Media entrepreneurship: alternative paths for media producers

A new type of media professional, with entrepreneurial skills, has emerged in the contemporary media environment in Australia – a professional that is informing the public and disseminating news and information but stretching the boundaries of journalism. These media professionals are engaged in, as Margaret Simons says, "the dissemination of news and views about our world" (2013, p. 13), but they are engaging with newer forms of media to provide these news and views. Flew calls these new forms "information media" (2014, p. 107). This paper is reporting on the preliminary work done on a research project that aims to conduct a detailed and applied investigation into these new media professionals and includes an introduction to the research, why this research is important, definitions, and a discussion of the existing literature to create the case for the value of research into this currently understudied field.

Media producers in the West have been faced with changes in the way content is produced and consumed with changes in technology, digitisation of content, and convergence each playing a part in a transforming media landscape. However, with these new technologies, different opportunities have opened up for media content producers, and there is a need for empirical evidence on these producers and how they work and survive in the digital media landscape.

There are four major questions that the research is seeking to answer:

RQ1: How have these new media professionals adapted their skills in production environments?

RQ2: What technologies and software, including SEOs and social media analytics, are deployed by these new media professionals?

RQ3: What are the evolving business models they are using?

RQ4: What are the degrees of success of these new media professionals according to different locations in the media scape?

The project is not researching journalists, although there are journalists who work in this space and could be included as participants; it is not a project that is examining produsers, as per Bruns (2005; 2006) definition, or citizen journalists (Glaser, 2012, p. 578), or what Jarvis calls *networked journalists*, where "professionals and amateurs [work] together to get the real story" (Jarvis in Deuze, 2010, p. 271). It is a project that will look at media producers who are disseminating information by alternative means to understand how they are doing this successfully, or if they are doing this successfully. Margaret Simons calls such producers "new-media entrepreneurs" (2013, p. 9). In this instance, it could include such media producers as bloggers,

including lifestyle as well as news blogs, online magazine producers, web publishers and broadcasters.

We know, anecdotally, that these new media professionals exist and research is being conducted in this space internationally. Research in New Zealand, for example, has shown that bloggers are becoming increasingly active in the media domain (Myllylahti, 2013) and other international research has examined business models of journalism startups (Sirkkunen & Cook, 2012) and working in native digital news (Jurkowitz, 2014). Simons' (2013) book *What's next in journalism?: new-media entrepreneurs tell their stories* is a collection of first person accounts, based on contributions at a conference held in Melbourne in 2012, from individuals who work in the online news media sector in Australia. Researchers have examined how audiences are engaging with alternative journalism sites (Barnes, 2013a; 2013b), the content of political blogs (Bruns et al., 2011) and efficient ways to provide support for emerging media (Karen Poh, discussed in Simons, 2013, p. 13). However, there is little empirical data at the moment in Australia that answers the above research questions.

Because of the radical changes to journalism over the last five years and the different way it is now produced and delivered, and the rise of alternative producers, it is even more crucial to examine the newer styles of journalism, if in fact it is journalism, and this examination will be done in this research by examining the producers themselves. Ethnographic techniques including semi-structured interviews, and document and artefact analysis will be used to answer the research questions.

Why is this research important?

Employment woes for workers in Western media in traditional media forms such as newspapers and broadcast journalism have been well documented (Fulton & Balnaves, 2013). Simons (2013) notes that it is business models that has led to the decline in mainstream media with classified advertising, the traditional means by which media made money, migrating to primarily free online sites. However, arguments have been made that while the delivery platform may be changing, journalism itself is not dying (Deuze, 2007; Nerone, 2013) and according to research by Economic and Market Development Advisors (EMDA), a business group that advises Australian businesses on market development using economic forecasting and modelling, media jobs in Australia have increased with approximately 22,000 workers who identified as journalists and writers as of November 2013 (Jackson, 2013). The EMDA report noted a decrease in traditional employment in this area with an increase in employment in areas such as online magazines and websites. The aim of this research is to examine workers in this new media, or Web 2.0, area. The Web 2.0 environment, which is characterised by such features as interactivity, participation and collaboration, has allowed people outside the mainstream media to

