Interactivity and Journalism's Changing Social Role: Two Australian Case Studies

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Domingo argues that interactivity has always been "at the epicentre of online journalism myths" (685) – often held as an ideal, but rarely adopted in practice. Given the centrality of interactivity to discussions around the potential of the internet in general, and online news in particular, this paper adopts this topic as a lens through which to examine the changing news business and practice of journalism. Through the consideration of two Australian case studies – *The Age Online* and *Crikey* – this paper argues that the adoption of interactive features at online news sites needs to be understood in relation to the broader political and economic changes in which news and journalism operate. In this framework, discussions of interactivity are refigured from a matter of technological consideration to the negotiation of journalism's historical social role.

Introduction

[1] This paper provides a new framework for analysing the adoption of interactivity at online news sites. While interactivity is frequently positioned as a key characteristic of the internet in general, and online news in particular, this positioning is often limited by a tendency to discuss interactivity only in relation to the adoption of a range of possible technological characteristics. I argue that the adoption of interactive features at online news sites is better understood within the broader conditions in which the business and practice of journalism operates, encompassing a changing technological environment and the political and economic conditions of advanced liberalism[1].

[2] I explore the concept of interactivity in relation to journalism's historical social role by considering the provision of interactive options for audiences at two Australian online news publications – one, *Crikey*, an independent daily news email and the other, *The Age Online*, the online counterpart of Melbourne's daily metropolitan broadsheet newspaper, *The Age*. I argue that while *Crikey* currently exhibits more interactive options, its attachment to discourses about traditional journalistic practices limits its potential for further growth in this area while *The Age Online* may not find itself so constrained.

[3] Interactivity is selected here as one of a range of issues within the larger changing landscape of news and journalism. While Australia's news industry has yet to mirror the dramatic downturns seen in the UK and the US, it is nonetheless facing a broad crisis of social standing, spurred both

by a migration of advertising dollars online (Beecher "Death of Newspapers: It's the Advertising, Stupid") and journalism's increasingly inadequate efforts to "penetrate the veil of obfuscation behind which power conducts its risky business" (Gitlin). The Australian newspaper industry is in the midst of a long-term decline, with readership of weekday editions falling by twenty one percent between 1993 and 2005 ("Life in the Clickstream: The Future of Journalism"), and most of that – over fifteen percent – since 2000 (OECD).

[4] More crucial to the success of newspapers is the advertising – and particularly classified advertising – revenue once dubbed 'rivers of gold' for its ability to financially sustain print journalism. While in recent years Australian newspaper advertising revenues have experienced only minor drops – for instance, 0.6 percent combined across all areas and publications in 2008 – larger losses of up to 12.3 percent were experienced in employment classified advertising in the same year ("Australian Newspaper Industry Outperforming U.K. And U.S."). But of greater concern than the decline in traditional advertising revenue is the relative growth in online advertising, with Google's Australian advertising revenue now outstripping traditional media, including newspapers (Beecher "Google Advertising Revenue Trumps Australia's Traditional Media").

[5] But while traditional journalism is in crisis, online news is faring better than ever, with increasing numbers of audiences heading online. However, the question of how to 'monetize' this audience persists, as media companies are grappling to adjust an old business model and product to a new medium. This is further complicated by the quickly evolving media landscape, in which user-driven content from blogs and social networking sites can rapidly become a force in the media cycle, and a tool for journalists and audiences alike. While interactivity is chosen here to illuminate a range of these issues, it is also of deeper value. As I discuss below, the negotiation of interactivity requires the negotiation of political and economic concerns about the development of news businesses and journalism, and specifically, the way in which the liberal notion of journalism's 'fourth estate' role can be negotiated online.

The case studies: *The Age Online* and *Crikey*

[6] Given these broader trends, *The Age Online* and *Crikey* are valuable as individual cases partly for their location and ease of access, but also to address the need to undertake a close examination of the changing Australian media landscape (Flew "Democracy, Participation and Convergent Media: Case Studies in Contemporary Online News Journalism in Australia"). While the Australian media landscape offers a range of possible alternative cases – for instance, it would have been possible to compare *The Age* and the daily national broadsheet, *The Australian* – in

Crikey, I am able to explore a publication that occupies a unique position in the Australian media landscape as the only independent, national, email news source.

