveys of opinion contributed to by self-selecting and self-interested readers, which could potentially "give a false impression of group attitudes, as well as a false sense of validity and substance usually generated by statistical evidence" (Friend & Singer, 2007, p. 164). Additionally, such articles do not present any new information but merely summarise the findings displayed in the "View results" tab. For example, an article reporting on poll results from a survey of reader opinion about the New Zealand government's latest budget by thePress.co.nz with the headline "Press readers poll shows opinion evenly divided" (Conway, 2010), simply creates a narrative out of what would be visible to users in the poll results.

However, articles quoting user responses from comments fields or “Have your says” have a more selective and potentially more problematic method of representing user opinion through involving a process of weaving together particular snippets of user comments to construct a narrative from the comments gathered. Although the processes of selection, filtering and editing are key elements of the journalistic role (Domingo et al., 2009), such processes work to sustain the belief that media simply reflect how society is and how society feels, functioning as part of what Couldry describes as the myth of the mediated centre (2003). NZHerald.co.nz staff frequently create articles through sourcing user opinion from the paper’s Your Views section, attempting to represent to users the sentiment and tone of discussion and serving as a summarised point of reference for those who do not have the time or motivation to read through the lengthy comment threads. Through constructing a narrative from user responses such articles draw conclusions about how the reader community feels, conclusions that are often evident in headlines such as “Online support for Versalko prostitute” (Dickison, 2010) or “Heads must roll if All Blacks lose, say readers” (Smith, 2010).

User comments were not only featured in stories attempting to illustrate a degree of public opinion on certain issues, but some of the online newspapers studied chose to highlight specific user comments on the paper’s front page or alongside articles. Both SMH.com.au and theAge.com.au feature the first sentence from the latest user comment posted in a sidebar next to articles enabling user comments, just under their promotion of sharing the story or discussing the issue on Twitter. Through this method, comments are automatically displayed and simply provide an update of the direction in which the comments thread is moving; however, papers like NZHerald.co.nz which choose to showcase an excerpt from one comment on the paper’s front page are slightly more troubling in terms of adequately representing user opinion. Online newspapers often feature quotes from opinion columnists on the front page of their sites, with excerpts of such writing often selected deliberately for their humorous or controversial nature in order to attract readers. Through adapting this convention to give front page prominence to specific user comments, this could be seen as a negotiation of professional and amateur boundaries, with users enjoying the privilege of having a snippet of their opinion and their username displayed alongside news content.

However, when examining what kinds of comments are highlighted in this way, it becomes clear that this device is less about elevating users to the status of honorary journalists and more about showcasing opinions that will unite or divide users in the hope that some will share their opinions. Of the papers studied, NZHerald.co.nz was the only one to feature user comments in this way, drawing on excerpts from comments posted in their user opinion section Your Views as a promotion for particular topics from the section on the front page. During the period of analysis carried out for this study, an anti-whaling protestor from New Zealand boarded a Japanese whaling vessel and was being held by the Japanese government awaiting trial. Your Views nominated the question “Is NZ doing enough to free Ady Gil skipper Pete Bethune?” (2010) and the front page promotion for the topic cited this excerpt from a comment by the user *maggie1862*: “I don’t think it’s in the government’s best interest to help out terrorists”. NZHerald.co.nz editorial staff clearly selected this statement for its controversial sentiment, casting Bethune as a “terrorist” would surely have been predicted to provoke a reaction from those sympathetic to the anti-whaling cause. By featuring decontextualised excerpts of user comments on the paper’s front page as a method to encourage users to view other users’ opinions or contribute their thoughts to the site, the editorial team of NZHerald.co.nz use the journalistic processes of selection and editing in a highly problematic fashion.

Case study: NZHerald’s “Your Views”

In order to capture the attention, and potentially the opinion, of online readers, NZHerald.co.nz’s Your Views provides a range of timely and most often controversial questions or topics related to story items reported by the paper. Ye and Li argue that online newspaper forums which are structured by pre-set topics for discussion and are linked to related news articles are more likely to achieve a better sense of coherence than that of free-form forums in which users can nominate topics for discussion (2006, p. 247). However, “Have your says” like Your Views are problematic because they do not simply nominate topics for discussion but set the agenda for debate to a large extent by posing questions to users which are specifically designed in order to elicit responses. The majority of topics made

available for user discussion in Your Views take the form of a question, except for a few which call for general responses to a topic or event, such as “Your Views on the Duchess of York bribe scandal” (2010). As part of this study’s analysis of Your Views, the content of 100 topics and questions posed by Your Views were examined in order to determine whether they were *closed*, triggering a yes or no response, or *open*, leaving room for a more detailed response.⁵⁵

Of the 100 topics and questions examined, 80 of them had a closed nature and 20 of them were open-ended; therefore, an overwhelming majority of the topics and questions posed in Your Views encouraged users to pick a side rather than to engage with the complexity of the associated issue. Closed questions posed by Your Views such as “Should the drug P be decriminalised?”, “Should we arm police?” and “Should voluntary euthanasia be legalised?” are problematic as the way in which they are phrased suggests there are only two possible opinion positions to adopt. Through supplying questions with a closed nature to stimulate public discussion, the editorial team risk polarising debate through establishing the conditions for an “us” versus “them” scenario with the chance for deliberation and consideration of one another’s opinions reduced considerably. Constructing questions with a closed nature to generate responses concerned with complex societal issues does not adequately serve to effectively facilitate public discussion. A number of questions posed by Your Views were also loaded with a particular view, often inherited from the related story which could be based around the findings of a study or a person’s statement of opinion. Questions like “Is the new prison at Mt Eden too big and too ugly?” feature judgments which users are intended to agree or disagree with, and these kinds of questions could more effectively encourage users to think through the complex and multi-faceted nature of issues if they were rephrased to adopt an open approach to the topic (e.g. “What are your thoughts on the new prison at Mt Eden?”).

The way in which discussion is framed and organised in Your Views works to support polarised debate and the upholding of populist sentiment. On the main page of a Your Views topic or question, two (or in fewer cases, three) extracts from user comments representing differing corners of the unfolding debate are displayed within speech bubbles in a prominent

⁵⁵ See Appendix 1 for a list of these questions/topics.

space above the bulk of comments. Although these are most likely intended to act as a reference guide for users wanting to quickly gauge the scope of responses, such representations of user comments provide only a limited portrayal of the debate actually occurring in the section, with little room to present any nuances in opinion. Your Views includes extra options for commenting and interacting with others' comments, including options to "like", report or reply to individual comments. Both report and reply functions present positive opportunities to support a wide and healthy debate, with users given the option to flag inappropriate or offensive material (which in theory moderators should have picked up on) and refer directly to each others' comments while posting themselves.

However, the "like" function, which is increasingly appearing across news websites and social media, presents a slightly more problematic method of interacting with others' comments. Giving users the option to "like" other users' material is clearly positive if it means that people feel a sense of solidarity or if responses are designed with the "like" function in mind and, therefore, it encourages users to construct more convincing and complex arguments. However, there are evident downsides in representing user support for particular points of view, including the tendency for online discussion spaces to act as an echo chamber for like-minded individuals with particular views. In reality, the "like" function does not inherently favour populist sentiment but adapts to suit its environment. In the case of Your Views, the environment constructed by the editorial team encourages reactionary and polarised responses meaning that comments with the most "likes" from the threads studied were usually succinct in their delivery and appealed to "commonsense" principles, thereby embodying a populist tone. Although Your Views did put one measure in place which served to counteract the likelihood that a certain response will appear to be the "best" or most popular with users, through displaying the total number of "likes" for any comment that receives over 100 "likes" as "100+ likes". By putting this limit in place, there is a reduced risk of certain users dominating discussion through appearing to "win" a kind of comment popularity contest and it also lessens the possibility of an echo chamber-effect occurring, with users rallying around and thus reinforcing particular viewpoints.

Although some of the characteristics of Your Views resemble those of online discussion forums or bulletin boards, the key distinction of “Have your says” is that they are not user-driven; users have little influence over the time frame and topics set for discussion. Your Views comment threads have a limited lifespan, with the editorial team selecting when debate on the issue is closed. There is no clear method as to how this is decided, some debates stay open to submissions for months even though they receive hundreds of comments and others with only a small selection of comments are shut down with no rationale given as to how the editorial team came to such a decision. In a standard online bulletin board, users are able to nominate topics for discussion, however, the structure of Your Views does not allow for users to do so and, therefore, may not represent the possible range of issues which users seek to discuss. Participation in the discussion hosted by Your Views is only available to those who wish to respond to issues put on the agenda by the editorial team. As discussion threads can be closed at any time, topics are limited to those selected by the editorial team and there is no guarantee that all submitted user response will be published, users have little control over the forum which claims to represent *their* views. The limited nature of discussion in Your Views is, therefore, a result of the ineffective facilitation of the “forum”; it functions as a site for the deposit of reactionary opinions through positioning complex issues as having a limited and often polarised scope of viewpoints for users to subscribe to.

