Possibilities and challenges of print investigative journalism in the digital age


Dr Andrea Carson
School of Social and Political Sciences
University of Melbourne
Rm 535, John Medley Building, Grattan St
Parkville 3010
Victoria
AUSTRALIA
Tel: (03) 9035 5075
Abstract

This paper examines key print newspapers’ adaptation to change in order to continue to produce investigative journalism in Australia. It compares traditional media’s historic offerings of investigative journalism with new possibilities and challenges for producing investigative journalism in the digital era. The research uses three independent content analyses to compare the capabilities of Australia’s traditional press and nascent digital media for producing investigative journalism. Building upon a body of literature focused on the relationship between the public sphere, liberal democracy and mass media this paper finds that, despite perceptions to the contrary, Australia’s newspapers are adapting to continue to produce quality investigative journalism. These adaptations occur in the context of print media’s falling revenues to support this reporting genre. The adaptations take advantage of new opportunities for producing investigative journalism. At the same time the altered economic environment also engenders fresh challenges for print media journalism. This article assesses the challenges and opportunities that legacy and new media face producing quality investigative journalism.
Possibilities and challenges of print investigative journalism in the digital age

Dr Andrea Carson

Introduction and background

Print newspapers across developed states are under financial duress; Australia is no exception. The newspaper’s business model has fractured. Factors adversely affecting the model have included economic, cultural and political changes, but particularly technological advancements, which have engendered the internet and its digital media offerings. Consequently, news media companies have lost their monopoly on advertising, which historically subsidised their journalism. They have also lost their monopoly on reporting news as, in the digital era, anyone with an internet connection and keyboard can purport to be a “citizen” journalist.

In June 2012 Australia’s duopoly press organisations, News Corporation Australia (NCA) and Fairfax Media, who between them own almost 90 per cent of metropolitan newspapers (Tiffen, 2010: 87; DBCDE, 2012: 60), announced unprecedented cutbacks. Between the two companies 800 editorial jobs were estimated to be among the thousands of redundancies (Warren in Lloyd, 2012).

The 2012 cutbacks for both companies included management restructures; greater syndication and sharing of resources across mastheads; and, for Fairfax, reformatting Sydney and Melbourne broadsheets to a tabloid size to reduce printing costs. In 2013, Fairfax’s management shed a further 45 full-time reporters, mainly employed in the business sections of their mastheads, attributing it to “continued cyclical weakness and structural change in the advertising sector” (Corbett, 2013).

The altered economic conditions for news media organisations in developed economies have raised concerns about the capabilities of newspapers’ and editors’ inclinations to produce
expensive forms of reporting such as investigative journalism in times of falling revenues to support it (Aucoin, 2005: 1; Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2009: 1). This paper explores whether selected Australian newspapers and news websites are adapting to the changed economic conditions for news media and continuing to produce investigative journalism.

This article will argue that despite Australian newspapers’ considerable economic challenges, quality print investigative journalism has continued to be produced contrary to the expressed concerns of some commentators and journalists (Beecher, 2011; Kohler, 2010). For example, a survey of Australian journalists identified low morale and pessimism about the future of quality journalism, particularly investigative reporting (MEAA, 2008: 16). Such negativity has been also reflected in international surveys. America’s Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) were pessimistic about the future of investigative journalism, describing proprietors' priorities as more about “profits than Pulitzers” (Aucoin, 2005: 1).

This pervasive pessimism about the future of investigative journalism is not without reason. Many developed states’ newspapers have experienced falling revenues and hardcopy circulations since the millennium, and earlier in some cases. Hundreds of mastheads have closed, while some have converted to online-only editions. During the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) print journalism job losses numbered tens of thousands across Europe and North America (Wunsch-Vincent et al., 2010: 21). Unofficial US figures recorded 14,861 editorial redundancies in 2009 alone (MEAA, 2010: 8). An OECD report asserted 2009 was the worst year on record for journalism cutbacks that began in 1997 (Wunsch-Vincent et al., 2010: 20). In contrast, before the 1990s, journalism jobs were growing globally, doubling in the last half of the twentieth century (ibid).