[7] While *Crikey* is often derided from within the mainstream media – particularly those publications owned by Rupert Murdoch's traditionally conservative company, News Limited – News Corporation's Australian branch – for its lack of journalistic credibility, it has worked hard to position itself as a serious news source (see Barns; Green). Further, Bruns argues that the perception of *Crikey* – and sites like it, such as the *Drudge Report* in the US – as alternative journalism sources is misleading:

> While they are able to exploit the web's low news production and delivery costs to set up their own operation and gain nationwide notoriety, journalistic practices on these sites – except for their deliberately confrontational, no-holds-barred approach to news coverage – is not much different from that in traditional news organizations. (Bruns 179)

In addition, the daily nature of the *Crikey* email resonates more with print deadlines than it does with the fluid nature of the online news continuous deadline. It is this interesting hybridity embodied by *Crikey*, situating it between new media and old, that makes it such an interesting case for comparison with an old media product making the move online.

[8] Further, a comparison of *The Age Online* and *Crikey* is made pertinent by the way in which these two quite different publications have related to each other publicly in recent years. *Crikey* publisher Eric Beecher has waged a vocal campaign for the preservation of what he calls 'public trust journalism' as news businesses evolve in an increasingly digital environment:

> By 'public trust' journalism I refer to journalism that applies scrutiny, analysis and accountability to governments, parliaments, politicians, public servants, judges, police, councils, the military, NGOs, diplomats, business and community leaders and the recipients of public funding. This journalism includes investigative reporting, analysis and feature writing, commentary, opinions, editorials, campaigns as well as the day-to-day reporting of parliaments, councils, courts, tribunals, wars, stock exchanges and all the other tentacles of the polity, the judiciary and the democracy. (Beecher "Democracy and the near-Death of Public Trust Journalism")

But *The Age Online* has not been actively involved in such debates. Rather, its parent company, Fairfax Media, has faced a range of challenges, including editorial-management conflict, a public boardroom stoush, significant staff cuts, and a high turnover of senior staff at both management and editorial levels (Oakes and Huxley; Ricketson; Simons "Andrew Jaspan? 235 Age Journalists Can't Be Wrong; Beecher "Beecher: Forget Kirk, When Will They Sack the Fairfax Board?; Chessell and Clegg). But Beecher, through *Crikey*, has lead the media charge in analysing these changes, and also accused Fairfax of internal censorship on these issues (Beecher "Beecher: No Debate on Journalism at Fairfax"). However, as I will demonstrate, *Crikey's* engagement with these debates has also meant they are awkwardly positioned to deal with some of the changes of the current news environment, while the apparent obliviousness of Fairfax allows the company and its publications to demonstrate more flexibility around some areas of change.

Journalism's changing political role

[9] Beecher's model of 'public trust journalism' is a contemporary re-imagining of the 'fourth estate' model of the press, which emerged with the liberal ideals of the nineteenth century. This model positions journalism as an additional check to the operation of the executive, judiciary and legislative branches of government. As Beecher's informal campaign demonstrates, this concept of journalism is still dominant today. But Schudson argues that there is a tendency to equate journalism and democracy, when "democracy and journalism are not the same thing", pointing out that democracy existed before and without journalism, and that journalism has demonstrated its ability to exist without democracy – in 1980s Chile, in Franco's Spain, and continues to exist in contemporary China (Schudson 11). Thus, rather than positioning journalism as a pillar of democracy, I argue that it is better understood as a technology of government, in the Foucauldian sense – in which government "entails any attempt to shape our behaviour according to particular sets of norms and for a variety of ends" (Dean 18). This form of government, also known as the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault in Dean 17), is predicated on the free and self-governing individual of liberalism.

[10] So, rather than measuring journalism according to its fulfillment of a 'democratic' or 'fourth estate' role, it can be considered in relation to the changing guises of liberalism. In this conception, journalism becomes the site of a range of objectives and techniques in relation to changing forms of liberalism – of which the classic liberal objective of journalism as a 'fourth estate' is just one. Nolan traces the development of classic liberalism to social liberalism and contemporary advanced liberalism, and the concomitant shifts in journalism. He argues that classic liberalism's focus on the moral individual saw the journalist as "a figure who lays claim to moral and (increasingly) technical authority" (Nolan 111). The moral position of journalism in this

period meant adopting the language of natural rights and the public good, developing the position of journalism as the 'fourth estate', and legitimisation through the value of objectivity which allowed the journalist to act as a relay between sites of authority and 'the people'. Specialized techniques, such as shorthand and the interview, allowed the journalist to fulfill this role of official record of information and communicator of knowledge to democracy's public.