In order to more effectively facilitate public discussion and adequately consider the wants and needs of their users while still working within the “Have your say” model of framing user opinion that Your Views adopts, the content of questions or topics nominated for discussion would need to be composed with a more open nature –to encourage a breadth and complexity of responses– and users would be given the option to suggest potential topics to the editorial team, thereby having a stronger contribution to the agenda for discussion.⁵⁶ In addition to this, editors could establish clear limits about how long the thread would be open for comments, whether a time-based (a set number of hours or days for comments to be open) or content-based (having a maximum number of comments set for each thread) limit, in order to

⁵⁶ BBC.co.uk’s “Have your say” feature (also called “Have Your Say” – potentially the inspiration for Hermida and Thurman’s definition for this type of “forum” (2009)) provides users with the opportunity to suggest future topics for consideration.

communicate to users some degree of information about the lifespan of the thread of discussion they wish to participate in.

While such improvements would make features based on the “Have your say” model more accountable to users and could potentially frame issues in a slightly less polarising light, the feature is still premised on the fact that it lets users have “their say” by submitting “their views” and, therefore, has an inbuilt structure which makes it serve as a depository for opinion rather than something which sponsors discussion and interaction. Although I agree with Ye and Li’s point (2006) that user discussion can be more effective if teamed with a degree of structure and facilitation, “Have your says” do not present a model through which discussion participants can come together to deliberate in the hope of some form of mutual understanding, but rather encourages a polarisation of viewpoints from competing “sides” of the debate. Additionally, in the attempts to summarise the opinion expressed by the escalating number of comments (the majority of which probably go unread by the user base), this polarisation is further encouraged by articles which purport to represent the climate of user opinion but which pay little attention to minority viewpoints or subtle nuances in argument which do not fit with the construction of “public opinion” being projected.

Conclusion

While the language surrounding the interactive features and UGC initiatives of online newspapers suggests that users can become empowered through their participation and engagement in such sites, the analysis carried out in this chapter illustrates that it is not as democratic an environment as the celebratory rhetoric suggests. Although there was a consistent and enthusiastic emphasis on the importance of “you” across the online newspapers examined, the invitations for users to participate were not linked with any real sense of agency bestowed on users by news producers. Users were encouraged to submit feedback and reactions to news coverage or topical issues but only in response to material designated by editorial staff as open to user contributions. Additionally, in submitting content to be posted, users agree to part with their rights over the representation of that content (whether the site makes this clear or not) and, therefore, news producers are entitled to

mobilise and frame UGC in whichever way they require, meaning that users have little say in how their contributions to the paper are represented.

Online newspapers' attempts to summarise UGC to create an impression of "public opinion" are problematic because they often impose a simplistic narrative rather than provide a detailed or nuanced account of poll results or the sentiment expressed in comments sections. Articles which use comments from "Have your says" like Your Views in order to draw sweeping conclusions about how the user community "feels" about an issue are flawed, not only because of the impossibility of adequately representing user opinion, but because of the polarising way in which users are encouraged to respond to issues. Far from embracing a collaborative style of news making involving journalists and users, the analysis in this chapter has shown that the online newspapers examined seemed to be inviting opportunities for UGC as a convenient way to get content free of charge (excluding moderation and editing costs) while simultaneously appearing in touch with the reader community and their concerns and maintaining the professional standards and role of journalism.

Through closely analysing the language expressed by journalists/editors and users in the spaces of interactivity and participation in online newspaper sites, this chapter has illustrated that there has not been a dramatic shift in the way news producers approach their relationship with and responsibilities to the audience. The majority of the online newspapers studied appeared to favour social media platforms as their preferred method to engage with users. While such spaces sponsor opportunities for users to communicate with the paper, other initiatives (like editorial blogs or journalistic input in comment threads), which show a greater commitment to encouraging an ongoing dialogue about the process of news making and negotiating the boundaries of the journalist-audience relationship, were almost non-existent. This chapter's case study of Stuff.co.nz's From the Newsroom has shown that editorial blogs can help to realise some of the ideals of the celebratory rhetoric through providing a space for newspaper staff to facilitate an ongoing conversation with users about news making and editorial decisions. From the analysis carried out in this chapter, it is clear that the relations between news producers and users have shifted in the online environment but there is still a great degree of reluctance on the part of online news producers towards

sponsoring interaction or initiatives which communicate a sense of accountability, transparency and responsiveness. The final and concluding chapter of the study explores the reasons behind this reluctance of online newspapers to venture beyond the standardised menu of interactivity to provide features which support interpersonal communication between users and news producers and acknowledge users as potential collaborators in the news production process.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusions

Through examining the interactive features and UGC initiatives provided by a selection of online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand, this thesis has demonstrated that the participatory menu offered to users is limited in terms of both scope and effective facilitation; this finding is consistent with other similar investigations of interactivity and user participation in online news media (Chung, 2007; Domingo, 2008; Paulussen et al., 2007; Quandt, 2008; Rosenberry, 2005; Singer & Ashman, 2009a). This final chapter looks beyond the ways in which the facilitation of interactivity and UGC is limited by the online newspapers studied to address wider issues which help us consider *why* this could be so, outlining a range of possible factors influencing the restricted range of participatory opportunities. By exploring the potential reasons behind the limited facilitation of interactivity and the corresponding democratic implications, this chapter revisits themes covered in the literature review, linking these with findings from the research.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the study's findings and illustrates how these resonate with existing research focused on online news media and user engagement, including geographically-based studies. The chapter then turns to address the realities and practicalities of public discussion in the online environment and considers the various responses adopted by online newspapers in their facilitation of user-to-user discussion in this environment. The discussion also considers how the commonly-circulated negative stereotypes of online comments have some potential bearing on the way in which online news producers perceive the value and nature of user discussion. The chapter examines the extent to which journalism practice is changing in the online newspaper environment, arguing that the professional culture of journalism continues to limit both the instances of journalist-user interactions and the opportunities for users to participate in news production processes. While the growing emphasis on the use of social media and the establishment of social media editors reflects an interest in engaging with the audience, it also appears that little emphasis is placed on regular journalists communicating with readers. After closely examining the role of journalists in the online newspaper environment, the chapter then considers the extent to which users are

empowered by their participation in online newspaper sites, drawing on examples of user comments which illustrate the complex and varied attitudes that users have in regard to the producer-consumer relationship. The last section of this chapter concludes the study through suggesting some avenues for future research and proposing a range of initiatives which media outlets could implement to work towards facilitating user engagement in more effective and civically responsible ways.

Contextualising the study's findings

The major findings emerging from the study's examination of a selection of online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand are largely in keeping with current academic assessments of online newspapers' approach towards interactivity and UGC. On the whole, the participatory opportunities provided by the online newspapers examined suggest that the news producers in question fit into the category of "cautious traditionalists" outlined by Chung (2007), meaning they appeared both interested and somewhat enthusiastic about facilitating interactivity in their sites but also concerned about the potential challenge to journalism's gatekeeping role and professional standards. Needless to say this tension between excitement and apprehension in regard to employing new technologies to facilitate user interaction reflects wider attitudes about both the promise and potential pitfalls of digital technologies; each new development is greeted with a simultaneous degree of enthusiasm and concern about its effect on established ways of doing things.

There were only a few instances in which the news producers behind the online newspapers studied could be described as taking up the opportunity to act as "innovators" (Chung, 2007), by adopting features like editorial blogs and sections for the publishing of user-authored news content which signalled a marked departure from the standard menu of participatory options on offer. The inclusion of uncommon but technically more "empowering" participatory initiatives (as in the case of ODT.co.nz's dedicated sections for user news and opinion and Stuff.co.nz's editorial blog) signifies a somewhat more progressive approach to audience participation in the news production process, whether the decision to provide particular features has arisen from a proactive editorial team or simply follows on from global trends in

interactivity. But despite the few instances where some papers had introduced fairly novel features to their interactive line-up, overall the analysis carried out reveals that the online newspapers studied adhered to a relatively standardised and conservative approach towards interactivity.