Print newspapers’ relationship to the public sphere
Jürgen Habermas' (1989) critical theory identified the public sphere as a free-thinking space outside state control for the exchange of ideas. He established a normative link between the role of the 'quality' newspaper and free political discourse in this communal space. Freedom of expression is a central tenet of liberal democracy. Brian McNair’s (2006: 59) discussion of the ‘ideal’ role of the news media in a democracy highlights the watchdog function, which serves to scrutinise and monitor political power. Without this commitment to investigative journalism by the news media in liberal democratic states, American Press Institute’s Tom Rosenstiel argued that there would be times when as a public “we won't know what we won't know” (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2009: 1).

From this notion that news media perform a democratic function by informing the Habermasian public sphere follows a range of critical media theories about the efficacy of the mass media’s role fulfilling this function. On one side are political economic concepts about the mass media that generally fall under the rubric of ‘control theories’. These theorists have a pessimistic perspective about the mass media’s function in a democracy, and consider that contemporary newspapers’ public interest role is largely overwhelmed by corporate interests (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 1; Curran, 2002). For example, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s (1988) well-documented propaganda theory views newspaper proprietors and organs of the media as an apparatus for manufacturing public consent through subliminally activated filters that determine what news is fit to publish.

On the other side are more positive theories about the mass media’s public sphere function, which fall into the ‘chaos theories’ stream of scholarship. These theories generally identify the media as pluralistic and able to rationally inform the citizenry through a number of functions. As noted, one of these functions is the watchdog function of investigative journalism (Schultz, 1998: 196; McNair, 2006: vii; Schudson, 2008: 12).
Contemporary media theorists John Street (2011), Bob Franklin (2008) and Peter Dahlgren (2009) are more centrally positioned between the optimists and pessimists, but warn of the rise of populist content in newspapers, at the expense of investigative journalism, to satisfy commercial imperatives. Street (2011: 194-195) explicitly links newspapers’ weakened commitment to investigative reporting to journalistic phenomena of “churnalism” and “dumbing down” of news content. But, Street acknowledges that while the narrative of investigative journalism’s decline is widely accepted, it should not be embraced uncritically. He suggests discussion about the state of newspaper investigative journalism needs to be context specific. This article supports his view of not assuming a decline of investigative reporting in times of falling revenues to support it.

Brian McNair (2006) and Michael Schudson (2003) offer perhaps the most optimistic understanding of the news media’s role informing the public sphere in a time of economic disruption for media. While both acknowledge journalistic concerns associated with cost cutting, they remain generally positive in their critiques about the mass media’s capacity to perform its ‘ideal’ role in a democracy. Schudson and Leonard Downie Jr (2009), similar to Vanishing Newspaper author Philip Meyer (2009), predicted newspapers that survived the GFC would adapt and continue to operate, but with smaller staffs, revenues and profits. Schudson argued newspapers would adapt to do many things at once including to “find new partners to help them produce high-quality news at lower cost” (Downie and Schudson, 2009: 25).

McNair (2006: vii) identified that in the digital era contemporary media should not be viewed as belonging to a negative, linear “control paradigm”. Instead borrowing the 1944 term “cultural chaos” from Adorno and Horkheimer he playfully turns it sideways to describe global media’s current state, which is underscored by anarchy and disruption, but also allows for “dissent, openness and diversity rather than closure, exclusivity and ideological
homogeneity” (McNair 2006: vii). He notes one possible limitation of the digital news sphere is that it is overcrowded and noisy. Paradoxically, navigating through the noise can return power to traditional information gatekeepers, such as print media, that serve as “sense-makers” of the cacophony (2006: 154). The challenge, argues McNair, is to find some order amid the chaos, and to preserve the decentralising and democratising effects of these new digital public spheres at national and global levels (2006: 207).

With consideration to these ranging positions about the role of the mass media in modern society, this paper specifically looks at whether the political economy of Australian print media limits newspapers’ capacity to produce quality investigative journalism, as often claimed, or whether they have adapted to continue to provide this watchdog function.