[11] With the shift in the twentieth century towards a form of social liberalism, came a turn towards a greater role for the state in ensuring that society best caters to the subject, who is no longer perceived of as the moral individual, but rather as "a subject of needs, attitudes and relationships," (Nolan 113) which are figured and governed within the realm of 'the social'. The related changes in journalism include a shift towards public service broadcasting, and an emphasis on the values of "quality, pluralism and diversity in the media" (113). Similarly, journalism itself shifted from a site of moral authority and towards claims for "a social legitimacy based more squarely on technical procedure" (113) – such as objectivity, balance, a dependence on official sources as a site of authority, a separation of journalism's news and business operations, codes of ethics, notions of standards, the use of opinion polls and various modes of journalism such as the human interest genre.

[12] Just as social liberalism saw the refiguring of the moral subject of classic liberalism, so advanced liberalism sees the subject refigured again from one who in social liberalism is socially assembled, understood and governed, to one who is individually assembled and understood, and governed by a range of empowering new self-knowledges. Alongside these political shifts are cultural ones, which affect the configuration and practice of journalism, such as a new "sensitivity and responsiveness to the perspectives, demands and predilections of news audiences" (Nolan 115) – which, in part, entails great interactivity.

[13] With changing models of liberalism come associated changes to the culture and practice of journalism. However, such transformations are not always comfortable. Tensions can arise with the introduction of new cultures and practices of journalism, particularly between those who prescribe to 'traditional' journalistic values, and those who are quick to adapt to the conditions and demands of a changed political and economic environment. This can be demonstrated by the tension between Eric Beecher of *Crikey*, and Fairfax Media, *The Age Online's* parent company, over the economic-driven decision making of the board. While Beecher argues that the Fairfax board is ill-equipped to face the range of problems facing contemporary journalism (Beecher "Crikey Says"), the board has defended their direction as necessary for the economic (and thus, also cultural) preservation of journalism ("Kirk: Fairfax Media Has Never Been in Stronger Shape"). While an economically driven agenda resonates with the economic politics of advanced liberalism, it is

deeply at odds with the 'fourth estate' notion of the press. By applying a similar analytical framework to discussions about the adoption of interactive features, it is possible to see the way in which such decisions are not driven solely by technological capabilities, but rather, like reckonings about journalism's changing political role, are shaped by the dominant political ethos of our times – advanced liberal government.

Defining interactivity: in theory and in practice

[14] Newhagen and Rafaeli name interactivity as a defining characteristic of the internet, inherent in its architecture, central to human communication, and the property that could set the web apart from traditional media. This is symptomatic of the way in which interactivity is discussed; yet it is difficult to find a uniform definition of the term. Interactivity is typically defined by a range of characteristics or features that indicate that interactivity have been adopted. Central to the concept of interactivity is the notion that it enables 'conversations' – described variously as dialogue, responsiveness, selectivity and exchange – between audiences and producers of content (See Pavlik and McIntosh; Massey and Levy; Downes and McMillan; Lievrouw and Livingstone).

[15] Looking specifically at interactivity at online news sites, Deuze argues that there are degrees of interactive options. He aligns levels of interactivity with the history of a news site, so that mainstream news sites with a traditional history are generally limited in their adoption of interactive options, while news sites outside of the mainstream are more likely to demonstrate increased interactivity. Others, such as Boczkowski and Fortunati, measure interactivity according to the presence of particular features, such as forums, chat rooms, polls, links, comments, emails, live chat, and options for personalization. Fortunati argues that of all the traditional media, the newspaper is the least endowed with interactive capabilities, so it is not surprising that it has been slow to make full use of interactive options online. Still, Domingo argues that interactivity has always been "at the epicentre of online journalism myths" (685).

