News on the Net: A Critical Analysis of The Potential of Online Alternative Journalism to Challenge The Dominance of Mainstream News Media

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Abstract Traditional media and provision of news and current affairs is in trouble. The newspaper is perhaps in its death throes, losing both its advertisers and audience to the internet, while television is failing to supplement its ageing audience with a new generation of viewers. Accompanying this shift are concerns that traditional media is not satisfying a perceived need for a more pluralist and inclusive media sphere with anticipated changes to cross-media legislation likely to further concentrate an already immensely concentrated Australian media. While traditional news outlets are co-opting the internet to either increase or maintain their audience share, alternative media, that is 'those media produced outside the forces of market economics and the state' (Atton 2002: 53, Forde 2004), have a significant online presence. This has fostered claims that online news and current affairs have the potential to transform social and political communication and to enhance democracy and citizenship. Such claims revolve around the feature of audience participation, the interactivity of the medium encouraging a shift from users to producers and the diminished or absent role of gatekeeper allowing uncensored flows of information and instantaneity of transmission.

It seems important and timely, given a changing social, political and media environment, to examine claims that the internet, and more specifically online alternative journalism, can contest what Nick Couldry, citing Bourdieu, argues is the power of a massively concentrated media to construct reality (2002: 24, 29).

Keywords journalism, gatekeeping, interactivity, citizenship

Democratic Yearnings

There is growing concern in Australia as in other western societies that the public sphere as a space where 'the people' come together and participate in inclusive discussion and debate is in decline. While proponents and critics alike have long recognised the public sphere as an idealised concept, it serves as a strategic 'benchmark' for the state of public communication: current concern is that a long-established trend towards commercialisation, trivialisation and a highly concentrated media ownership is accelerating.

A touchstone of this is the press, the public sphere's 'pre-eminent institution' whose distance from state and civil society allowed it the independence it needed to provide citizens with disinterested political information (Habermas, 1989). Max Suich, a past editor-in-chief of Fairfax, wrote during his coverage of the 2005 Australian federal election campaign that the 'news pages of our newspapers are now, mostly, an unobstructed conduit of "news events" and official statements - both from government and opposition'. The emerging trend, he argues, of 'sexed up' opinion articles from

"look-at-me" columnists and commentators is replacing serious journalism (Suich, 2005).

Suich's alarm that Australia's media deliver little more than the official line is echoed by Robert Manne (2005, 97). He argues that Rupert Murdoch, whose company News Ltd. owns almost 70 percent of Australian newspapers, has an audience reach that extends beyond his newspapers, to setting the agenda for commercial talkback radio helping 'determine the way millions of Australians determine their world'. In a survey conducted by Roy Morgan Research for *The Reader* in August 2004, 73 per cent of journalists surveyed said that media proprietors use their outlets to 'push their own business and or political interests to influence the national debate'. Reinforcing these findings is Reporters Sans Frontieres 2004 press freedom index that rates 167 countries noting Australia's decline from 12th position to 41st place in just 2 years (Sydney Morning Herald, 2004). Not surprisingly, the report is concerned with anticipated changes to cross-media ownership laws arguing that easing these restrictions poses a threat to press freedom and diversity.

The internet features as part of this debate with those clamouring for relaxation of cross-media rules offering the internet's reach and diversity as compensation and reason for change. Its proponents call the internet a counter public sphere (Salazar 2003, 19) that has the potential to revitalise citizen-based democracy and to reinvigorate a compromised media (Meikle, 2004, 85). It is claimed that online alternative journalism is transforming traditional models of journalism to imagine a more democratic community based on equality, participation, pluralism and empowerment.

But how significant are these shifts and how realistic is it to think that online alternative journalism can challenge the might of entrenched media interests? This paper will focus on the promise of alternative journalism or 'native reporting' (Atton, 2002), 'citizen's media' (Rodriguez, 2001), 'grassroots journalism' (Gillmor, 2004) and claims about its potential to transform social and political communication. It will do so by examining claims about audience participation, interactivity, the role of the gatekeeper and the discourses that accompany them.