The normative approach toward interactivity adopted by the online newspapers examined allowed users to customise, distribute and react to news content. However, there were limited opportunities for users to interact with other users and journalists, and even fewer instances where users were given the ability to act as news producers. The wide provision of interactive features enabling users to filter their news consumption experience through opportunities for customisation and distribution is consistent with the findings of other studies which argue that mainstream news sites support features involving content interactivity (Bucy, 2004; Deuze, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Zeng & Li, 2006). In addition, the study's finding that there were limited opportunities for users to communicate with one another and with newspaper staff in the online newspapers studied is also in keeping with international studies which found low levels of features facilitating interpersonal interactivity, such as byline email links, message boards and "Have your says" (Chung, 2008; Kenney et al., 2000; Massey & Levy, 1999; Schultz, 1999). The lack of opportunities for users to contribute to the news production process, apart from the traditional forms of audience input such as story tip-offs and reader photos, is also consistent with the findings of other studies which similarly argue that UGC is primarily seen as a way to bolster professionally-produced news content rather than to acknowledge users as citizen journalists (Harrison, 2010; Hermida & Thurman, 2009; Örnebring, 2009). The enthusiastic rhetoric expressed across the sites studied attempts to link user participation with notions of empowerment and community belonging. However, the reality of how much agency users have in these interactive environments (evident from the management and guidelines of such features) is far from the democratic wonderland constructed by the surrounding text. Although in quantitative terms, the methods provided by online newspapers for users to interact with and react to news content may have greatly expanded, the way in which UGC is obtained and incorporated into professional news content is not markedly different from that done by offline newspapers.

The findings and conclusions emerging from this study's examination of Australian and New Zealand online newspapers appear consistent with the results from other similar studies with a focus on the facilitation of interactivity by online news media in geographically-specific locations. While it is true, as Boczkowski notes, that innovations in online newspapers are "shaped by various combinations of initial conditions and local contingencies" (2004a, p. 4), the global nature of the online medium means that online newspapers are always discovering and choosing whether or not to implement interactive features which transpire through emergent international trends. While studies of online news media in different countries reveal variation in the construction of the interactive menus provided, such studies consistently highlight the limited and ineffective facilitation of user participation in online news sites.

Quandt's comparative content analysis of ten online news sites in five countries (United States of America, France, United Kingdom, Germany and Russia) reveals an underwhelming level of interactive options across the sites studied and notes that there were few instances of direct interaction with journalists (2008, p. 727). Similarly, Paulussen et al.'s study of online news sites in four European countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany and Spain) concludes that despite the differences in context, media in all of the countries examined offered limited opportunities for audience participation (2007). In his study of Swedish online news media, Karlsson concludes that users are not encouraged to "become involved in the key news-production processes of creating, shaping, and selecting news items" and instead, they are invited to "comment, rate, praise, criticize, interpret, and react to [news items] in various ways after they have been published" (2010, p. 12) –a conclusion supported by the findings from this study's analysis. Karlsson argues that online news media have "simultaneously embraced and normalized user participation in online news to fit traditional journalistic culture" (2010, p. 12), an assertion which resonates not only with the study conducted here but with Domingo's examination of Spanish online newsrooms (2008). Domingo argues that the principles of interactivity are at odds with established journalistic norms and considers this a major contributing factor in online journalism's reluctance to fully explore audience participation (2008).

Taming the online wild west

The democratic potential of mediated, moderated online communication

Although the online environment offers unprecedented opportunities for people to interact and share with one another, the realities concerning the nature of online communication are no doubt of concern to online newspaper producers when considering the types of user interaction to facilitate in their sites. As with offline communication, people do not always converse in a deliberative fashion and as Schudson has argued, public discourse is “not necessarily egalitarian but is essentially *public*” and because it involves conversation between people with differing values and backgrounds it is also often “profoundly *uncomfortable*” (1997, p. 299; original emphasis). Scholars who argue that online journalism could potentially reinvigorate forms of civic engagement simultaneously acknowledge that public participation is often not in the form of rational, critical deliberation (Schultz, 2000; Thurman, 2008). As Papacharissi notes (2002, p. 13), “access to the internet does not guarantee increased political activity or enlightened political discourse” because citizens do not necessarily engage in political discussion, and when they do, the effective facilitation of such discussion is often absent.

The internet’s absence of face-to-face interaction and the potential anonymity of citizens, which could be imagined to expand freedom of expression and enable a level playing field for discussion, in effect, often prevents us from “assessing the impact and social value of our words” (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 16). The tendency for online news producers to favour the strategy of pre-moderation in regard to UGC, a finding evident in this study as well as others (Chung, 2007; Thurman, 2008), reflects an anxiety surrounding the anonymity granted to users in the online environment. In addition to this, most sites require users to register their details with the site before submitting any material – a move which helps to further quell this anxiety by adopting a method which is in keeping with the standards of accountability held in relation to the traditional letters to the editor convention. Without such requirements and structure, online newspaper forums risk resembling “the wild west”, as described by one of

the online news editors quoted in Robinson's study (2010, p. 134), potentially exposing the paper's brand to an unnecessary tarnishing.

In the often chaotic, unpredictable and fragmentary communication environment of the internet, the way in which online newspapers choose to facilitate user discussion –how they seek to tame the wild west one could say– largely reflects what news producers see as the goals for public discussion. Ye and Li note that the absence of journalistic input in the discussion forums of the Chinese online newspapers studied shows a perception of such forums as “reader's playgrounds” (2006, p. 255). Although many would argue that encouraging journalists or editors to participate in discussions premised on their status as a platform for user expression would suggest a reinforcement of journalistic authority in a space dedicated to “the people”, this study agrees with Ye and Li's assertion (2006, p. 255) that a “more active role of journalists in the public forums will benefit both journalism practice and public discourse”. However, this is not to say that sites like Guardian.co.uk which feature a noticeable journalistic presence on comment threads guarantee a more rational-critical tone to user discussion as threads of online communication mirror typical characteristics of offline conversation; with repeated sentiment, disregard of oppositional viewpoints and deviations from the subject matter in question all likely to feature.

One measure adopted by Guardian.co.uk to reduce some of these messy realities of conversation was to place a 48-hour time limit for user comments on articles, which comment editor Georgina Henry explained was established in order to “try and keep conversations as topical and relevant as possible” (2008, para. 11). Although restricting user discussion on specific articles to a brief time period has potential downsides (such as cutting short potentially valuable civic debate), it could be beneficial for many online newspapers wanting to guard against hosting comment threads filled with repetition and digression from the central issues. Another feature which aids engagement amongst conversation participants is the reply function, which a number of the online newspapers in the study neglected to provide. Giving users the option to reply in response to specific user comments signifies an acknowledgement on the part of the facilitator of the importance of interaction between

users, foregrounding the potential of such spaces to play host to conversations alongside the bulk of responses which resemble user attempts to simply deposit their “two cents worth”.

Although the majority of online newspapers facilitating user discussion establish rules or guidelines sections and emphasise the importance of moderation in order to project a commitment to fair and healthy debate, the resulting user discussions do not always maintain a healthy level of civility. While people have differing degrees of what they consider to be offensive, the rules and guidelines sections of online newspapers clearly state what principles user responses are expected to adhere to and, therefore, one could consider moderation to be a relatively straightforward task. However, alongside the obvious negative interruptions to online discussion such as “spam”, “trolls” or “flamers” which moderators are expected to filter out, there are many instances of stereotype-invoking, name-calling and vulgarity in published user comments which are at odds with the rules and guidelines for user discussion outlined on the sites. The previous chapter referred to a few user comments which expressed disappointment at Stuff.co.nz’s decision to enable user comments on an article about two morbidly obese women who were denied public funding for gastric bypass surgery (Newton, 2010). The resulting negative comments could be perceived at best, unnecessary, and at worst, highly offensive, with calls for the women in the article to “[s]tep away from the pie” (*AndyB* #24) and one user scathingly stating “I put these women in the same catagorie [*sic*] as dole bludgers [*sic*]” (*Moz* #55). Similarly in NZHerald.co.nz’s *Your Views*, a section characterised by its tendency to encourage a polarisation of viewpoints, name-calling and intentionally provocative language often passes through the moderator’s filter unedited. In one of the threads examined (“What should be the official names of the North and South Islands?”, 2009), users included terms like “closet Māori basher”, “redneck” and “narrow-minded racist bigots” in comments made in reference to other users posting in the section.