[16] Chung found that there is the tendency for journalists to conflate interactivity with the concepts of technological convergence or immediacy. In the words of the editor of OpinionJournal.com, interviewed by Chung: "The main thing about interactivity is immediacy…However, [interactivity] is not a word that I think of that much" (51). The difference here is the way in which these two features work within existing professional practices in journalism. While immediacy (or the speed of news online) sits comfortably alongside pre-existing news values to do with timeliness, interactivity does not. Interactivity clashes with the norms and values of professional (liberal) journalistic culture, and particularly, the traditional relationship

between news producers and audiences. The adoption of interactivity would require for the journalist a "complete redefinition of working routines" (Domingo 692).

[17] MacGregor made a similar finding in his study on the use of tracking data in the newsroom. While journalists keenly follow the success of stories as well as related geographical data about readers, they are unlikely to use this data to make immediate changes to their published work. MacGregor suggests that a key reason for a resistance to such data, which provides the potential for deep interaction between the audience and the journalist, is the deeply entrenched professional practice of news values. Tracking statistics are seen as less trustworthy than the abstract 'feeling' for news values that professional journalists cultivate.

[18] Boczkowski found that the ways in which interactive options are adopted at online news sites was shaped by approaches to production within the newsroom, such as organizational structures, representations of the audience, and work practices. So, for example, an online news room that was positioned closely alongside its print counterpart, perceived its audience as possessing a limited level of technical skill, and maintained the gate-keeping role of traditional journalism – in which journalists act as a privileged filter between information and audience – as central to the online news context produced a site with low interactivity. On the other hand, a site with far less alignment with its print counterpart, and perception of its audience as technologically savvy, produced a site with high levels of multimediality – but still had low levels of interactivity, because it was still attached to the gate-keeping role of journalis. Finally, the site that perceived of its audience as possessing limited technological skills, but with very little attachment to its print counterpart, and reconfigured newsroom tasks around alternatives to gate-keeping, produced a site with high levels of interactivity.

[19] Chung, MacGregor and Boczkowksi identify that the adoption of interactivity does not always sit comfortably with the 'traditional' – or liberal – values and practices of journalism. Chung and MacGregor demonstrate that the adoption of interactive options for journalists is often at odds with the news values those journalists have cultivated as professionals. In this liberal conception of journalism, the journalist is the site of professional knowledge and expertise – "a figure who lays claim to moral and (increasingly) technical authority" (Nolan 111). This is at odds with the journalist of advanced liberalism, who demonstrates an increased sensitivity to audience demands. It is with the latter incarnation of the journalist that contemporary expectations of interactivity sit – but journalists who are still attached to the liberal model of journalism would find this transition uncomfortable. Thus it is necessary to extend Boczkowski's suggestion that the greater the attachment to print norms, the lower the chances of interactivity, so that, rather than considering just 'print norms', we consider the liberal journalistic model more broadly in order to examine its

influence over the adoption of interactive options. I will now demonstrate this in the discussion of the two case studies.

The cases of *The Age Online* and *Crikey*

[20] Interactivity has always been central to *Crikey's* operation. Established in 2000 by 'shareholder activist' Stephen Mayne, the first weekly edition contained just six stories (Mayne). Since its establishment, *Crikey*, which now operates as both a substantial daily subscriber email, and a website, has run a combination of items by full time staff, regular contributors, anonymous tip-offs, and longer contributions from interested or qualified readers. Thus, the publication has always thrived on a lively and active relationship with its audience, and has cultivated a readership that is keenly interested and able to comment as amateur experts – or in fact, often as legitimate experts in their field. While its tenuous financial situation – whether from legal threats or the shaky dot com market at the time of its inception – placed its owners in financial jeopardy a number of times (Day), it also enabled the growth of a strong 'insider' culture among its readers, allowing it to occupy a critical position much like the ABC Television program *Media Watch*, which critiques and analyses the media from within, with *Crikey* readers contributing tip-offs and articles about issues from the media, finance, politics and the arts.