First, I will begin with a claim of my own: that investigation of the internet's potential to enhance diversity and independence must begin with political economy.

The Need for A Political Economy Perspective

'The primary task of mass communications research is not to explore the meanings of media messages but to analyse the social processes through which they are constructed and interpreted and the contexts and pressures that shape and constrain these constructions', argued Golding and Murdock in 1978 (Golding & Murdock 1978, 72). If their argument provoked widespread criticism in the 70s and 80s – with media studies working to disentangle itself from reductionist Marxist political-economic assumptions – emerging reconsiderations of the importance of the political economy of media in the 90s ran into new contenders as to research priorities – from the

focus on digital technology. Yet this political economy is imperative given the way 'civic utopianism' about the net has aligned itself with the interests of media owners, neo-liberal governments and agendas, and alternative social and political organisations from the 'left' of politics. These groups are often in furious agreement that convergence, and the new tools it makes available to 'ordinary' people, are enabling a 'producer revolution among the formerly consuming classes in media' (Rosen 2005, 54). It is this kind of rhetoric that pinpoints what Burchell (2003, 12) claims is a 'kind of wide-eyed civic utopianism that sees the internet as heralding a new renaissance of 'participatory democracy' and as such needs to be considered carefully.

Political economy examines the relationship between communication systems and society focusing particularly on the influence of economic factors as well as considering issues of ownership and government policy and their impact on the production, distribution and consumption of communications (McChesney 2000, 110). A number of communications theorists (Mansell 2004, Garnham 1996, McChesney 2000) are calling for a renewed interest in political economy although it has been broadly criticised for its too narrow approach and accused of reducing 'complex social processes to economic questions' (Sinclair 2006, 19). With this criticism in mind, a non-reductionist political economy of the internet is needed that recognises communication as not superstructural or symptomatic but nevertheless understood as having an integral role in forming and maintaining particular kinds of economic arrangements (Hamelink, 1996). Understanding the 'social embeddedness of technology … avoids overly deterministic arguments: instrumentalist, technological determinist, and social determinist … to take into account the complex interplay between multiple constituting elements' (Dahlberg 2004, 2).

Robyn Mansell (2004, 96, 97) writes that while there has been 'interest in new media from almost every possible social science perspective the political economy of new media has been relatively neglected'. Mansell asks that rather than accept power distribution as a given 'a more holistic account of the dynamics of new media production and consumption' will expose the 'way in which articulations of power are shaping the new media landscape'.

The present political economy of the media ensures that wealthy mainstream media outlets are best positioned to invest in the internet (Turner 2005, 140). Recently released figures tell the story: *Ninemsn*, borne of a merger between Microsoft and the Nine network, is Australia's most visited website while News Interactive, News Ltd's online newspapers, is the fifth most popular site. ABC Online comes in at tenth position (Goggin 2006, 267). Compounding *Ninemsn's* ascendancy are downloads that exceed 2 million per month with a large percentage of these downloads being Channel Nine's nightly news (McIntyre, 2005). The internet has provided opportunities for News Ltd. and PBL to significantly expand existing media interests as well as to address the drift of audiences and advertising away from print and electronic media, the internet extending their dominance rather than curtailing it. Papacharissi's (2002, 20) warning that new technologies 'cannot single-handedly transform a political and economic structure that has thrived for

centuries', is borne out by figures cited by Alan Kohler (2006) in *The Age*: 'Three main traditional media companies, control more than 70 per cent of the internet news sites – Fairfax (35 per cent), News Corp (25 per cent) and PBL (13 per cent)'.