Threats to print investigative journalism

Investigative journalism is not universally defined. In this paper I develop a 10-point definition derived from the scholarly literature (see method section). Essentially, investigative journalism is viewed as different from daily news reporting because of the time, research and verification involved to unearth truths that are in the public interest and would otherwise remain hidden.

Investigative journalism produces fewer stories than other genres of reporting because of the detailed nature of the reporter’s work. Investigative journalism is costly because it runs a higher risk of attracting litigation due to its scrutiny of those with power who might seek to curtail investigations (Birnbauer, 2012: 83). As discussed, Australia’s print media are experiencing financial pressures and therefore might reasonably be deterred from incurring the costs and time investment of investigative reporting.

In Australia, investigative reporting has historically been the domain of newspapers,
particularly broadsheets, and non-commercial broadcast media (Carson, 2013). These media provide more political and investigative coverage and attract a discerning, educated audience known in advertising as the elite AB socioeconomic demographic. This audience has concern for public accountability and transparency (McNair, 2000: 16). Historically, broadsheets have had time, skilled journalists and resources to pursue lengthy, difficult investigations. Furthermore, despite cutbacks, newspapers remain the single largest employers of full-time journalists in Australia (Tiffen, 2010: 94).

This article adopts Habermas’ normative ideal of the public sphere and uses empirical methods to test whether Meyer, Downie and Schudson’s assertions that newspapers can adapt to their economic challenges, and embrace opportunities of the digital age to continue to produce investigative journalism, is true of Australian media. The aim of this paper is to understand if and, if so, how newspapers have adapted to the digital era to produce quality investigative journalism, and what contributions the online sphere is making to this genre of journalism in Australia.

Methods and data

From the literature, two research questions form: 1) in the digital age of print economic decline, how much investigative journalism do Australian newspapers produce compared to the past? And 2) can digital media produce substantive investigative journalism – both in terms of quality and quantity?

The analytical approach to answer these research questions was designed to compare the quantum and application of investigative journalism of selected Australian print newspapers with selected digital news organisations that publish online only.
Three separate and independent content analyses were undertaken. Content analysis is useful for analysing large amounts of newspaper content (Weber, 1990: 41). It is non-reactive and therefore provides a rigorous and systematic way of analysing information (Neuman, 1997: 272). It is ideal for comparing one era to another and measuring information “at a distance” (Neuman, 1997: 274). It can measure many different features of the content, including what is not there. When undertaken correctly, it is reliable, stable and therefore a valid method that can be replicated by other researchers.

Operational definition of investigative journalism

There is no universal understanding for what constitutes investigative journalism and therefore a definition had to be operationalised to undertake the analyses. This was a two-step process. First, a typology derived from the scholarly literature identified key common statements about investigative journalism. Second, 10 key elements were isolated from these statements that could then be used as individual data fields within a coding matrix.

Not all investigative stories contain the 10 elements. For this reason six elements were identified as essential for defining a story as investigative. These six were designated as mandatory fields and must be observable in the story for it to be included in the investigative journalism sample. Detailed rules for each element were developed to maintain consistent application during each analysis, and these are summarised in Table 1 in a much abbreviated form. For this study, one of the mandatory fields was that the investigative journalism be Australian.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Key Considerations for Defining Investigative Journalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Does the article set the agenda/or is exclusive to that publication?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Is the story an example of active journalism?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is there evidence of time and research?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Does the story investigate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is the story of political relevance or of some import to the public sphere?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Does it identify victims or villains?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Does it investigative a breach of public trust?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Does it pursue a suppressed truth (that is in the public interest)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Is a moral standard implied?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Is it written about Australia, or Australian-centric issues?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author. Note: Shaded elements are mandatory fields of the operative definition.

Broadsheet study

The first content analysis examined the content of all pages of selected mastheads for a month (April) in 10-year intervals beginning from 1971 through to 2011. Chosen newspapers were: The Age, The Australian, National Times and Sydney Morning Herald (SMH). These mastheads were selected for various reasons. The Age was Australia’s first masthead to install a dedicated investigative unit (in 1967, fully staffed in 1973) under the editorship of Graham Perkin (Hills, 2010: 310). The Australian (1964– ) is Australia’s only national broadsheet general news masthead and is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation Australia. The now defunct National Times was selected because it had a reputation for investigative journalism (McKnight, 1999: 155) and was included in the study because its demise might afford insights about Australian investigative reporting. The SMH was selected because it is a Sydney-based Fairfax daily masthead that offers a point of comparison with Murdoch’s Australian and Melbourne’s Age.