engage with an audience, and provide media, via platforms such as blogs (for example, Wordpress), microblogs (Twitter), social networking sites (Facebook) and websites. Athique states that "Web 2.0 is a domain in which user-produced content comes to the fore, replacing the 'elite' sources of information" (2013, pp. 249-250), which is talking about the top-down nature of traditional media. Flew notes several features of Web 2.0 that have enabled this growth in alternative producers: distribution, entry costs are cheaper thus giving a lower barrier to entry in the market; production, where smaller production teams can produce content; power, giving the consumer power to choose from a wider range of media; producer-consumer relationship, giving the consumer a personalised media experience; and, content, where long tail economics may mean non-mass media products could be profitable (2014, p. 77).

One of the areas examined will be an exploration into how skills have been adapted to enable productive work in the online space. Web 2.0 is an environment that supports hypertextuality, where an audience has access to information that is outside of their screen via links, or hypertexts, multimediality, where different media forms such as text, images, audio and video interact, and interactivity, which gives the audience the ability to participate in the site (Siapera, 2012). The first research question explores how the respondents have developed skills to work with these Web 2.0 characteristics, thus providing data that will, perhaps, lead to greater success for new players.

In the same vein, another area to be investigated will be the means by which the respondents monetise their work, if they do, which could also provide valuable insight for start-ups. Ross points out that workers in this space often make a living by "piecing together disparate lumps of work and income" (2013, p. 30). Will this "piecing together" be a business model discovered in the research? Several respondents who have been recognised as potential participants are active in numerous parts of the online space including a network of social media connections such as Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus and Pinterest as well as their core product of a blog, website or online publication. Bakker listed the following streams of revenue for online news operations: subscription, single copy sales, advertising, sponsorship, donations and non-profit funding (2012, p. 628) but he also noted that newer style enterprises, such as *The Huffington Post*, have relied on free content provided by bloggers, a business model that meant a sale price of $315million in 2011. The Huffington Post business model has been accused of exploiting workers who are desperate to work in the creative industries (Hirst, 2014; Terranova, 2013). Furthermore, while there have been success stories such as, internationally, *The Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed* (now in Australia) and, in Australia, *Mamamia.com*, Bruns notes that most political bloggers, for example, are "doing this work mostly pro bono, out of personal interest rather than as their core professional endeavour" (2012, p. 426). Audiences expect online content to be free (Sirkkunen & Cook, 2012, p. 8) and this expectation has made it difficult for media producers to charge for

content. In 2003, Barbrook called freely available online information a "high-tech version of the gift economy" (2003, p. 91) and claimed that one of the striking features of the Internet is that, "[i]nformation is for sharing not for selling. Knowledge is a gift not a commodity" (ibid.). Barbrook's comment aptly describes the conundrum faced by new media professionals. However, on a brighter note, Jenkins, et al. state that "the companies that will thrive over the long term in a 'spreadable media' landscape are those that listen to, care abut and ultimately aim to speak to the needs and wants of their audiences as crucially as they do their own business goals" (2013, loc. 107). Alternative media producers typically have a high amount of engagement and interactivity with their audience and this engagement emerges out of the social networks they develop.

These social networks, technologies, business models and skills appear to be deeply interconnected and it is timely to examine how they are connected and how each of these areas contributes to the success, or not, of alternative media producers in the Australian media landscape. A further important benefit is that, with the journalism and communication education sector often accused of producing more workers than jobs, the research findings could provide valuable information for educators to use in journalism and communication programs.

Definitions: are new media producers journalists?

What do these media producers call themselves? Can it be said that they are doing journalism? In a similar way to new media itself, the definition for digital media workers is fluid and is difficult to define. While this project is not specifically researching journalists or journalism, rather it is examining alternative news and information disseminators, it is fruitful to provide a definition of the terms journalist and journalism, to see if there is any correlation, as well as discuss other definitions that may lead to an operational definition of key terms to use for the research study.