The lack of interest in the 'social and economic dynamics of the production and the consumption of new media' that Mansell identifies is likely due in part to the sense of abundance afforded by the internet that Communications Minister, Helen Coonan claims "is resulting in the emergence of new players, new content, new services and new platforms" (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2006). Sherman Young points out a number of worrying trends, however: the end of free web-hosting with fees increasing proportionate to the popularity of the site, and subscription, an increasingly frequent demand from the online corporate world, as well as the growing expense to small but popular websites struggling to pay costs of web-hosting and bandwidth services. Young predicts that the cost of searching will rise with search engines giving premium placement in search lists in return for premium payments creating a major impediment to smaller, independent websites. Another barrier to 'non-commercial voices' are pricing policies that encourage consumption rather than production. Finally, a highly concentrated Internet Service Provider (ISP) ownership that attempt control through home pages and portals will more hinder than encourage diversity (Young 2002, 78-79), confirming Mansell's (2004, 97, 98) thesis that scarcity, more associated with broadcast media than new media, is reproduced as a result of power relations.

Alternative media that emerged in the munificence now associated with the early days of the internet enabling new forms of news production, dissemination and reception to flourish is under some threat. What was once a non-commercial medium that hosted a 'gift culture economy' is now highly commodified, a potentially hugely profitable borderless space where existing power and influence is likely to be duplicated. Indeed, market research conducted by AdRelevance, part of the Nielsen//NetRatings group, found that the online advertising market in Australia grew to $620 million in December 2005, translating into 961 million online display ad impressions in October and peaking at 1.5 billion in December (Real Estate, Finance and Travel – Key Leaders of Australian Online Advertising Growth 2006). Young's (2002, 80) anticipation that the 'internet is ripe to propagate consumer culture' was prophetic indeed. Nevertheless, expectations that the internet would provide new spaces hosting content, discussion and debate not found in traditional media, have been realised. If we are, however, to ignore the forces that dominate existing media then it is likely we will see these virtual spaces diminish in number if not disappear altogether.

The political economy approach then is crucial to any discussion of media, traditional, new or as is more often the case, convergent. McChesney (2000, 109, 110) contends that political economy tradition can help analyse 'the most pressing communication issues of our era'.

The Not So Alternative Public Sphere

Alternative media is so often hailed as having the potential to enhance democracy and citizenship that it has become something of a catchcry. The mythology that democratic potentials are inherent to the medium 'is an easy lapse into technological determinism' (Redden, Caldwell, Nguyen 2003, 71). There is no doubting the many opportunities made available by the internet: access to information is unprecedented, alternative content abounds, user-generated content is growing and all manner of communities flourish online. However, celebratory accounts of the internet as a network that guarantees an enriched public sphere fail to consider the 'economic, political, and cultural forces' that shape the deployment of communications technologies (Jenkins & Thorburn 2003, 5). Furthermore, claims of politically transformed individuals and communities ignore the lack of political engagement identified by social researcher, Hugh Mackay (2005) who says that Australians are more interested in lifestyle programs than news and current affairs. Such indifference tends to suggest that 'a change in political will is more important than a change in the technologies of communication' (May 2002, 92). The apathy Mackay talks of is a significant challenge to the conception of an alternative public sphere that imagines reciprocity, engagement and active citizen participation.

While the notion of active participation as a beneficial attribute of media usage is important, it is worth remembering that active participation, while dependent on access, needs to move beyond that to issues of literacy. This is particularly significant when participation in an online context demands high levels of social, cultural and critical literacy if citizens are to become 'produsers' (Bruns 2004, 184) of alternative news. 'Becoming the media' is often the preserve of the privileged well-educated elite who recognize the tools and have the know-how to deploy them, a reminder that the virtual public sphere is much like its bourgeoisie ancestor, 'not fair, representative and egalitarian' (Papacharissi 2002, 14). It may be that issues of marginalised groups achieve more prominence in alternative media, but as in mainstream media, that discussion will be mediated by articulate spokespersons rather than those directly affected. One such example is the website *Online Opinion* that claims a 'democratic space' for all citizens by allowing a wide spectrum of views to be published. Participation of 'ordinary people' is for the most part, restricted to response and while there is a guarantee that all comments will be published as long as contributors are civil, participation is otherwise as limited as 'letter to the editor' forums in mainstream newspapers. While the internet does provide a space for more participation the social distribution of cultural capital or know-how that discriminates against full participation rather than ameliorated is reproduced online.