Time intervals were selected to reflect and record different economic and political publishing environments for newspapers. For example, the 1970s and early 1980s marked the peak for
Australian newspaper circulations (Hills, 2010: 505). The late 1980s saw the Australian economy decline with the 1987 stock market crash, which contributed to the closure of the National Times (Carroll, 2012). The end of this decade was the onset of Australia’s evening paper closures (Tiffen and Gittins, 2009: 181). By 1991 print circulations were declining (Flew and Cunningham, 1997: 417-418). The internet’s commercial application began halfway through this decade. By 2001, the digital age had fully arrived; in the decade’s latter half social media such as Twitter and Facebook presented new challenges to traditional media’s business model by poaching advertising and readers, but also through its capacity to quickly disseminate breaking news to a potentially global audience.

Identifying investigative journalism in the selected mastheads involved analysing 21,100 news pages. This method found 45 unique investigative reports, excluding ongoing investigations that were part of a story series.

Walkley Award study

The second content analysis was independent of the masthead study. It involved examining print news stories from selected categories of the national peer-reviewed Walkley Awards since their inception in 1956 until 2011. The Awards provided a unique sample of exceptional journalism, respected within the Australian media community (O’Donnell, 2009: 26). This analysis was important to triangulate findings with the broadsheet study. While not a definitive sample of quality reporting, the Walkley study provided a more diverse sample of newspaper investigative journalism from every year and across a wider group of mastheads. From the nine selected Walkley categories, 101 out of a possible 187 stories met the operative definition for investigative journalism. The categories were selected based on their likelihood for containing examples of investigative reporting. For example, categories
evaluating headline writing were excluded.

*Online news study*

I analysed daily online content from selected Australian news websites for a month. This involved subscribing to online newsfeeds, monitoring social media and auditing websites at the same time each day. By receiving Twitter updates and newsfeeds it was anticipated that no investigative story would be overlooked, even if the story was unavailable at the time of auditing the website. Daily webpages were captured in screenshots to provide a permanent record.

The aim of this analysis was to determine if Australia’s nascent news sites were producers of investigative journalism in their own right. The study was undertaken during April 2011 to mirror the methodology of the masthead study. News websites were included if they employed journalists and published without hardcopy subsidisation. Selected sites were: *New Matilda, Crikey* and *WikiLeaks*. *WikiLeaks* was of particular interest because of claims that it is a new vehicle for investigative journalism (Dreyfus and Hrafnsson, 2013: 39). *Crikey* met the criteria and is Australia’s oldest online-only news site; *New Matilda* has survived for almost a decade using a funding model that combines crowdsourcing donations with limited advertising.

The stories were analysed using the same methodology and recording matrix as the other studies, amounting to 4970 data entries. This data analysis yielded a small sample of five investigative stories during the month of April in 2011.
Findings and discussion

Both the raw data of the masthead and Walkley content analyses independently answered the first research question and showed that the quantum of investigative journalism increased over time until 2010. Each successive decade recorded more investigative journalism than the one before (see Figures 1 and 2). Investigative reporting, while increasing over time, constitutes a small portion of overall reportage. Figure 1 shows the Walkley study’s raw data for investigative journalism increased with each decade.

**Figure 1: Amount of Newspaper Investigative Journalism Winning Walkley Awards, 1950s–2000s**

![Graph showing the increase in investigative journalism from 1950s to 2000s](image)

*Source: Author* *incomplete decade, as Walkley awards began in 1956*

*Note: n=101*

In order to adjust for an expected increase in entries as more categories were added each year – the awards expanding from five categories in 1956 to 34 in 2011– the number of winners was expressed as a percentage of the total number of entries for each decade. This percentage comparison reveals two “golden” periods for investigative journalism, the first being the 1970s, confirming previous research about the surge of investigative reporting – largely a domestic response to the *Washington Post’s* investigative reporting of the Watergate scandal.
that cost Richard Nixon his presidency (Schultz, 1998: 43; McKnight, 1999). The second peak, perhaps more surprising given the decline in print revenues, was the 2000s. An explanation for this will follow shortly.

