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Introduction

A changing profession

No industry stands still. But the forces of change and the way they take effect are not always the ones we expect.

When the first edition of this book was in production, the biggest influence on broadcast news seemed to be the imminent introduction of digital transmission. This time it is changes to the regulations governing the ownership of the Australian media, which were expected, but not explicit, at the time of writing.

This book is about the practice of journalism in what are often termed the ‘electronic media’ – those delivered by broadcast or online – and it details what journalists do and how they go about it. It also tries to set that practice in the context of the broader operations of the electronic media so that students will understand why newsrooms function in a particular way. Some of the key moments in the evolution of Australia’s electronic media are set out in the timeline (figure 1.1) on pages 7–8. The ‘big picture’ changes naturally weigh on the workaday world of journalists, but smaller changes are often at least equally important.

Many forces shape the work of electronic reporters. They include the technologies used, the revenues and expenses associated with running a newsroom, and the number and type of people who tune in and whether that number is growing or shrinking. So those who work in today’s electronic media will be influenced by a series of factors, some of which are discussed below.

The number of ways of receiving news is growing

Not so long ago, the 'electronic media' meant radio and television. Now there is online news, news delivered to mobile phones and personal digital devices, datacasting, interactive television and radio. There are also more bulletins on the 'old media', particularly metropolitan television, where you can see news programs in the early morning, noon, early afternoon, mid-evening and late night. If that's not enough, there is 24-hour news on radio and on pay TV.

One story, many versions

But the increase in delivery systems – particularly pay TV, online and mobiles – does not mean more people or organisations are *gathering* news. Much of the time, it means the same pictures and interviews are being repackaged in different ways for different services. The pay TV service, Sky News, repurposes material originally shot by Seven and Nine, while segments of the studio interviews it conducts with politicians and businesspeople are used, in turn, by free-to-air radio and television bulletins. News items produced by a broadcast newsroom may reappear on its online site as both audio and video and rewritten as text. They may also be sold for delivery on other platforms, such as 3G mobile phones.

News teams are being 'downsized'

Not only is the number of people engaged in news production shifting from gathering audio and video to repurposing it, there have been other moves towards smaller news teams. The most dramatic example of this is television's solo operator, the video journalist (VJ). But while VJs are still a rarity in Australia, the number of people in the standard television news reporting team has also contracted. Automated cameras have reduced the number of floor crew required in some television news studios. Computer automation systems have allowed radio news to downsize, with material being shared between network stations. Advances in satellite technology have made it possible to centralise bulletin production in both radio and television.

News material can come from anyone, anywhere

There has been a steady increase over the years in the volume of news video that comes from outside newsrooms. Some is generated by the public relations industries. But non-professionals of different kinds are a growing source. To understand the influence on news of images taken by non-professionals, you

only have to look back to 2004 when the year's defining images were the shocking pictures from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and of the tsunami that struck coastal areas from Asia to Africa. It took nothing away from their impact that they were shot on small, tourist cameras or phones and for a range of intended uses. Those images were a reminder that almost no event now occurs out of camera range and that the first people on the scene of an unexpected event with a camera will often not be professional news gatherers. Big online news sites often receive their earliest information and images of unexpected events from the public. At the same time, professional news teams are using everyday technologies, especially the Internet, to deliver compressed video from places that used to be out of range for daily news gathering. Paradoxically, television's willingness to use low-resolution video if the content is strong enough has come at a time when many viewers are investing in very high quality screens, reinforcing the point that content and speed of delivery are the driving forces in news.

The tone of electronic news is changing

By definition, many of the reports and visuals from non-professional sources that find their way into news are personal in tone. Online news sites, in particular, encourage witnesses to contribute first-person accounts that create a diary effect. Non-professional video is often punctuated by the reactions of those taking the pictures, in a way that is rarely the case with professional news material. At the same time, reporting and presentation styles in radio and television have been shifting. This is particularly noticeable in radio news and the differences in delivery styles between the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and commercial sector, and between bulletins on the AM and FM bands, with commercial FM radio adopting a particularly informal tone. Different forces are changing delivery styles in television.