The promise of the internet as a domain to foster dialogue and produce the spirited debate that emerges from a diversity of opinion is also lost when conversations are limited to those who share similar world-views, risking a 'ghettoization of political opinion' (May 2003, 93). Rather than the imagined 'technologies of freedom' (Pool, 1983), Meredyth & Thomas (2002, 5) warn

that the 'majoritarian domination and faction' that is part of liberal democracy may be exacerbated by new technology rather than be removed by it.

Getting Alternative Online

The democratic promise of the internet has been in circulation since its earliest inception echoing the optimism often associated with new forms of media with online alternative media emerging from and responding to a perceived need for a more pluralist and inclusive media with claims that it can effect social, political and cultural change. There are contesting definitions of alternative media. Atton (2003) sees journalistic practice as emerging from and reflecting the day-to-day lives of ordinary citizens, Couldry (2001, 7) defines it as 'practices of symbolic production … which contest the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions' whereas Downing's (2001) definition refers to 'radical media'. In following Rodriguez's definition, Atton & Couldry (2003, 580) agree that whatever terms are used what is 'at stake in the whole range of alternative media practices is the issue of *citizenship*'.

An example of alternative media that tests out the scope of definitions of alternative media is the 'brash and noisy upstart' (Turner 2005, 144), *Crikey*, an online news organization that delivers to your inbox (for a fee), what it claims is alternative news. Yet, it is very much a part of the market, indeed represents it, in its advocacy for shareholders. *Crikey* asserts its contribution to the democratic process with its aim "to point out theft, corruption, deception and collusion" calling big business, including media entities, to account often publishing stories that the mainstream either skirt around or avoid. *Crikey* has however been an outstanding success that 'In 2004 had about fifteen thousand subscribers to its daily bulletins, 140 of them with parliamentary addresses' (Turner 2005, 143); these numbers fade into insignificance when comparisons are made to Murdoch's *Herald-Sun* that sells more than 4 million newspapers each week.

Also testing the definition of alternative are 'alternative' news websites, including *Crikey* and *Online Opinion*, that are supported by sponsorship and advertising. Margo Kingston's much- heralded *Webdiary* survived only a short time following Kingston's split from the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The financial costs that were apparently a significant factor in *Webdiary's* failure to stand alone have now been addressed (Kingston is no longer at the helm) by selling advertising space to support its activities. Atton's (2002) wider definition of alternative media, as media which is produced outside the forces of market economics is somewhat problematic. However wishful, markets and market forces are a reality of capitalism. Indeed, what is there that exists outside a market. A community media model, as proposed by Carpentier et al, provides a useful way of thinking about the intersection of alternative media and the market place. They argue that though community media have relationships with the market 'often for reasons of survival', this does not remove their 'potentially destablizing and deterritorialising' possibilities (Carpentier et al. cited in Meadows et al. 2006). Media in this model are then positioned to 'act

as a significant conduit for relations among communities, the state and the market' (Meadows et al. 2006).

Rupert Murdoch, who well understands marketplace realities, says there is a "revolution in the way young people are accessing news … they want their news on demand … they want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it" (Coultan, 2005). The increasing number of people turning to the internet for news and current affairs indicates a growing dissatisfaction with traditional formats. New platforms though do not necessarily mean new content. While people are attracted to the internet they do not travel far accessing their news from traditional providers. Surveys of hit-rates find that mainstream media organisations receive the most visitors (Turner 2005, 139) suggesting the shift of audiences to the internet signals more a desire to customise the media experience rather than a search for alternative content.