Broadsheet newspapers have played a significant role producing Australian award-winning investigative journalism and this can be seen by analysing the specific “Investigative Journalism” Walkley category. It did not appear until 1991, and was not an “All Media” category until 1997. Notwithstanding, during its 21-year existence print has won “investigative reporting” 15 times, and all except two winning print stories came from broadsheets.

The broadsheet study, independent of the Walkley study, also reveals higher numbers of investigative reporting stories in the 2000s (2001) compared to previous periods. This study records a slight dip at the next recording interval in 2011 (see Figure 2). This might suggest a peak has been reached and that downsizing of newsrooms is starting to impact on investigative journalism; whether this is an anomaly or a new trend requires further research.

**Figure 2: Amount of Broadsheet Investigative Journalism – 1971–2011**

![Bar chart showing amount of broadsheet investigative journalism from 1971 to 2011 for Australian, NT, Sunday Age, SMH, and The Age newspapers.](chart.png)

*Source: Author*

*Note: n=45*
It can be seen from Figure 2 that the mastheads with a consistent record for producing investigative reporting are Fairfax’s *SMH* and *The Age*. Both mastheads have had long-standing editorial commitment to public interest journalism (Souter, 1991: 146). This finding was also independently identified in the Walkley study. For example, the *SMH* received 15 awards for journalism that fitted the operative definition of investigative, followed by *The Age* (12), and then equally *The Australian* and Fairfax’s financial tabloid *Australian Financial Review* (10 each). When the mastheads’ Sunday papers were included in the tally, and there is an argument that they should be, given that over the past two decades they have shared resources and staff, then *The Age* (17), published slightly more investigative journalism than the *SMH* (16).

These findings do not fit with commentary about investigative journalism’s decline as a consequence of newsroom cost cutting (Tanner and Richardson, 2013: 4). Yet, it is true that print newspapers have lost institutional power using any number of measures: audience penetration, market capitalisation, advertising revenues, number of full-time journalists employed, and so forth (Carson, 2013). How have newspapers continued to produce investigative journalism despite cutbacks? From the data, it can be seen that several adaptations have enabled media companies to continue to produce investigative journalism despite their organisations’ deteriorating economic outlooks.

**Online media and investigative reporting**

Before examining these adaptations, the findings of the third content analysis will be discussed. This analysis was designed to answer research question two. Although limited in its sample, the online study also shows news websites were producing original investigative journalism (see Figure 3).
The quantum of online investigative stories (excluding follow-up reports) was similar to the amount of print investigative reporting recorded in the 1970s. This finding reflects the nascent character of new media, just as the early 1970s was an emergent time for print investigative journalism. Further research is required to determine if the online sphere will continue to increase its contribution to original investigative journalism. An examination of digital media outlet investigative stories reveals some of the same adaptations found in the other content analyses, which are discussed below.

Adapting to change to produce investigative journalism

From local to national: the rise of syndication

An identifiable trend within the Walkley and broadsheet data was an increase in syndication over time. John Fairfax and Sons began this in the late 1980s; by the 2010s their syndications had more than quadrupled. News Corporation also adopted this practice during the 2000s. A
rise in in-house story sharing coincides with mastheads’ newsroom cutbacks. What this suggests is an editorial adaptation to provide resources for investigative journalism by spreading the cost burden through a more centralised editorial approach, rather than abandoning resource-intensive reporting such as investigative journalism.

By June 2012, both major newspaper groups were explicit about sharing stories and resources. Fairfax’s CEO Greg Hywood (2012) stated that there will be “… greater sharing of editorial content across geographies and across platforms”. NCA’s then CEO Kim Williams promised a more centralised command structure: “In editorial, we will adopt a ‘one city, one newsroom’ strategy ... each state will be in a single news network” (Norrie, 2012). Similarly, in 2013, Fairfax’s Australian Publishing Media managing director Allen Williams announced further job losses and the merging of business reporting teams across three metropolitan mastheads (McGrath, 2013).