Defining *journalist* is contentious. Attempts by academics and other writers to define the term have met with limited success (Shapiro, 2014). Zelizer summarised the confusion when she declared: "Although one might think that academics, journalism educators and journalists themselves might talk about journalism in roughly the same manner, defining 'journalism' is not in fact consensual" (2004, p. 13). Zelizer provided a simple definition by stating that a journalist is one who practices the actions of news work but then asks the question: "Is a teenage girl who produces daily entries in her diary and shares them with her friend a journalist? According to the above-mentioned definition, she is" (2004, p. 23) and further lists film reviewers, music critics, radio talk-show announcers, weblog producers and reality television as entities who might push journalism's "definitional lines" (ibid). Using Zelizer's definition, the producers to be analysed in this study are journalists. Furthermore, these media workers could be called journalists as what they do seems to correspond with the employment classification provided by the Australian Bureau of

Statistics (ABS): "JOURNALISTS AND RELATED PROFESSIONALS write and edit news reports, commentaries and feature stories for presentation by print or electronic media" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014, emphasis in original). The ABS definition could encompass the participants recognised for this research.

G. Stuart Adam defined a journalist via their work practice as one who "expresses a judgment on the importance of an item, engages in reporting, adopts words and metaphors, solves a narrative puzzle and assesses and interprets" (1989, p. 75). However, Sheridan Burns (Sheridan Burns, 2013) maintains that rather than being simple, the definition of a journalist includes more than merely practice and entails three parts: someone who earns their living from practising journalism; someone who has mastered the technicalities of the profession and is accepted by other journalists as having done that; and, someone who practices journalism as social responsibility. Tapsall and Varley claim it is easier to identify what a journalist does rather than define what a journalist is and noted: "Journalists find the truth; try to interest and engage readers, listeners, or viewers; act independently and question society; support society's wider values; communicate clearly; and strive to be fair in their reporting" (2001, p. 5). Tapsall and Varley further add a qualifying point in agreement with Sheridan Burns: what should separate a journalist is the ideal of public responsibility, an ideal noted by others (Breit, 2004; Josephi, 1998; Quinn, 2006; Vine, 2009) and included in the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) Code of Ethics (2008).

William Bovée (1999) suggested that a journalist is one who does journalism, but this of course leads to the question of what is journalism. On a pragmatic level, G. Stuart Adam described journalism as "an invention or a form of expression used to report and comment in the public media on the events and ideas of the here and now" (1993, p. 11). More recently, Shapiro provided the following functional definition: "Journalism comprises the activities involved in an independent pursuit of accurate information about current or recent events and its original presentation for public edification" (2014, p. 1). It has been described as a cultural practice that "effectively manages the flow of information and ideas in society" (Meadows, 2001, p. 47) and "the gathering, the processing, and delivery of important and interesting information and developments by newspapers, magazines, or broadcast media" (Hachten, 2005, p. xiv). Conley and Lamble stated that it "may be defined as the reporting of newsworthy events" (2006, p. 82) while Knight added that it is "non-fiction writing (news) which relies on identifiable sources" (2000, p. 48). Knight also attempts to distinguish journalists from bloggers: "Anyone applying professional practices within recognised codes of ethics will be differentiated from most bloggers (2008, p. 123). It could be argued, though, that there are those who call themselves professional journalists who do not seem to work wholly within the "recognised ethics" (ibid.), thus leading to an erosion of trust in the traditional journalism institutions. This very idea was noted in the Finkelstein Report: "There is considerable evidence that Australians have a low level of trust in the media as an institution and in journalists as a

professional group" (2012, p. 123). On the other hand, there are bloggers who are considered by their audience to be trusted and professional (see, for example, the report on the New Zealand landscape by Myllylahti (2013)).