What is often forgotten in the buzz surrounding online alternative media is that alternative media is nothing new, though it never sat on newsstands next to the *Herald-Sun* at your newsagent. Like today, you had to go looking for it. It's interesting then, that virtual spaces are identified as more liberating than the traditions of dissent already captured in community media. Whether offline or virtual, forums that dissent from the mainstream, encourage free speech, are pluralist and inclusive, are likely to enjoy the patronage of the already converted rather than attract new audiences. There are many claims made about the active, productive, empowered audience of online media who are portrayed as wildly different from the Frankfurt School's passive consumers of Ezensberger's (1974) 'mind industry'. Yet, while there are a number of assumptions made about the 'internet audience' as a whole, very little is understood about that part of the audience who seek out alternative media.

Build It and They Will Come

Interactivity is the sine qua non of empowerment online, enabling voices to be heard, contributing to diversity and enriching democracy. Yet, the mantra of interactivity needs closer examination. There are questions to be asked of the quality of interactive when many claims to it resemble little more that a one-way response to articles or postings rather than the two-way conversation imagined. Is online interactivity any more democratic than talkback radio that allows a range of people to express a view or the much-lauded interactivity now boasted by reality television? How interactive is the online alternative when compared to newspapers that after a slow start have co-opted the interactive formula appealing to a more youthful audience who are invited to have their say though often on a nominated topic. Does interactivity create a democracy-seeking politicised audience? Not according to Bimber (1998, 2), who argues that flows of information and instantaneous access do not necessarily produce more informed citizens. Indeed, he raises the point that haste produces errors and leaves little time for reflection with few of us able to 'swim the rapids' of information.

Much of the 'The Gates Come Down' (Gillmor 2004) rhetoric surrounding democratized flows of information relate also to the perception that its flow is uncensored. The trope is that the role of gatekeeper is limited if not vanquished in the online world of communication, creating 'pure avenues of information pathways' (Gitelman & Pingree 2003, 4). Gatekeepers, or "knowledge elites" (Lippmann cited in Bimber 1998, 7) are surely needed to filter and interpret 'to reduce complexity, help users make judgments about what is important, and build shared beliefs' (Schultz 2000, 207). This then perhaps why the role of gatekeeper, while diminished, is alive and well online, with *Indymedia* and *Slashdot* good examples of alternative sites that abandoned their open publishing policy (Haas 2005, 393). There are many forms of gatekeeping, however. The equality promised by free flows is also challenged by 'a hard core of individuals' (forum participant quoted in Schultz 2000, 215) intent on dominating the discourse. *Online Opinion* and *Webdiary* prove the point.

So what of the impact of discourse in an online world where information flows 'farther, faster and with fewer intermediaries' (Bimber 1998, 19). Does it lead to politicised citizens who are ready-set-go-to-wrest power from media barons, enhance diversity and independent thought or does it merely work to increase the individualism and self-interest associated with communication technologies (May 2003, 85). How indeed do disparate groups of 'grassroots' journalists reach the audiences of mainstream news and achieve a level of credibility that makes their voices worth listening to.

We're All Journalists Now

A popular reading of the internet is that it has taken journalism from the pens of professionals employed for the most part in commercial organisations where content is largely decided by its capacity to maximise audiences and advertising and handed the tools of production to 'the people'. This dramatic shift in news production and dissemination rejects notions of objectivity, credibility and distance from its audience with platforms that foster dialogue rather than monologue, is non-hierachical and privileges unmediated narratives that emerge from the lived existence of its audience. Citizens' media would seem a long way from the Galtung & Ruge (1965) model where elite voices and elite nations dominate news-gathering, news content and news discourse.