A challenge that investigative journalism faces from the practice of increased syndication is the potential loss of diversity of voices and topics, and undue preference for stories with mass, rather than local, appeal. But this disadvantage must be weighed against syndication being an effective means for preserving resources to finance expensive journalism, such as investigative journalism, that facilitates mastheads to maintain a watchdog function in democratic society.

**Narrowing investigative journalism’s subject targets**

The content analyses revealed the most common investigative targets over time. While the data is able to show that the amount of investigative journalism did not decline, story targets for investigative reporting noticeably shifted. For example, international investigative stories from an Australian perspective, which can incur great expense, became fewer. Conversely,
state-based investigative stories, which incur minimal travel costs, increased in number. Crime investigations and political scandal stories, which are perennially popular with audiences, were the most frequent investigative targets. This finding reflects international research that maps a trend towards greater tabloidisation of content characterised by adversarial political reporting and an increase in crime stories (Schudson, 2011: 84).

An important observation from the broadsheet study after the 1980s was the conspicuous absence of corporate investigative journalism. This suggests that as the political economy of general news mastheads adapted to declining revenues, some story subjects were less likely to be pursued as topics for investigative stories because of implicit or explicit commercial imperatives. More overtly, as discussed earlier, business reporters at Fairfax’s three metropolitan mastheads were specifically singled out for redundancies. Political economic theory is useful for explaining this absence of corporate sector investigative reporting as print news increasing relies on diminishing commercial advertising to subsidise its journalism.

Further, the roles of editor and publisher conflated in the 2000s. Tiffen (2010: 145) argues this substantial editorial reform could cause newspapers to be “less willing to endanger the profit flow by investing in and publishing investigative journalism”. From the data, it appears that the mainstream general news press have not jeopardised commercial relationships through greater editorial scrutiny of the sector by undertaking investigative journalism. The exception to this finding was the niche business paper, the Australian Financial Review, which did the mainstay of print media’s corporate investigations after the 1990s.

*The rise of media collaborations*

In a climate of decreased print newspaper penetration of the population, the data indicates that the mainstream press used various innovations to raise the profile and reach of
investigative stories, such as strategic collaborations. All three independent content analyses showed that the decade of the 2000s marked the beginning of Australian media institutions seriously collaborating with other outlets to produce specific investigative stories. These collaborations involved both media and non-media organisations such as academia.

For example, the use of WikiLeaks material as a starting point for investigative stories in Fairfax publications began in late 2010. The results indicate that WikiLeaks can be best viewed as a “warehouse” for information, which then becomes investigative journalism when the whistle-blower collaborates with an established media “retailer”. This is a conclusion that WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange drew himself when he experienced difficulty getting the reach and audience impact he desired with initial leaks, until he collaborated with reputable mainstream print media across the globe (Manne, 2011: 230).

The Age and the ABC also engaged in collaboration and succeeded in obtaining greater audience share and reach on several investigative stories, most notably the “Money Makers”. This 2011 Walkley-winning investigation by Richard Baker and Nick McKenzie uncovered Australia’s biggest bribery scandal involving the Reserve Bank of Australia’s subsidiary currency firms, Note Printing Australia and Securency (McKenzie and Baker, 2012).

The longitudinal broadsheet study found that of 326 individual newspaper pages analysed in April 2011, an unprecedented nine stories involved collaborations with an outside media organisation. These collaborations show a trend for media organisations to work with other outlets to extend audience reach and story impact. This trend was also evident in the online study, which found 80 per cent of online investigative stories were made possible through collaborations with other organisations, including non-media institutions such as universities. Collaborations enabled news sites such as New Matilda to deliver investigative journalism in challenging economic times for funded journalism. The collaborators had various forms of expertise, including academic and journalism proficiencies. These partnerships went beyond
crowdsourcing, whereby news outlets enlist citizens to help with reporting and information gathering. As fewer Australians buy newspapers and the cultural power of print newspapers recedes, collaborations between journalists and/or with other institutions, such as academia, provide alternative sources of cultural authority. This authority is important because it can strengthen public trust in investigative journalism, and such organisations have the financial resources to guard against reputational and legal attacks that could otherwise cripple start-up media outlets.