Hirst (2011) states that professionals and amateurs are capable of presenting news and he does this by providing a definition of news: "News … can also be common knowledge, information about events close or distant in which we take some interest … To be news something has to be new — information that is revealed to the audience (of one, or many) for the first time" (2011, p. 111). Hirst also notes the common list of news values – proximity, immediacy, impact, novelty, public or human interest, conflict, prominence and consequence – as further evidence to judge whether an item is news and claims that if a professional or amateur presents news with at least some of these values, that is news, therefore confirming Zelizer's earlier definition. However, an early argument against bloggers, particularly by traditional news organisations, was that the content was a regurgitation of news stories investigated and reported on by mainstream media. Research done by the Pew Research Centre in 2010 showed that more than 99% of content on US blog sites linked to mainstream media outlets (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). A further bone of contention in the relationship between bloggers and journalists is that it was claimed that blogging consisted of commentary only with bloggers dismissed as untrustworthy and unskilled (Bruns, 2008). Bruns (2012) provides a succinct piece on blogging and tweeting in Australia and the sometimes fraught relationship with the mainstream media, claiming that the mainstream typically attacks new online players. Political journalists and bloggers, in particular, have been sometimes contemptuous of each other's value in the media landscape (Bruns, 2012) and Greg Jericho includes a chapter in his book, *The rise of the Fifth Estate*, to present examples of how certain mainstream journalists denigrated bloggers during 2007 (Jericho, 2012, pp. 102-142).

With the uncertainty around definitions, the researcher has examined several terms in the online media space in an attempt to clarify how the media producers recruited for this research can be defined and clarify the operational definition for the research. Citizen journalism, amateur media, user-generated content (UGC), networked journalism, post-industrial journalism and entrepreneurial journalism are all terms examined in an attempt to provide a definition for these media producers. However, while each term seems to describe some part of what these content producers do, each term falls short.

Steve Outing defines citizen journalism as "harnessing the power of the audience" (2005, p. 1) within mainstream media. Outing lists eleven layers of citizen journalism such as opening up stories to public comment, inviting the audience to post images, videos and reader-stories, including citizen blogs on a news website, and a news organization running a citizen-only blog site, right through to what he calls "wiki journalism" (ibid.), where readers are the editors. Each of Outing's examples

includes traditional media and/or journalists in some form. However, Axel Bruns claims that citizen journalism "is a form of journalism where citizens themselves, rather than (or at the very least in addition to) paid journalists claiming to represent the public interest, are directly engaged in covering, debating, and deliberating on the news" (2008, p. 174); in other words, Bruns includes bloggers, tweeters, photographers, etc. who publish themselves. Bruns' understanding of citizen journalism may suit this research project and this definition will be examined closely when the respondents answer the question of their own classification. However, the different understandings of citizen journalism, briefly outlined here using Outing and Bruns, suggests further terms need to be examined.

Are these respondents engaging in amateur media? Certainly not in the traditional understanding of amateur, which is that "[a]mateurs are usually understood to be uninterested in the business aspect of their activity … amateurs take on the task in their spare time, content to accept no financial reward" (Hamilton, 2013, pp. 178-179), and not in the sense that Hunter, et al. (2013) use the term, which is to liken it to UGC. However, a chapter in the same volume as the Hamilton reading provided the following definition for UGC that provides an argument against including new media content producers under the UGC banner:

> "UGC remains a category typically designed in relation to its normative opposites: the professionally produced content that is supported and sustained by commercial media businesses or public organisations and the purportedly docile and passive modes of consumption associated with mass analog media" (Lobato, Thomas & Hunter, 2013, p. 3).

The participants that are being examined in this research are typically producing professional content and several are supported by commercial media businesses, or are commercially successful media businesses in their own right. Thus, they are an example of UGC's "normative opposite" (ibid.). However, they are certainly not supported and sustained by passive consumption with one of the parameters in this media space including an engagement with Web 2.0 elements: interactivity, participation and collaboration. In other words, the media producers researched in this project may fulfill part of the above definition of UGC but certainly not all of it. Hirst (2011) takes the idea of UGC further and calls it *User Generated News-Like Content* or UGNC, which he defines as "an act of creation by someone who is not professionally distinguished from the audience … 'news-like' describes a wide and varied range of UGNC material that appears inside and alongside readily identifiable news outlets" (2011, pp. 110-111). Again, this definition does not quite describe what the media producers in this research engage in because there will be participants who do not consider themselves "the audience" but media producers in their own right.