Matheson (2004, 446) cites Bourdieu, to draw attention to the 'symbolic power of news language within journalism', an authority that is recognised by both journalists and audiences. That symbolic power, now challenged by alternative journalism, is by the people for the people and about the people. Yet recent research has found that use of the internet for alternative news does not necessarily signify a shift from traditional models of news-gathering practice. A study of UK activist newspaper *SchNEWS* demonstrates that while at first glance the paper appears to privilege 'ordinary' voices closer examination reveals a 'counter-elite'. These voices are depended on, as they are in mainstream media, for 'expertise, authoritativeness and legitimacy' (Atton & Wickenden 2005, 347). Sourcing

practices that determine who is 'included or excluded as news actors in the media' (Dueze 2005, 453) can work to silence the very voices an alternative public sphere claim to amplify.

Nevertheless, alternative journalism does represent a 'radical challenge' (Atton 2003, 267) to mainstream media with journalistic practices shifting from a producer-consumer relationship (Dueze 2005, 451) to 'hybrid forms such as the activist-journalist and the native reporter' (Atton 2003, 269). However, Deuze (2005, 447) contends that all journalists across all mediums carry an 'ideology of journalism' that includes objectivity; an objectivity that Atton (2003, 268) argues is replaced by 'overt advocacy'. The claim to objectivity is difficult to sustain as journalists emerge from and reflect the values of their culture and so cannot be detached or value free. The case for advocacy where bias is declared and agendas openly pursued seems at the very least more honest and transparent, though not without its problems. Pursuit of individual causes is more likely to produce fragmentation producing a diluted rather than unified public discourse, with a myriad of small interest groups vying for attention. Nevertheless, this alternative sphere does provide opportunities though how those spaces are utilised will very much reflect existing social and political culture.

The continuum, suggested by Harcup (2005, 371), in considering the cross-over between alternative and mainstream media is further confirmed by Atton's (2003, 267) contention that alternative journalism is 'reworking the populist tabloid newspapers to recover a 'radical popular style' of reporting that is more inclusive. Yet, the tabloid is more often associated with conservative agendas, prioritising the private over the public, sensationalist headlines and biased coverage of news. Can the adoption of tabloid models of journalism be justified by alternative journalism on grounds that it shuns objectivity to feature the narratives of ordinary citizens who would otherwise be ignored or excluded? There is a need to be wary of alternative journalism taking up the least celebrated practices of mainstream journalism, even though for a worthy cause. Aside from hypocrisy, tabloid, whether ideologically driven by left or right, may ultimately inspire the same disillusionment that has seen the audience of alternative media fleeing its mainstream counterpart. Is there a need then to establish what journalistic practices are valuable according to traditional models of journalism - truth, fairness and balance, diversity, public good, credibility - and which are less valuable, or, are these the very values that an alternative journalism calls into question.

Blessed Is The Blog

Online diaries or journals, otherwise known as weblogs or blogs, have excited both public and scholarly interest with utopian claims they can transform passive media couch potatoes into active media producers. Lance Knobel (2005: 27) claimed 8.5 million blogs in 2004 while *Technorati* puts 2006 blog numbers at more than 27 million. Blogs now attract 50,000 postings per hour and 75,000 new blogs are created each day (Sifry 2006). Yet despite, or as a

consequence of these astounding figures, 'it is still to be seen how much symbolic power blogs wield in the wider social field (Matheson 2004, 446). The blog is simply set up; anyone (and that is by no means everyone) with a computer, internet access and basic computer literacy can blog. While lots of bloggers are logging the minutiae of dull lives, some blogs are exposing corruption in the upper echelons of power and bringing us eyewitness accounts of war that 'embedded' and other mainstream journalists are less free to, although according to Ian Fogg of Jupiter Research, political blogs make up only 5 per cent of blogs (The Rise and Rise of Vlogs, 2006). Further complicating the 'blogosphere' are claims that 'just over two-thirds of blogs were declared "dead" after having no posts for two months, and 40 per cent of those were "one-day wonders" (Brown 2005, 2). Recent research is also suggesting that blogs, rather than set the news agenda, follow it, and indeed in the best traditions of hegemony, reinforce and magnify the elite voices of mainstream news media.