As evident from these examples, despite the use of pre-moderation amongst many online newspapers, the screening process does not always filter out the potentially offensive and discriminatory content which the corresponding rules and guidelines sections claim to censor. Therefore, while online newspapers adopting pre-moderation do so in order to prevent spaces for interpersonal communication from resembling a kind of wild west, there is clearly

some allowance given for occasional shootouts to take place. This is possibly indicative of a light-touch moderation policy adopted by some online newspapers, one that is not strictly aligned with the rules and guidelines for discussion, but one that allows for a certain degree of incivility or outbursts of emotion which moderators judge to be within the standards of what their organisation accepts as healthy debate. By adopting a light-touch moderation policy, moderators ensure that the paper can avoid unwanted controversy while still allowing a potential degree of incivility, attempting to strike a delicate balance between providing a communication environment which is both safe and enjoyable but lets users feel as if they are given freedom of expression. As Robinson notes in her study of user attitudes towards the commenting policies of online news sites, many users enjoy the “sometimes crass, anything-goes exchange” which often appears in online discussions (2010, p. 138). Therefore, some users may prefer moderators to adopt a light-touch approach to reviewing user comments in order to approve responses with less tight scrutiny and more haste to prevent delays which could generate frustration for those partaking in discussion. However, the pressure on moderators to screen user comments in a timely manner, spurred on by user demand and the need to keep up with the immediate nature of online news, could be at the expense of maintaining an inclusive and representative discussion; if comment threads are littered with antagonistic and discriminatory remarks, this may serve as a deterrent for new users to join the discussion.

Citizens or loonies? Perceptions of online commenters

The nature and value of online comments have been a source of both humour and criticism from bloggers and internet users, invoking stereotypes channelling the insane and inane qualities of user responses. The popular news parody site The Onion poked fun at the nature of online comments in the story “Local idiot to post comment on internet”, a mock interview with a man named Brandon Mylenek who was intended to represent the stereotypical online commenter thought to be lacking in intellect and argumentation skills:

Mylenek, who rarely in his life has been capable of formulating an idea or opinion worth the amount of oxygen required to express it, went on to guarantee that the text of his comment would be misspelled to the point of incomprehension, that it would defy the laws of both logic

and grammar, and that it would allege that several elements of the video are homosexual in nature.

"The result will be an astonishing combination of ignorance, offensiveness, and sheer idiocy," Mylenek said. ("Local idiot," 2008, para. 3)

Matt Southall, the creator of "spEak You're bRanes", a blog commenting on the user responses generated from the BBC's online forum "Have Your Say", takes a similarly satirical and critical stance towards online comments. In a piece written for Guardian.co.uk, Southall describes the users of "Have Your Say" as a "gang of multi-chinned nincompoops", calling their expressions of opinion "deranged mooing" (2008, para. 2). However, such sardonic approaches towards the quality of online comments are not restricted to the domain of humorous bloggers, because users themselves are, of course, aware of such stereotypes.

Users often comment on the predictability of incivility arising in comment threads, and are usually quick to criticise the easily identifiable pitfalls of other users' comments, such as spelling and grammar mistakes. Anne Conroy, a user of SMH.com.au, chose the topic of online comments as the subject matter for her contribution to the paper's reader-authored column "The Heckler" (2010). While Conroy notes that she "like[s] newspapers giving their web readers a chance to comment on articles" because it is "fun to read", "encourages criticism of the article itself" and often brings new perspectives to an issue (2010, para. 1), the majority of the column details the inappropriate and irritating side of user comments. These range from her dislike of trolls and comments written entirely in capital letters to the "smug vitriolic personal attacks" enabled by the relative anonymity of internet communication (2010, para. 9). The resulting 44 comments on the article engaged in a lively and interesting discussion about the tone and quality of online discussion, with users musing on the internet's influence on the way people engage with information (some arguing it leads to misinformed viewpoints), the disguised presence of public relations experts in comments fields and whether politeness and courtesy are necessary conditions for debate.

Commenting on comments is not only in the domain of bloggers and other "amateur" internet users; the opinions expressed by journalists about the nature and value of online comments which key into a stereotypical rhetoric indicate much about how news producers view

contributions from users. In an article titled “Thanks so much for your comments, Mr Barking Mad” written by Michael Lallo, a journalist at theAge.com.au, comments sections are described as a kind of addictive freak show featuring users who are incapable of rational thought:

Forget porn. When it comes to cheap online thrills, nothing beats looking at the reader comments section of news websites. ... Inevitably, my addiction has skewed the way I consume news. I now skim-read business and politics so I can get to the good stuff: drink drivers, welfare cheats and fat people who want the Government to pay for their lap-band surgery. These issues are like catnip for idiots. It causes them to stop whatever they’re doing – playing a banjo, probably – and tap out another irrational diatribe. (2009, para. 1)

Like in Conroy’s article, Lallo uses humour to highlight the messy and unpredictable nature of user comments, such as relaxed standards for grammar and spelling and the dominance of emotion over fact and reason. However, as Lallo is a journalist and not simply a guest contributor on a reader-authored column like Conroy, his comments hint towards the potential perceptions of UGC held by professional journalists which are not evident in the enthusiastic tone adopted for encouraging user contributions. Obviously Lallo does not believe all users to be banjo-playing rednecks, but his attitude toward user contributions expressed in the article is strongly reminiscent of those held by the letters editors of Wahl-Jorgensen’s study, who employed an “idiom of insanity” to “poke fun of and distance the staff from the letter-writers” (2002b, p. 189).

The point to make here is that the interpersonal dimension of the interactive menu provided by online newspapers could be potentially contained by how the users are imagined by news producers, an impression which is linked to long-established negative connotations surrounding the audience as contributor.⁵⁷ Although the rhetoric surrounding the features professes that the paper wants to hear “your say”, articles like the one in question reveal attitudes held about the value of audience contributions which may help explain why the opportunities for user interaction and participation in online newspapers are limited. In addition, the fact that comments were not enabled on Lallo’s article meant that there was no

⁵⁷ McNair notes that one of the established stereotypes of letter writers is that they are “obsessive” and “meddling” (2000, p. 111), connotations which are similarly reflected by the editorial staff in Wahl-Jorgensen’s who dismissed letter writers as “crazy and irrational” (2002b, p. 200).

opportunity provided for users to engage with the issues raised in the piece, issues which directly relate to the practice they are likely to participate in regularly.

Online newspaper producers' understanding of interactivity and perceptions about the nature and value of user contributions have a bearing on the types of interactive features provided and how these are facilitated and managed. In other words, the choices made by online newspaper producers in regard to how user contributions are sourced and featured on the site and how interpersonal communication is structured reflects how they understand journalism's role in supporting user participation in their sites. The low frequency of byline email links to journalist is perhaps indicative of the ever-present constraints of time and workload pressures, however, it also suggests that at an institutional level the paper is less open to engaging with users about specific issues raised in news coverage. Additionally, an online newspaper's decision to select pre-moderation over post-moderation of UGC signifies a cautious approach to interpersonal interactivity, with news producers wary of the unpredictable nature of online discussion. While there is no question that moderation is a vital part of hosting UGC on mainstream news sites, the attitudes implicit in the ideas of pre-moderation appear to resonate with the "offline" newsroom perceptions of the public described by Wahl-Jorgensen: "in the newsroom there was a sense that if left to its own devices, the public debate would turn into a dangerously irrational creature, an unpredictable monster" (2002b, p. 197). Decisions about how to moderate and manage features and initiatives involving user participation indicate the level of control news producers wish to exert over public discourse and simultaneously reveal the extent of the anxiety about hosting interpersonal communication on their sites.

Changing roles and responsibilities for journalists or business as usual?

The online environment has presented journalism with new opportunities to source and present information which has led to an alteration of work routines and a renewed responsibility for ensuring that content is both credible and accurate. But while the various roles and responsibilities of the journalist have indeed adapted to fit with the conditions presented by the online environment, a fundamental change has not taken place in terms of

how the majority of journalists are expected to interact with members of the public. From the online newspapers studied, it does not appear that journalists and editors have dedicated a central role for themselves in engaging with the audience in ways dramatically different from those traditionally cast, such as providing methods of contact to submit feedback or news tips. The discourse analysis carried out for this thesis reveals a disconnection between the celebratory rhetoric which suggests journalists are committed to engaging with the audience and the general lack of opportunities for users to collaborate with journalists in the news production process or to communicate with journalists after articles are published. Although there are signs that editorial blogs are growing in popularity in global terms, their relative absence from the menu offered by the online newspapers studied is of concern because they are valuable tools for informing the audience of editorial decisions and communicating a degree of accountability and transparency on part of the paper. Currently, social media appear to be the most popular tools for online newspapers wishing to communicate with their audience. Sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube serve as additional avenues for online newspapers to deliver news content, capture user reactions and foster a sense of online community in spaces which represent a less formal and institutionalised version of the paper.