Flew notes media models such as *post industrial* and *networked* journalism as terms

that are attempting to explain these new forms of journalism – with post industrial defined as "identifying new ways of engaging the public and using computing tools to represent information in new and engaging ways in the context of news institutions" (2014, p. 116) and networked journalism described as "where professionals and amateurs collaborate across shared platforms" (ibid., p. 115). Flew's definition of networked journalism is similar to Jarvis's (in Deuze, 2010, p. 271), as noted earlier, and is one business model that is popular in the online space. Australian websites such as *MamaMia* and *The Hoopla*, for example, use both amateur and professional content, although both sites now pay their amateurs, and others such as *The Roar* have professional sports writers and amateur writers, whose work is edited by professionals. The model of post industrial journalism is certainly partially relevant as well, because the very nature of these professionals is that they are engaging the public in new ways, and using technology to precipitate that engagement. Nevertheless, the caveat of "news institutions" (Flew, 2014, p. 116) in the above definition precludes the use of post industrial journalism as a way to define the participants.

Each of the above definitions could be considered partially relevant but each of the above definitions does not consider that the participants to be recruited for this project could consider what they do as media production and not an extension of themselves as an audience member. With that in mind, the final idea to be assessed, what Flew (2014) calls *entrepreneurial journalism*, seems appropriate. Entrepreneurial journalism is a form which "combines the skills traditionally associated with freelance journalism with business skills associated with an MBA program, and a preparedness to start one's own online publishing venture if need be" (2014, p. 116) and this definition provides the closest to the kind of producers to be examined in this study, particularly the last section.

Entrepreneurial journalism is the latest buzzword in an industry that is facing major challenges. Universities are running courses in entrepreneurial journalism; books and other literature are providing information on how to be an entrepreneurial journalist (Baines & Kennedy, 2010; Briggs, 2011; DeMasi, 2013); and there are instances of freelance journalists who call themselves a *journopreneur*. "A journalist who also identifies as an entrepreneur who is building a business on the side" (Evans, 2014). Simons' description of the contributors to her book can be used in this instance as well: "they are all operating in a space that either is, or strongly overlaps with, what we have traditionally thought of as being the business of journalism - the dissemination of news and views about our world" (2013, p. 9).

It could be argued, though, that the tension around defining journalism precludes this definition as well for this particular research. Therefore, it may be worthwhile taking Simons' and Flew's definitions one step further in an attempt to provide an operational definition for the research project: rather than limiting the research, using a term such as *media entrepreneurs* broadens the scope of the study to include an

expanded base of participants who are involved in the "dissemination of news and views about our world" (Simons, 2013, p. 9) by alternative means. In fact, if we take the view that media producers tell society's stories, it may even be fruitful to introduce the term *entrepreneurial storytellers* to describe what these people do.

Conclusion

In a changing media environment, there is ongoing debate on what skills are needed to work in the digital space and which business models work and this paper has reported on the preliminary steps in a research project that will explore how media producers work and survive in the digital media landscape. The research is attempting to develop an understanding of producers that are successful and why they are successful. This paper introduced the research, explained why this research is important, and briefly discussed the existing literature to create the case for the value of research into this currently understudied field in Australia.

The value of the project is that in a precarious work environment, the information discovered in the data may be useful to media producers intending to start up their own business. Furthermore, the information could also be useful within university communication programs. With job opportunities in mainstream media becoming increasingly rare, providing information to students on alternative ways to successfully monetise their work and what skills are required as well as teaching students how to adapt to changing platforms can only be positive.

Additionally, and of crucial importance, the paper has explored definitions and provided an operational definition of key terms in the study. Rather than limiting the research to participants who consider themselves journalists, these operational definitions enables a broader range of participants who work in the digital media space.