Bloggers are poorly resourced in comparison to professional journalists employed by mainstream publications. It is also unlikely they have the skills or time to do their own research or investigations 'rarely publishing anything that amounts to first-hand reporting or information' (Brown 2005, 2). There are of course outstanding exceptions: Trent Lott's racist remarks were outed by a blog, resulting in his resignation, and Iraqi, Salam Pax, blogged eyewitness reports of the bombing of his homeland. There are more instances of bloggers challenging the hegemon but the frequency with which only a handful of examples are trotted out tends to suggest the blogosphere's counter-hegemonic activities are novel because they are so rare.

Yet, claims that blogs 'are at the centre of media democratisation' (Knobel 2005, 28) persist in spite of research that suggests that link-dependent news-gathering serves to lock bloggers into responding to the main news of the day rather than blogging all the news that isn't fit to print. Bruns (2004, 182) takes a quite different position arguing that links to news material creates conversation and debate with 'gatekeepers' guiding readers to 'best of'', different from the more censorious role of gatekeepers deployed in traditional models of journalism. The blogosphere is also criticised for its narrow range of voices determining content much in the same way as mainstream media has been criticised for an elite commentariat (Suich 2005) and that Atton & Wickenden (2005) have identified in other alternative forums.

But is this inevitable? Brown (2005, 2) says that most bloggers have very little to say that is interesting while Redden (2003, 74) argues that bloggers are not 'committed to truth, accuracy, objectivity and fairness' or for 'checking their facts' (Turner 2005, 137). The tenet that journalists must at all times, strive for objectivity is not always practised by an alternative journalism that is populated with citizens keen to tell 'their stories' from their perspective. Ironically, it is the 'rapid decline of media credibility' that has given rise to the weblog (Andrews, cited in Redden 2003, 74). And what of the content produced by blogs or other forms of alternative media. Is it enough that a blog is politically interested, do we expect alongside that a level of literacy and

inquiry, or is an alternative view, no matter how uninformed, a contribution to public discourse?

While there are competing figures related to the number of blogs, even moreso, the number that are politically interested, there is no doubting their popularity. The surge of interest in blogging is more attributed to their entertainment value than rising political or social awareness or bands of citizens demanding an alternative to mainstream media. Blogs do have a huge potential to disseminate alternative content and share knowledge but the freedom of speech they afford is for the most part ignored. Rather than jump on utopian bandwagons, claims for the democratising potential of blogs ought not ignore the 'social embeddedness of technology' (Dahlberg 2004: 7) if they are to be 'consistent with what we know about the media, political participation, social structures and especially, the political individual' (Bimber 1998: 16).

While the decentralised, non-hierarchical medium of the internet has renewed and sustained hope of news and current affairs that is radically different from that produced by media oligopolies there is some evidence that this optimism may be short-lived. The power relations present in an offline world are increasingly articulated online and the 'promised revolution … a myth' (Young 2002, 79). Undisputed are the possibilities for public conversation yet that dialogue while less interrupted by gatekeepers, and more interactive, is little different from the chatter overheard in most public spaces. The tools of the internet have been put to individual rather than collective use, and not unlike the potential of radio and television, are being deployed for their entertainment value rather than their democratising capacities. Relaxing cross-media rules only hands increased power and influence to existing media interests to deliver more of the same, further reducing independence and diversity in Australia's media. Alternative journalism, rather than a radical departure from traditional models of journalism is more a continuum that is often contingent on mainstream news media with its reach limited to those who seek it out.

The research now needs to explore the political economic concerns this paper has raised while avoiding the too-monolithic approaches of the past. In particular, questions will address the democratic possibilities afforded by the internet, user rationality (Dahlberg 2004) and the cultural competencies and journalistic capacities of users in order to critically examine a number of the claims made about participation, citizenship and democracy.

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