There is more 'live' material in broadcast news

Free-to-air news bulletins are still largely constrained by the broadcast schedule – though they can override this when events of international importance occur. But pay TV news and 24-hour radio news have the flexibility to carry events as they happen. Live coverage, particularly on television, sometimes means allowing the pictures and natural sound to carry much of the narrative, along with contributions from reporters in the field and the studio anchors. But this is a qualitatively different style of reporting from the packaged reports that make up the bulk of items on a free-to-air bulletin. Reporters working live

inevitably inject more of their personality and observations into their commentary than they would in a packaged report, contributing to a less formal tone in news programs.

Coincidentally, it also means that viewers have the option of seeing far more of the news material than they had before, since live broadcasts will include many of the pictures and interviews cut out during the editing of the very short news packages.

New technologies demand new reporting skills

More live-to-air reports means more reporters have to be able to work live, which requires ad libbing skills and a confident, fluid interviewing style. These are in addition to the skills previously required of television journalists and they are likely to become more important as bulletins make more use of 'top and tail' live reports (that is, crosses to reporters at the start or end of a package) from journalists on the scene.

New technologies give reporters more control over their product

The same technologies that are demanding new skills of electronic reporters are also giving them more control over their product. For instance, easy-to-use video editing packages mean a small number of television reporters are now expected to edit their reports. But far more can use the same technology to produce a rough edit, or template of what they want their story to look like, as a guide for the craft editor. This gives reporters, especially those who file from the field or a bureau, and who don't have the chance to sit with the editor while their story is cut, a greater level of involvement in the finished product than they once had.

Journalists are under more scrutiny than ever before

And that may be just as well, because journalists' errors are now more likely to be picked up than ever before, and not just by the official media watchdogs, whose role is detailed in chapter 15. These days, the most powerful spotlights on journalists' work are shone by the public and by self-appointed analysts who publish their critiques on weblogs.

In Australia, the findings of media 'bloggers' also surface on that most influential commentator on media standards, the ABC TV program *Media Watch*. But the most far-reaching example at the time of writing occurred ahead of the

2004 US presidential election, when the CBS network's *60 Minutes* based allegations about the President's military record on what it said were documents of the time. Bloggers who analysed the memos' typeface took only hours to declare them fake (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 November 2004: 9). The network's long-term anchor, Dan Rather, announced his resignation not long after, ensuring the news industry will remember the incident and its implications for years to come.

News is just another program

Long-term news industry staff can probably remember a time when news was the linchpin of any broadcaster. In part that may have reflected different times and a greater public interest in information rather than entertainment. In television it also reflected the ethos that if you could attract viewers to the mid-evening news, inertia would probably keep them tuned to the same channel for the rest of the night. The introduction of the remote control in the early 1980s undermined the ideal of viewer loyalty. But changes to the financial operations of stations, where a program's budget is dependent on its earnings, and the increasing influence of ratings data have also played a part. These days, the idea that the provision of news is a public service is largely confined to the public-sector broadcasters, though it has not been completely extinguished from the commercial world, a point that became clear in late 2003 when the owners of the Macquarie and Southern Cross radio networks controversially proposed merging their Sydney newsrooms at 2GB and 2UE to save around \$2 million a year. The plan caused considerable public disquiet until it was abandoned, suggesting many listeners still consider the provision of news a responsibility for a licensee, not a choice (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 December 2003: 2).

News resources are shrinking

The status of radio news is particularly interesting because most bulletins are so short that they can't attract an identifiable audience. That means news bulletins, unlike other programs, can't be 'sold' and don't add to a station's bottom line. The way that economic forces have affected radio news is summed up by one radio news executive interviewed for this book, who recalled that when he started at one of Australia's largest commercial newsrooms little more than a decade earlier there had been a traffic helicopter, and 'rounds people for just about everything you could imagine'. Since then, rationalisation in the industry had led to fewer staff and particularly fewer specialist staff. The changes have been even more dramatic in regional radio news, particularly in the commercial