Amidst the hype and excitement surrounding what social media can do for online newspapers, the onus for communicating with the audience is increasingly placed on social media editors rather than regular journalists. Recently a number of media organisations have added the position of social media editor to their staff, a position which is usually held by formally-trained journalists who are hired not to produce news content but to serve as the public face for the media outlet through using online platforms to engage with the reader community. However, as journalism scholar Skoler notes, there is no guarantee that news organisations will use social media to interact with the audience effectively, and in order for social media editors to be successful in connecting with users, they must “spend as much time listening on Twitter as they do tweeting” (2009, p. 39). The importance of listening is often referred to in the language used by social media editors in communicating their roles to users in interactions on Twitter and Facebook. After NYTimes.com’s newly appointed social media editor Jennifer Preston asked her numerous Twitter followers to let her know how the paper could enhance the audience’s use of social media, a Twitter user asked Preston if she

recognised the importance of journalists using social media to listen in order to stay in touch with the concerns of their user base. Preston's reply acknowledged the importance of social media editors paying attention to what their readers are saying on Twitter: "@jronaldlee. Use social media to listen? Absolutely agree. I will be listening more than tweeting as I explore my new role" (2009).

However, user attitudes towards the necessity of social media editors differ greatly; with some applauding the commitment to interacting with the audience and others seeing the existence of social media editors as a sign that online newspaper journalism has traded in its focus on "quality" investigative journalism and the ability to act as the "Fourth Estate". Responses to the announcement of the appointment of Stuff.co.nz's social media editor Greer McDonald in the site's editorial blog *From the Newsroom* (Boucher, 2010) demonstrate a range of attitudes towards the role of social media editors. While many users applauded Stuff.co.nz's decision to create a position dedicated to improving the paper's interactive potential through the use of social media, others viewed the appointment as proof that the news producers had their news values and priorities in the wrong place: "Just what we need...another uninformed and undereducated twitterphile, pseudo journalist who thinks her opinion counts for anything. Why do we have no real investigative journalism in this country?" (*Mike #24*).⁵⁸ The seemingly nostalgic sentiment expressed in this response featured in the comments fields of other blog posts in *From the Newsroom* blog posts, with a number of users proposing a link between the current focus and enthusiasm for interacting with the audience via social media and what they saw as an absence of in-depth reportage, now lost to a golden media age.⁵⁹ However, the dwindling instances of investigative journalism are not simply a consequence of news organisations putting all of their eggs in the social media basket, so to speak; they are symptomatic of a combination of factors including budget restrictions, the 24-hour news cycle which is dependent on speed and immediacy and

⁵⁸ This comment was submitted in response to the aforementioned blog post "Stuff gets a new social media editor" (Boucher, 2010).

⁵⁹ An example of one such comment submitted in response to McDonald's first post on the blog (2010): "The main problem is news should be as objective and factual as possible, something Fairfax abandoned in NZ a long time ago. Any news item involving science is butchered, no research is done to establish facts, details are vague and the journalist's opinion is all over the page. "the way that you want it" is simply asking the customer's permission to slide further into tabloid journalism. The idea of more sensationalistic [*sic*] stories saturated by people's comments is NOT news. How about removing this position and creating a fact-checker or quality control editor?" (*Another max #20*).

decreasing audience interest in the coverage of public affairs, all of which have meant that less resources are allocated for journalists to carry out in-depth reporting. Nevertheless, comments echoing this type of sentiment illustrate that not all users view the opportunities for participation in the same way, an idea which will be described in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

While engaging with the audience is a social media editor's *raison d'être*, the daily routines of online newspaper journalists, including sourcing information, writing news content and processing UGC, leave little space for opportunities to interact with users. As noted previously in the literature review, the high economic cost of employing staff to manage interactive features is a significant contributing factor towards the ineffective facilitation of such features (Beyers, 2004; Chung, 2007; Massey & Levy, 1999; Thurman, 2008). Therefore, the time and energy regular journalists can devote to interacting with users is dependent on whether their work schedule allows space for such communication. The low levels of byline email links provided and absence of journalists in comment threads evident from the examination of online newspapers in this thesis suggests that the concern of maintaining professional distance outweighs the need to appear personally accessible to audience feedback and interaction (Singer & Ashman, 2009). For journalists acting in the role of moderators, their primary focus is not to interact with users but to screen and edit their contributions, a job which often involves a significant amount of time for processing if a paper adopts pre-moderation and requires all content to be checked before posting. Moderators and comment editors, therefore, most likely have a greater grasp on reader concerns and reactions to news coverage than regular journalists, who are still relatively inaccessible to the public.

In addition to maintaining a level of professional distance from the audience, online newspaper journalists and editors are able to retain their selection and filtering role by nominating what news content users are able to comment on and deciding the methods through which UGC is obtained and represented. The public typically looks to journalism to deliver clear and credible information about what is happening in the world in an effective manner, and the professional standards and gatekeeping methods of journalism practice are integral to fulfilling this expected role. With a few notable exceptions, the online newspapers

studied appeared relatively responsible in selecting which articles were enabled with user comments according to whether they were valuable and constructive for public debate or whether they were likely to serve as repositories for unnecessarily hateful or offensive sentiment. However, through examining the types of content enabled for user comments by the online newspapers studied, it was evident that most editors were still seeking to maintain a clear separation between the domains of fact and opinion, aligning professional journalism with the realm of “truth” and the “serious business” of news making, and users with that of comment and speculation.⁶⁰ Articles made available for user comments were almost always lifestyle, entertainment or opinion-based, with few opportunities for users to provide input on breaking news stories. In addition to this, the types of written or multimedia news content users were asked to contribute most often, as Singer notes, had a “personal and/or local focus” (2010, p. 282), and served to reinforce the boundaries between the domains of amateur and professional content. By defining what types of content users can comment on and contribute, online newspapers reflect the great degree to which the top-down decision making processes of journalism dominate such spaces rather than such choices emerging as a result of user input.

Online newspaper journalism mobilises UGC to represent “the voice of the people” along similarly problematic lines to how media have traditionally included citizen voices and opinions in news coverage. As discussed in Chapter One, the inclusion of citizen voices in news content is a long-established device of journalism practice, but the interactive environment of the online newspaper means the interests and opinions of users can be captured and mobilised without journalists having to leave the confines of the newsroom. While users are increasingly encouraged to share their opinions on the site, this does not mean that users retain control over how this material is represented; any content that users submit belongs to the paper and can be mobilised in both offline and online publications in whichever way editors see fit. Through creating articles based around user comments, online newspaper journalists demonstrate how snippets of online discussion can be packaged and mediated to make inferences about public opinion (Myers, 2004, p. 223). Articles like these construct a narrative out of a selection of user responses in order to counteract the

⁶⁰ The exception to this rule was ODT.co.nz which allowed comments on the majority of site content.

fragmented and repetitive nature of user contributions in the online environment. As Conboy notes, newspapers have always attempted to provide readers with a coherent picture of the world around them: “the newspaper is, as a genre, always attempting to edit down a range of worldviews, to structure them so as to cohere to an institutional and a cultural framework of expectation” (2002, p. 181). However, site content which claims to reflect current user opinion or interest, whether in articles based on user responses or in links lists featuring the most clicked-on stories, is problematic because it constructs an inadequate projection of public opinion based around the notion of “majority rules”. In claiming to represent the thoughts or interests of the “average user”, online newspapers instead reflect a ventriloquised “voice of the people”, one which tends towards populist sentiment and irons out many of the realities of public opinion expression such as disagreement and nuanced argumentation.

Empowering users?

Engagement does not equal empowerment

The celebratory rhetoric surrounding the interactive features of online newspapers conflates participation with empowerment while simultaneously neglecting to acknowledge that users can only exert agency in limited ways. Through examining the interactive practices in the online newspapers studied, this thesis has found that the majority of user participation occurs after professionally-produced material is published. This finding is consistent with Singer’s study which observed that “the largest chunk of content from users comes after the fact – comments generated about information gathered, structured and published by journalists” (2010, p. 283). Therefore, while users can filter news according to personal preferences and submit their opinion on the issues raised, they are given few opportunities to collaborate with journalists in the news production process. Although users are entitled to feel a sense of empowerment through having their contribution represented on the site, we must not lose sight of the benefits of UGC for online newspapers through being provided with a convenient link to (relatively) free content which can be mobilised to give the impression the paper is in touch with the reader community and public opinion.