The trend toward collaboration attests to Downie and Schudson’s contention, outlined earlier, that newspapers’ economic pressures have led them to innovate and collaborate, rather than perish. They argued that future news gatherers would include newsroom journalists, but also freelancers and academics (Downie and Schudson, 2009: 2). This study shows this to be true of Australian online investigative journalism and also of print. In the United States this trend has been evident with philanthropically funded investigative journalism websites such as ProPublica collaborating with traditional media such as the New York Times and other reputable outlets to produce Pulitzer-winning investigative journalism for a mass audience (Crikey, 2010).

Australia’s cross-media collaborations identified in this study are significant because they show print newspapers’ willingness to adapt to deliver journalism in the “public interest” to larger audiences. Broadening an investigative story’s readership is important in the digital age whereby audiences have fragmented across plural public spheres. It strengthens an investigation’s impact and counters the risk of a story being lost in the fast-paced 24-hour news cycle.

Conclusions
Within the academic literature this paper is positioned within a liberal democratic pluralistic perspective of news media, sharing the view that news outlets, particularly newspapers, can continue to play an important role informing the public sphere despite economic challenges to them. The content analyses of investigative journalism in newspapers, online and for Walkley awards indicates that news organisations are adapting their practices to continue to produce quality investigative journalism.

Greater syndication of investigative journalism and sharing of resources across mastheads within a news group is a key change that has the effect of cordonning print investigative journalism from widespread cutbacks. Another identifiable trend is the increased collaboration on investigative stories between media organisations – both traditional and new – and with non-media institutions. These adaptations have occurred in the context of print media’s institutional decline marked by falling circulations and advertising revenues. While this paper concludes that the nascent online sphere is not yet able to produce the amount of investigative journalism produced by traditional print media, it is encouraging to find that it is producing some original investigative journalism. Further research is required to determine if the online sphere will increase its contribution to original investigative journalism, and to determine if unprecedented Australian print organisation cutbacks in June 2012 are a tipping point that might reverse the upward trends identified here, thereby curtailing print investigative reporting in the future.

The adaptations identified in this paper present new opportunities for providing the Australian public sphere with quality investigative journalism through the sharing of resources and costs. Media collaborations also enable investigative stories to potentially reach a larger and more diverse audience. Syndication and collaboration are adaptations that can strengthen the impact of a story by reaching more Australians across fragmented and plural public spheres. These adaptations are consistent with the findings of Schudson and Downie
(2009) who argue that collaborations are a future funding and news-gathering model for investigative journalism. Notwithstanding these findings, adapting traditional print investigative journalism to the digital era also conveys challenges. Not least among them is ensuring masthead syndication and centralised print operations do not compromise geographical and story diversities, particularly in a topographically large and media-concentrated nation such as Australia. A further challenge for news organisations is to resist political economic imperatives that undermine investigative journalists’ capacity to scrutinise certain powerful groups in society, such as the corporate sector.

On a final note, McNair (2006: 207) foresaw that one challenge for journalism in the digital era was finding order amid the chaos, while preserving its decentralising and democratising effects. These adaptations speak to that challenge, enabling investigative stories to rise above the din of “information abundance” via media collaborations and syndications, which can expand audience reach and impact.
List of references


Beecher, E., 2011, Interview with the author, 12 May.


Carroll, V. J., 2012, Interview with the author, 8 February.


Kohler, A., 2010, 'Interview with the author,' 5 October.


McGrath, P., ‘Fairfax to cut 45 business news and magazine positions amid falling advertising revenue,’ ABC online, abc.net.au, 1 October.


Curthoys and J. Schultz, (eds.), *Journalism, Print, Politics and Popular Culture*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press.


Penguin.


Author/s:
CARSON, A

Title:
Possibilities and challenges of print investigative journalism in the digital age

Date:
2014-11-03

Citation:
CARSON, A, Possibilities and challenges of print investigative journalism in the digital age, The digital and the social: communication for inclusion and exchange, 2014, pp. 1 - 26

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/51350