[21] With the sale of *Crikey* to Private Media Partners, which saw former Editor-In-Chief of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Eric Beecher, take the helm as publisher, anonymous articles were no longer published, and *Crikey* began to build its status as a mainstream news source and align itself more clearly with traditional journalistic values (Hogan). Nonetheless, the strong relationship with the audience has remained. For example, a more classic letters section has remained throughout *Crikey's* history – originally as a weekly section called 'Yoursay', now a daily section of the subscriber email, known as 'Comments, corrections, clarifications and c*ckups'(Josey). While today *Crikey* employs far more full time staff and paid contributors than ever before, it still relies on its dynamic relationship with its readers to provide tip-offs and act as occasional contributors on expert or niche issues as they arise. It is this intimacy and responsiveness between readers and journalists, as well as its ability to find contributors and sources among its readership, outside of the domain of traditional journalism, which has been part of *Crikey's* success.

[22] Eleven years since its inception, *Crikey* is now interactive in different ways. Key members of the *Crikey* staff are notably active on microblogging service Twitter. The number of *Crikey*-affiliated Twitter accounts (see Brown for a compilation of these) are used for a range of activities, from linking to daily stories, advertising competitions and exclusives, holding informal reader polls, drawing readers to the website, linking to interesting media content from outside sources,

and largely, as a form of interaction with their readers and followers. Each story on the website is also accompanied by links to enable instant sharing through a range of Web 2.0 platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Digg, del.icio.us, Reddit and StumbleUpon, encouraging reader interaction with content beyond the bounds of the immediate experience of consumption.

[23] In May 2009, *Crikey* relaunched its website as a media portal, in addition to its usual function as an anchor for *Crikey* archives and point of entry for new subscribers. The newly configured website was described as "*Crikey*, but now with extra source", positioning *Crikey* as more than a news producer, but also as "a point of view, a filter, a perspective, a way of seeing the world" ("The New Crikey Website"). It also signalled a move away from *Crikey* as a solely text-based medium, introducing a new focus on video and podcasts. The relaunch was successful in attracting a new, younger audience, but not in bringing in more revenue, and so with a new editor, Sophie Black, appointed late 2009, the focus has shifted again to further building links from the website to the email (Simons "Sophie, the Mad Monk and the Drum"), where interaction is more limited.

[24] *The Age Online* has a very different provenance to *Crikey*. While the latter is a web-only publication, *The Age Online* is the online version of print newspaper *The Age*, Melbourne's only local broadsheet, traditionally positioned to the left of the Murdoch-owned *Herald Sun* tabloid. While *The Age Online* began with few more features than the ability to navigate via hyperlinks, it has recently relaunched its website with heightened interactive features. These include: greater prominence for comments on stories, alongside encouragement to 'join the conversation', though not all stories are open for comment; a counter showing how many users are reading a particular story at a given time; links to enable instant sharing on Twitter and Facebook; links to related coverage; the compilation of top stories within each news category; and a heightened video presence throughout the website. Online Editor in Chief Mike Van Niekerk wrote that the site had been reorganised to "give [readers] more choice and to present the big stories and features more quickly and effectively" (Van Niekerk).

[25] However, beyond stories that are open to readers' comments, interactivity is limited. Unlike *Crikey*, readers at *The Age* are not encouraged to become part of the news-making process if they have a tip-off or are interested in making a contribution in areas of their expertise. While *Crikey* fosters and thrives on such interaction, *The Age Online* only reaches out to readers in cases of dramatic breaking news, usually running readers' photos as part of a compilation the next day (for an example, see "Heavy Rain Strikes Melbourne"). Readers wanting to send feedback to *The Age Online* must fill in an anonymous comment box and hope for a reply. On the other hand, *The Age Online* has made use of Twitter, with a number of 'official' accounts linking back to the website to top stories and breaking news. While the official *Age* account (http://twitter.com/TheAge) does

not demonstrate interactivity per se, simply directing followers to stories in a one-way fashion, the accounts of some individual journalists demonstrate far more interaction with followers and content online. But overall, *The Age Online* presents itself as a closed journalistic product, produced beyond the readers' reach, with limited, internally controlled areas for audience interaction.