As news organisations are currently facing difficult economic times and struggling with how to establish an effective business model in the online environment,⁶¹ UGC provides an opportunity for papers to have their readers do some of the reporting for them. As explained in the previous chapter, online newspapers often publish stories reporting on user responses gathered from comments threads or “Have your say” features and the process often involves naming and showcasing the views of individual users. But the inclusion of snippets of user opinion into online news stories functions in a similar way to the television vox pop; the person offering an opinion is of less significance than the opinion itself and its contribution to the narrative being constructed in the news item. As theAge.com.au journalist Lallo explains: “media proprietors love the “Your Say” feature because it generates plenty of free content for their websites – I mean, because it allows marginalised Australians to have their say, enhancing the functioning of our democratic society. Ahem” (2009, para. 9). Lallo’s comment, while cynical, highlights the disconnection between the rhetoric of user empowerment adopted in relation to UGC and the not so overtly projected motivations behind online newspapers inviting user contributions. However, this is not to say that in showcasing UGC (material which is obtained virtually free of charge, minus the costs of moderation and editing), online newspapers cannot provide a space which has value in terms of facilitating civic engagement. The interactive map hosted by thePress.co.nz which plots user-authored accounts of the Canterbury earthquake according to their location, although no doubt viewed by the news producers as beneficial to the paper’s coverage of the earthquake, also serves the reader community well through providing a space for users to share their experiences and read the stories of others (“Canterbury Earthquake: Your Story”, 2010).

Do users necessarily want to be citizen journalists?

Although users appear to appreciate the various interactive opportunities provided for them to filter and respond to news content, not all users may expect or even desire their online newspapers to recognise them as equal partners in the creation, dissemination and discussion of news content. If we think about user participation in online news sites according to Lovink’s “so-called 1% rule” (2008, p. xxvii) discussed in Chapter One, the number of users

⁶¹ *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger noted recently that the most common question asked of newspaper editors operating in the online environment is “What’s the business model?”(2010).

choosing to submit content is far outweighed by those who want to interact with content or simply read it. Bergström's study of audience participation in Swedish online news sites found that there appeared to be "little general interest in the kind of participation demanding more activity and creativity from the users when it comes to news sites" (2008, p. 76); a finding in line with other studies which note the low levels of user interest in the forms of participation which involve citizens taking up a relatively active role (Thurman, 2008; Ye & Li, 2006). In order to find the motivation to produce and submit stories to online newspapers, users must feel that there is something at stake or some degree of personal relevance to the topic they are responding to. Users who submitted personal accounts of their experience of the Canterbury earthquake to thePress.co.nz most likely recognised that their firsthand experience of the event could contribute towards a wider understanding of the event's consequences and significance.

Studies concerned with how the roles of journalists and users are structured and organised by online news sites have also shown that users vary in their attitudes towards how participation should be facilitated in spaces of interpersonal interaction (Light & Rogers, 1999; Robinson, 2010). Robinson's study (2010) examines an hour-long, live blog discussion hosted by an unnamed online newspaper which invited online readers to share their thoughts about the site's commenting policies and facilitation of user responses. The responses from users vary greatly in their attitudes towards journalist input in the spaces for user discussion. Some users were keen on having journalistic moderation and involvement in comment threads (a few in particular stating they refused to participate in spaces which lacked a journalistic presence), while others considered any journalist partaking in comment threads as a hindrance to what they saw as space designated for user discussion (2010, p. 137).

As Robinson's study shows, instances where users are invited to comment on the way user participation is facilitated reveal a complex mix of attitudes in regard to how users see the roles of journalism and of users in the online news environment. In this study, the user responses to Stuff.co.nz's crowdsourcing project on MPs expenses (discussed earlier in Chapter Three) show that while some users were excited to be given the opportunity to participate in crowdsourcing activities, others viewed such work as the domain of

professional journalists and, therefore, criticised the value of the project. Stuff.co.nz's blog post titled "Crowdsourcing MP expenses" described crowdsourcing as "a great way to quickly sift through a lot of information and get you – the reader – involved in creating the news" (Schwarz, 2010).⁶² A number of users responded in the comments field with both cynicism and criticism, questioning the rhetoric which suggested that users could become honorary journalists through their involvement in the project. One questioned the notion that Stuff.co.nz were doing something novel and exciting by hinting that crowdsourcing was simply an easy way to get users to do the ground work for journalists: "Innovative... Or lazy?" (*Undecided* #1). Another user suggested that participants in the project should be compensated for their work: "Great. But how about you pay us for it?" (*Tom* #11). However, the comments were not all critical of the crowdsourcing project. Many users appeared delighted that they were given the opportunity to take part in the project, evident in comments like this one: "Nice work! Such an interesting thing for people to be able to look at. I think its [*sic*] very innovative, and can appreciate how much work went into it!" (*bridge* #16).

The differing attitudes held by users regarding their participation in online spaces illustrates that facilitating user engagement is not a straightforward task. Despite the various methods implemented to maintain user interest (including progress bars to encourage users to feel as if they have a shared goal and displaying lists of the top performing volunteers⁶³), both the crowdsourcing project looked at in this study, from Stuff.co.nz, and the project it was based on at Guardian.co.uk, remain unfinished at present. The incomplete state of these projects indicates the difficulty of harnessing audience attention and maintaining their interest in contributing, especially because audience members are not accustomed to taking an active role in the news production process as news organisations have not traditionally invited them to do so. Muthukumaraswamy notes that a recurring theme across crowdsourcing projects is that "the crowd contributes because it has sufficient passion or interest in an issue, or perhaps, adequate stake in it" (2010, p. 60).

⁶² As done in the previous chapter, the user comments mentioned in this paragraph were posted in response to the blog post referenced in this sentence.

⁶³ These devices were among a number outlined by Simon Ellison, developer of Guardian.co.uk's MPs expenses crowdsourcing project, which were implemented in order to make the project more enjoyable for users. In addition to those mentioned above, Ellison also noted that adding mugshots of MPs adds an element of fun to the crowdsourcing task: "You've got this big smiling face looking at you while you're digging through their expenses" (quoted in Andersen, 2009, para. 11).

However, this point is not just confined to crowdsourcing; all forms of user participation in online news sites require users to be invested in whatever type of interaction or contribution they are carrying out. In order to generate the levels of user contributions necessary to sustain UGC sections, the language employed by online newspapers encourages users to feel that they have some degree of investment in the issue or event at hand. But by using rhetorical strategies such as addressing users as “you” or the user community as “we” or “us” and adopting “Have your say” questions which frame issues in polarised terms, online newspapers risk projecting forms of public opinion which are heavily shaped by the eye-catching yet oversimplified methods through which the content is generated. While it may be necessary to use attention-grabbing techniques to encourage the audience to take part in participatory activities, this should not be at the expense of adequately addressing and engaging with public concerns.

Conclusion

Through examining a selection of online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand, this thesis has identified a number of deficiencies in the way user participation is facilitated by online newspapers. These findings not only relate to and are consistent with the results of other studies concerned with online news media and user engagement but advance our understanding of an area which has received little attention to date. By comparing what kinds of features make up the interactive menus of online newspaper sites and how these are facilitated alongside the enthusiastic egalitarian and democratic rhetoric expressed in such sites, this thesis has demonstrated that users are not imparted with the degree of agency suggested by that rhetoric. The findings of this study suggest that online newspapers’ facilitation of user engagement is shaped by the professional culture of journalism which drives news outlets to retain control of the framing and representation of UGC. The limited nature of the interactive menus provided, both in terms of the features presented and the way they were structured and facilitated, shows a degree of reluctance on the part of online newspaper producers to make effective use of the communicative potentials provided by the online medium.

A limitation of current research into online news media and user engagement is that studies have predominantly focused on investigating how news producers understand and value interactivity and user participation in their sites. Such studies have conducted research interviews with site producers, observed newsroom practices and analysed the moderation policies and framing of UGC in the sites (as this study has done) to understand the factors influencing the structure and facilitation of interactive features and UGC initiatives in online news environments. In order to complement the existing research, future examinations of the participatory opportunities provided by online news media could benefit greatly from more exploration of user perspectives to work towards a better understanding of how users understand their role in the online news environment and how they evaluate the interactive opportunities presented. As noted in the previous sections, a few studies have highlighted low levels of user involvement in the more active forms of participation on online news sites (Bergström, 2008; Thurman, 2008; Ye & Li, 2006). Through examining the user comments posted on the online newspapers included in this study, this thesis has indicated that the attitudes held by users about their position in the online news environment are complex and varied. However, there is clearly scope for further investigation into audience perspectives in this area in both the context(s) of Australia and/or New Zealand and other geographic locations. Future research could explore the differing degrees of user interest in the participatory opportunities provided by online news media (ranging from those who are keen to be active content creators to those who enjoy voting in sidebar polls and those who find interactivity a hindrance to the “serious” business of news) and also highlight the reasons for which they choose to participate or decline to participate in the features and initiatives on offer. But in light of the existing research and the findings of this study, it is possible to articulate a number of conclusions about the directions online newspapers should take if they are to facilitate user engagement in more effective and civically responsible ways.

Online newspaper producers should view the technological capabilities afforded to facilitate user engagement in the online environment as an opportunity for change rather than a problem to be dealt with. Many online newspapers seem to adopt a kind of “tick-box” approach towards interactivity and UGC, one that appears on paper to be providing a range of opportunities for user participation but in practice fails to ensure such features and initiatives

are adequately structured and facilitated. While it is rather optimistic to expect news producers to be prepared to embrace a “pro-am” style of collaborative news production (and there might be low levels of user interest in this anyway), there are potential options which could be implemented in order to fulfil some of the projected rhetoric of audience empowerment. Such changes would not require journalism to abandon its professional standards and gatekeeping role which help maintain a sense of authority and credibility. However, these would involve altering work routines and roles so as to devote more effort towards illustrating that online newspaper staff are engaged with audiences and their concerns. The following paragraphs outline a number of suggested initiatives for online newspaper producers who wish to improve the channels of communication between newspaper staff and users and to more effectively facilitate and represent the discussions taking place on their sites.

In order to demonstrate that online newspaper staff are “listening”, opportunities for engagement with users and their concerns must be prioritised as part of journalists’ daily work routines. Although the potential for social media spaces to provide opportunities for user expression and engagement is promising, we must be wary of viewing enthusiasm for social media on the part of news organisations and the appointment of social media editors as an indication that news producers are truly engaged and, therefore, responsive to user concerns. Regular journalists (including editors) need to do more than simply say that they are listening; they need to prove that they are listening by appearing responsive and accountable to users and their concerns. As argued earlier in the chapter, the active involvement of journalists in threads of user discussion has potential advantages for both public discourse and for journalism (Ye & Li, 2006, p. 55). As discussed previously, the involvement of journalists and editors in the comment threads of Guardian.co.uk does not necessarily put an end to some of the messy realities of online discussion, but their presence and contributions to the debate provides both a sense of accountability and evidence of the paper’s ongoing commitment to engaging with users in conversations about the news.

Therefore, as well as reading the comments posted by users in discussion spaces, journalists need to contribute towards these unfolding conversations by posting comments themselves

and in some cases, acting on the user concerns expressed (whether disabling the comments on particular articles because of complaints regarding the discriminatory responses received or following up a potentially newsworthy story suggested in a user comment). This recommendation is echoed in the sentiment expressed by a Stuff.co.nz user who argued that in order to show that the editorial staff are in touch with the concerns of their user base, they “really need to engage with the comments left and so on rather than merely enabling them” (L #33).⁶⁴ Journalists’ work routines also need to accommodate time for receiving and replying to emails sent in by users with legitimate matters of interest or concern, with byline email links a basic prerequisite for supporting this kind of communication. In order to safeguard against the anxieties associated with interacting with users, online newspapers would need to establish a set of official guidelines for journalists entering into discussion with users via email or in comment threads; such guidelines would help to maintain professional boundaries and uphold the paper’s reputation while still allowing journalists to appear responsive and engaged with users.

Online newspapers hosting interpersonal interactivity in their sites must focus on facilitating discussion effectively and reflecting on public opinion in more nuanced and productive ways than that of current practice. While the internet may have enabled online newspaper journalists to stage public debate on a wider scale than possible with offline publications, this does not mean that discussion is being facilitated effectively as shown in the case study of NZHerald.co.nz’s Your Views. Discussion spaces need to be viewed not simply as repositories for user opinion which can be summarised to create stories which infer public opinion but as potential avenues for journalists to effectively facilitate and engage in a discussion with the user community. As discussed earlier in the chapter, online discussion is often unpredictable and fragmented and, therefore, the guidelines and processes of moderating content should not necessarily seek to iron out the elements which users find lively, interesting and enjoyable for engaging in debate. However, while light-touch moderation policies have the benefit of getting pre-moderated content through quickly, with as little interruption to the conversation flow as possible, moderators should always strive to sustain meaningful, inclusive and representative

⁶⁴ This comment was submitted in response to McDonald’s blog post titled “Stuff and social media” (2010).

discussions by denying comments which contain unnecessarily antagonistic or discriminatory remarks.

Additionally, as explained towards the end of Chapter Four, online newspaper producers wishing to adopt “Have your say”-style features like Your Views to effectively support civic engagement must refrain from representing complex issues as having two opposing “sides” as this encourages a polarised environment for discussion where civility, engagement with others’ viewpoints and reasoned argumentation is threatened. In order to avoid creating the conditions for an “us” versus “them” scenario, the questions/topics posed must be framed more openly to account for the complex and multi-faceted nature of the issues covered. Similarly, news producers would also need to decrease the tendency towards writing articles which draw on user contributions from “Have your says” to make generalised conclusions about how the user community “feels” about an issue because such projections often extend the polarisation of viewpoints by failing to account for the nuances within such debates. Users must be also be given the chance to provide a stronger contribution to the agenda for discussion by being able to suggest issues to be covered, as is standard practice on BBC.co.uk’s “Have Your Say” (2010).⁶⁵

Online newspaper producers must also recognise the differing user attitudes and expectations towards interactivity and participation and try to cater for these appropriately. As the analysis carried out in this thesis has shown, not all users are interested in contributing articles or multimedia material, with many preferring to discuss news content and issues with others or simply read the articles. Additionally, users do not all require the same degree of responsiveness and interaction with newspaper staff. There are also clear divisions between those who view the “serious” business of news facts as paramount, and interactivity (specifically the use of social media) as a distraction from this, and others who appreciate the opportunities for user participation as productive and enjoyable elements of online news

⁶⁵ The proposed changes to the “Have your say” model noted here were just some of those suggested at the end of Chapter Five in the case study of Your Views, which also included establishing clear limits in place about when or why discussion would be closed so users could be aware of the lifespan of each unfolding discussion thread. However, this discussion also concluded that even with such changes, the “Have your say” model is problematic as it has an inbuilt structure which leads it to act more as a depository for opinion than a forum which assists users in coming together towards some level of mutual understanding.

consumption. Such divisions are evident in these two user comments posted consecutively in response to a From the Newsroom blog post (McDonald, 2010):

Stop asking for everyone's opinion on everything, back off on the social media fad and start getting some serious, experienced opinion and analysis published. Raise the bar instead of dragging everyone down with "What do you think?" news and opinions. Save the social media stuff for the blogs, and keep the news the news. (*Chris #12*)

If I were you I'd utilize the daily viewers to your advantage and get them involved more. It makes for much more interesting reading and opinions and ideas get shared around among readers rather than reading only what the journalist has to say. (*Bobby #13*)

Online newspaper producers need to strike the right balance in order to serve the differing needs of users. In order to retain credibility with users who value thorough and factual news reporting, newspaper staff must continue to provide well researched news content in order to inform the public about developments, issues and events happening in the wider societal context. However, online newspaper producers must simultaneously offer interactive options to connect with those users who want to engage in discussion about the issues raised in news coverage, utilising the communicative benefits of byline email links, social media and editorial blogs.

Editorial blogs represent one type of initiative which can make a significant contribution towards increasing the media literacy skills of citizens through supporting an ongoing dialogue around news making, editorial decisions and moderation processes. As evident from the case study of Stuff.co.nz's From the Newsroom, editorial blogs are not without potential flaws; often blog posts serve as a promotional vehicle for site developments or events rather than explaining how decisions are made and offer no guarantee that the journalists or editors posting will choose to engage in comment threads.⁶⁶ However, editorial blogs are vital because they present an opportunity for online newspaper staff to inform users about how news production processes work and how editorial decisions arise and in the resulting comment threads, provide a space for the negotiation of relations between news producers

⁶⁶ Editorial blogs are also more suited to national or regional online newspapers than smaller community-based papers as they are more likely to have large numbers of staff and more complex editorial guidelines.

and users and their respective, mutually constitutive identities. News media are a vital component of healthy functioning democracies but they need to implement initiatives like editorial blogs in order to offer users the tools to become more media literate about the processes shaping news delivery and presentation. By illuminating these processes in blog posts, inviting users to give feedback and engaging within comment threads, online news producers can encourage an enhanced level of understanding about how news media operate and also provide a sense of accountability and transparency which could potentially counter the feelings of distrust and scepticism held by many citizens in relation to news reporting.