Comparison and discussion

[26] *The Age Online* and *Crikey* embody different histories and positions in the Australian media landscape. Simons argues that *Crikey* is significant "not only because it is Australia's first commercial internet-only journalism service", but also because it demonstrates the successful mix of paid and free content that other online news sources are keen to replicate (Simons "Crikey Costs Trimmed, but Not the Attitude"). In comparison, *The Age Online* (in combination with its print counterpart) represents an important alternative to the conservative Murdoch-owned press, and particularly (the News Limited-owned, daily national broadsheet) *The Australian*, which in recent years has "consciously positioned itself as the site for thought leadership in conservative politics in Australia" (Flew "Not yet the Internet Election: Online Media, Political Commentary and the 2007 Federal Election" 9). However, in light of recent staff cuts and internal reshuffles at *The Age Online's* parent company, Fairfax Media, *Crikey* has begun to position itself as the independent alternative to *The Age Online* and mainstream news media more generally. In particular, *Crikey* publisher Eric Beecher argues that Fairfax is no longer interested in providing public-oriented journalism in Australia (The Axe Falls at Fairfax), the implication being that *Crikey* is interested, and offers a robust, independent and committed alternative.

[27] While *Crikey* is open to audience participation and contribution in a range of ways, *The Age Online* sets out clearly defined spaces for interaction within an otherwise closed system. While *The Age Online* has embodied the struggles of a large media organization responding to the challenges of a changing media and business landscape by consolidating its operations and cutting journalists' jobs, *Crikey* has moved beyond early financial pressure to position itself as the independent champion for the cause of quality journalism in Australia. Despite their different positions in the local media landscape, and their different responses to interactivity – viewed on a larger scale, the two publications are not so different. Looking beyond the complexities of their operations, both publications only allow audience interaction within clearly demarcated boundaries.

[28] However, while this analysis demonstrates that Crikey currently possesses more avenues for reader-journalist interactivity, I suggest that this might not always be the case. Despite its unique

characteristics, *Crikey* is more outwardly attached to liberal notions of journalism's social role, as its investment in current debates about the future of 'public trust' journalism in Australia demonstrate – and this investment could work to limit further development of interactivity, while *The Age Online* might not find itself so constrained. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Interactivity is central to the contemporary development of online news because of its resonance with the economic politics of the times. But the recognition of the historically contingent nature of journalism's 'fourth estate' role requires a similar recognition that the current culture of journalism is historically contingent and therefore neither intrinsic nor intrinsically beneficial.

[29] As Nolan outlines, changes in journalism reflect broader socio-political shifts, and specifically, the evolution of liberalism as the basis for contemporary democracy. It is evident from the case studies that each publication is responding to these shifts by manifesting some of the tensions that arise around the cultural changes occurring in journalism as its social role evolves. In each case, relations between news producers and consumers are being broken down, allowing audiences to extend their social use of news. While at present *Crikey* offers more interactive options, *The Age Online* is implementing changes too. *The Age Online* may be slower to respond to the changing news environment, but large media organizations are traditionally slow to adapt to change. In comparison, *Crikey* began with more structurally embedded interactive options due to its weak financial position, requiring high levels of audience involvement, and has worked to reduce this direct form of interaction as it secured a stronger financial position and a place in the Australian mainstream media. In its recent informal campaign asserting the importance of public journalism it demonstrates some of the tensions that arise with shifting political and economic conditions and their related cultural changes.

[30] With the increasing role of the audience and the decreasing prominence of the journalist as the site of knowledge and expertise in advanced liberal incarnations of journalistic culture, 'traditional' (liberal) journalism is left in an uncomfortable position. Despite the current lack of interactive options at *The Age Online*, and its historical development through liberal 'fourth estate' print journalism, there is less discomfort in its transition towards an audience-centred, interactive news experience. This suggests that it is the navigation of journalism's changing characteristics, within its political and economic context, that informs the adoption of interactive features – rather than technological or historical circumstances.

Bio Note

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communication technologies with politics, economics and culture in general, and journalism and

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[1] Advanced liberalism is used here rather than the more popular neo-liberalism, in recognition that contemporary government – which I discuss in more detail in the body of the paper – does not take a monolithic form. Rather, advanced liberal government inhabits a number of guises – of which neo-liberalism is the most prominent – including neo-conservativism and communitarianism. Forms of advanced liberal government are thus recognizable not by their declared 'ethos', but by their central elements, including the spread of the market into areas formerly of public provision, the adoption of indirect means of regulation, and the dispersion of government across multiple sites and forms of agency (Dean 266).