By closely examining how a number of online newspapers are facilitating user participation in their sites and situating these findings amongst wider scholarship regarding interactivity, citizenship and new media, this thesis has demonstrated that online newspapers appear to be reproducing the power relations associated with the traditional journalistic culture developed in print traditions which means that users are not as empowered as the celebratory and egalitarian rhetoric suggests. While the internet's many-to-many mode of communication has enabled online newspapers to offer users an unprecedented level of participation in the news consumption process, news producers continue to adhere to the norms of traditional journalism practice which are not naturally conducive to the effective structure and facilitation of interactive features and UGC initiatives. The research and analytical methods used in this thesis have been able to highlight both the standardised menu of interactivity offered by the online newspapers studied and the democratic potential of such spaces by examining how particular features were structured and facilitated and the discourses and rhetoric surrounding them. By addressing the facilitation of user engagement by online newspapers from Australia and New Zealand, this thesis has explored the interactive practices of news media in two countries which have so far received little academic attention. This thesis has not only identified various deficiencies in the provision of opportunities for user engagement but has also proposed a number of potential directions for change that could be implemented by online news producers wishing to more effectively facilitate citizen participation in the news environment.

Online newspaper producers seeking to increase the opportunities for civic engagement and promote productive and meaningful discussion amongst citizens and journalists must move

beyond viewing interactivity and user engagement as a necessary evil; one which poses a threat to their professional sensibilities but must nevertheless be provided in order to stay current and appear responsive to the audience in the online environment. If such perceptions about the value and potential of opportunities for user participation continue to dominate, the degree of agency imparted to users will most likely remain limited. Additionally, UGC will continue to be drawn on to construct projections of “the voice of the people” which serve more to create and maintain an imagined community of readers than acknowledge the potential for users to act as citizen journalists. Online newspaper producers who wish to deliver on some of the promises implied by the celebratory rhetoric surrounding the spaces of user participation need to provide features and initiatives which support a more open and engaged dialogue about the news and news making processes. If this kind of dialogue is supported, and if features and initiatives for user participation are facilitated effectively to foster greater engagement with the news, online newspapers will perform in more civically responsible and accountable ways which will enable them to support users to develop vital media literacy skills and engage in richer modes of active citizenship.

Appendix 1

The selection of Your Views questions/topics analysed

Questions/topics	Phrasing of question/topic
1. Do you think a male brothel would be successful?	Closed
2. Is 'raunch culture' damaging to young girls?	Closed
3. Should there be stricter controls on liquor licences?	Closed
4. Which TV news do you prefer?	Open-ended
5. Are longboarders idiots?	Closed
6. Are prenup agreements a good idea? Would you get one?	Closed
7. Should the adult blood-alcohol limit drop to 50mg per 100ml?	Closed
8. Can Labour win next year's election?	Closed
9. Should only New Zealanders be able to buy NZ land?	Closed
10. Should employers give staff more holidays?	Closed
11. Are the laws around bus lanes too confusing?	Closed
12. Should the sale of high-powered air rifles be restricted?	Closed
13. Is there a referee bias against the Springboks?	Closed
14. Should oil drilling be allowed in the Raukumara Basin?	Closed
15. Will you be getting an iPad?	Closed
16. Should voluntary euthanasia be legalised?	Closed
17. Is NZ a rip-off?	Closed
18. Do you still use a cellphone while driving?	Closed
19. Is the mining decision a backdown for John Key and the National Government?	Closed
20. Should GST be scrapped on healthy foods?	Closed
21. Should employers be able to keep unions out of the workplace?	Closed
22. Do you want to see more candidates in the Super City election?	Closed
23. Would you still be interested in seeing a Mel Gibson movie?	Closed
24. Are the Warriors unfairly targeted by NRL refs?	Closed
25. Has the 'Working for Families' scheme been a success?	Closed
26. Should defensive driving courses be mandatory for new drivers?	Closed
27. Have university and polytech fees made study unreachable for many?	Closed
28. Should it be law for skiers to wear a helmet?	Closed
29. Should the drug P be decriminalised?	Closed
30. Should we arm police?	Closed
31. Does NZ need a supermarket code of conduct to monitor profit margins?	Closed
32. Are the Queens Wharf sheds worth saving?	Closed
33. Should Andy Haden have remained a Rugby World Cup ambassador?	Closed
34. Can the .xxx domain name clean up the internet?	Closed
35. Your memories and stories of Moko the dolphin	Open-ended

36. Should NZ contribute to a refugee processing centre in East Timor?	Closed
37. Which team deserves to win the Fifa World Cup final?	Open-ended
38. Which country has the best team going into the Tri-Nations?	Open-ended
39. Will proposed law changes reduce knife crimes?	Closed
40. Should it be illegal to give under-18s alcohol without parental consent?	Closed
41. Should abortion be legal on request for women up to 24 weeks into a pregnancy?	Closed
42. Do MPs deserve a pay rise in return for losing some travel perks?	Closed
43. Is John Banks' idea of hosting the Olympic Games realistic?	Closed
44. Will the Emissions Trading Scheme have a negative impact on the economy?	Closed
45. Should FIFA embrace goal-line technology for football games?	Closed
46. Should ultra-skinny models be banned from NZ catwalks?	Closed
47. Which of the three remaining teams will win the Fifa World Cup?	Open-ended
48. Will the Warriors miss Steve Price on the field?	Closed
49. Should NZ prisons be smoke-free?	Closed
50. Should the ban on commercial whaling be lifted?	Closed
51. England out of the World Cup: Who is to blame?	Open-ended
52. Would Len Brown make a good Super City Mayor?	Closed
53. Should John Key have apologised to the Chinese delegation?	Closed
54. Should school staff be allowed to search students for weapons and drugs?	Closed
55. All Whites out of World Cup: How did they do?	Open-ended
56. What mistakes did Kevin Rudd make as Australian PM?	Open-ended
57. Is breath-testing school rugby spectators a good idea?	Closed
58. Should Asian tourists be warned about crime before visiting NZ?	Closed
59. Is it fair for NZ universities to tighten their academic entry criteria?	Closed
60. Should NZ's foreshore and seabed be put into 'public domain' ownership?	Closed
61. Should Auckland City Council spend \$120,000 on a history of itself?	Closed
62. Should Israel Dagg be the first choice All Black fullback?	Closed
63. Can the All Whites beat Paraguay?	Closed
64. What are your biggest frustrations with Kiwi drivers?	Open-ended
65. Your messages of support for the All Whites	Open-ended
66. Is the Manurewa Cosmopolitan Club within its rights enforcing a headwear ban?	Closed
67. Would an All Whites win justify a public holiday?	Closed
68. Who is your pick to win the 2010 Football World Cup?	Open-ended
69. Is NZ doing enough to free Ady Gil skipper Pete Bethune?	Closed
70. Should the vuvuzela horns be banned from World Cup venues?	Closed
71. Was Goff right to demote Jones, Carter and Ririnui?	Closed
72. Would you like to see Sonny Bill Williams as an All Black?	Closed

73. Would you feel comfortable purchasing items with your cellphone?	Closed
74. Should all government ministers forfeit their credit cards?	Closed
75. Is Google evil?	Closed
76. Is NZ really the world's most peaceful country?	Closed
77. Is trying to recover the Versalko prostitute money a good idea for ASB?	Closed
78. Should Michael Laws stand as Super City Mayor?	Closed
79. Do NZ drivers take too many risks?	Closed
80. How would you stop the Gulf of Mexico oil spill?	Open-ended
81. Do you have confidence in the 2010 All Black selections?	Closed
82. Are shipping containers suitable to house prisoners?	Closed
83. What advice do you have for making The Hobbit? Who should direct?	Open-ended
84. What do you dislike about going to the cinema?	Open-ended
85. Your tributes to filmmaker Merata Mita	Open-ended
86. Is Paula Bennett guilty of breaching privacy rights?	Closed
87. Is the new prison at Mt Eden too big and too ugly?	Closed
88. Should breastfeeding mums have to feed their babies in a restaurant's toilet?	Closed
89. Is smashing pokie machines a good idea or willful vandalism?	Closed
90. Should employees be compensated for missing public holidays?	Closed
91. Do you support the smoking ban at Auckland Zoo?	Closed
92. Will the 'three strikes' law lower the crime rate?	Closed
93. Your Views on the Duchess of York bribe scandal	Open-ended
94. What does the government need to do in the war against P?	Open-ended
95. Will the Super City be a positive development for the Auckland region?	Closed
96. Should we be concerned about NZ farms in overseas ownership?	Closed
97. How will the 2010 Budget affect you?	Open-ended
98. What do you think of Mark Bryers' sentence?	Open-ended
99. What needs to be done about youth drinking?	Open-ended
100. Is a powhiri an appropriate welcome for Mickey and Minnie Mouse?	Closed

Note. The questions/topics examined were published during the period May 22-August 5 2010.

Source: Your Views Archive. (2010). *NZHerald.co.nz*. Retrieved from http://www.nzherald.co.nz/your-views/news/archive.cfm?c_id=1501154

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