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Media in the News: How Australia’s Media Beat Covered Two Major Journalism Change Events

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ABSTRACT

As the primary mechanism through which journalistic labour is organized within a newsroom, news beats are an important feature of journalistic research. However, within the extensive research that examines beat reporting and its specialties, there is little that examines how the media covers itself—or the media beat. This study explores the media beat in Australia, examining how media covered two major media change events: the loss of jobs at newspaper publisher Fairfax in 2012 and the potential closure of wire service Australian Associated Press (AAP) in 2020. In analysing reporting of change events in journalism through a framework of metajournalistic discourse, and through an analysis of 200 items, this study found that “media beat” journalists included more information about the adverse effects of job loss and disruption on news supply in 2020 than in 2012. Intermedia competition often shaped coverage, with journalists reporting change in rival media companies. Yet, how “media beat” reporters covered these changes varied in both years. The study also found that stakeholders from within and outside of media contribute to the development of change narratives in journalism by offering robust discussion of the implications of industry transformation for news quality and informed publics.

KEYWORDS

Media beat; metajournalistic discourse; Fairfax; AAP; Australia; job loss; beat journalism

Introduction

Reporting on the media requires journalists to cover their own industry, a task that implies critical review and assessment of journalism practices and media performance. If done well, it requires courage, both to ask hard questions of media executives and colleagues, perhaps even your own boss, *and* to withstand industry pushback to revelations of business mismanagement or newsroom malpractice. It is not surprising therefore that the media beat is a challenging newsroom job that rarely wins

accolades. But in the context of industry upheaval and digital disruption, the media reporter has a vital role, and has the potential to contribute to critical self-reflection of journalism practices, and to greater awareness of the issues that confront the viability of news media.

While studies of digital restructuring of news reporting have proliferated over the past decade (Bunce 2019; Cohen 2019; Zion 2016), the question of how journalists communicate industry change to their audiences has attracted less attention, perhaps in part, because reporting on the media has not normally been considered a major beat. This study addresses this gap by examining media reporting of two significant media change events in Australia. In conceptualizing and operationalizing the media beat, this article contributes to understandings of news beats, demonstrating that analysis of the media beat provides insights into the episteme of journalistic authority. Our research also provides new insights into how media engages with audiences about the extent and implications of (threats to) its own economic sustainability. The significance of this process is that it demonstrates how the media beat plays an important role in framing representations of journalism and the media industry.

We outline the key components of the media beat (with specific reference to the Australian context), including regular media sections in newspapers, broadcast programmes focusing on media, and digital media sites that include regular media coverage. We then take a case study approach to examine coverage by several media outlets of the loss of journalism jobs at a large media company in 2012, and of the threatened closure of a newswire service in 2020. These events bookend a decade of disruptive industry transformation, during which time it is estimated that around 3000 journalist jobs disappeared from Australian newsrooms (MEAA 2017, 6). We find that the Australian media beat's coverage of the media has become more focused on the scale and implications of industry change over the last decade.

Literature Review

As the primary mechanism through which journalistic labour is organised in the newsroom, news beats have long been a major focus of journalism research (Magin and Maurer 2019; Tuchman 1975). As the media beat evolves in the context of ongoing digital restructuring of news reporting, there is evidence that routines in beats are changing (Tandoc and Duffy 2019). While reporters still craft news stories by gathering information from established networks of sources, a wider range of editorial technologies and resources are in use in digital newsrooms, such as audience analytics and metrics, with new work routines emerging in that context (Westlund and Ekstrom 2019).

While much research has focused on high-status beats such as politics, there is less research that examines the media beat, and how it may be changing in the context of digital restructuring. The research that does address the media beat found similar criticisms of the reporting model to others, including an overreliance on high-status sources. Fengler (2003) found that media reporting and media criticism in the news media emerged from the media boom of the 1990s as a promising media accountability system in the United States', but noted that "media reporters and media critics disagreed about the purpose of media criticism and media reporting." Fengler further argued that many media reporters and media critics

still appeared to be more reluctant to go after fellow journalists, as well as media managers and media owners, than after politicians or businesspeople. The apparent reason for their cautiousness is their dependency on other media professionals as sources, colleagues, and employers. (827)

Similarly, a case study of business reporting of the 2008–2010 newspaper crisis in the US (Chyi, Lewis, and Zheng 2012) found shortcomings in media coverage of media, arguing that journalists at the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* lacked adequate contextual information, relied too heavily on media company sources, and “struggled to capture a holistic portrayal of newspapers’ troubles” (305). They concluded that a greater reliance on media economics data—a staple resource for business/finance beat reporting—might do more to bolster public faith in the newspaper industry, and trust in news reporting (2012, 318). In work that examines news organizations disclosure strategies for job layoffs, Babington (2020) argued there are ethical obligations for media companies to publicly disclose employment reduction and related impacts on news supply. In another article that explores how journalism can respond to the current crisis, Williams (2017, 4731) claimed that raising public awareness of financial struggles and cutbacks in journalism is “a pivotal issue” because “a majority of the public” knows little about this crisis and its consequences for democratic values.

Such findings point to a shortage of not only newsworthy information about journalism’s digital “transition” (Picard 2014, 8), but also of “news media self-criticism” (Haas 2006), and raise the question of what specialist coverage of the media consists of, and where it fits into the beat system. While this topic receives limited attention in the literature, journalism scholars have identified key issues in need of further research. Haas (2006, 351) has signalled the strategic importance of news media self-criticism to redress the “gradual erosion of the cultural authority of mainstream journalism” in the digital era. Engaging with this theme, Lerner (2021) argues that digital technologies have enabled such media criticism. Drawing on an influential 1974 essay by James Carey that called for the development of a culture of press criticism (Carey 1974), Lerner points to Carey’s concern “that the institutions of journalism, in their move toward professionalism, had grown too remote from the public that they served”. Four decades later, Lerner contends, “the rift is at least as bad, and likely worse—though such things are difficult to quantify” (2021, 131), but he notes that a “culture of press criticism has begun to coalesce, particularly because all of these media interact with each other ... responding to a much more rapid news cycle than existed in 1974” (2021, 122).

What Lerner is describing is the evolution of a new kind of discourse about the media through increasingly digital media. To further extend this line of analysis in the context of the media beat, we propose in this article that Carlson’s (2016, 2017) theoretical framework for analyzing journalistic authority provides an integrated approach to the study of news media’s coverage of itself as an instance of meta-journalistic discourse (2017, 77). In this view, journalism maintains its cultural authority as “a practice capable of supplying valid knowledge of events in the world” when journalists and their audiences share understandings of news practices (Carlson 2016, 350). In this regard, “the analytical value of the theory of metajournalistic discourse ... derives from how it connects discourse about journalism to how the news is understood and ideas of what it should look like” (361). We propose conceptualizing the media beat as a hybrid formation, as both a news practice and metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016, 2017), that relays information

about industry change to audiences, and in doing so, contributes to how journalism is understood. While we are mindful of recent critiques of the overuse of “hybridity” as researchers grapple with the growing complexity of digital journalism (Witschge et al. 2019), we propose that the concept is appropriate for analyses of the media beats because it combines “narratives of journalism” and “narratives about journalism” (Carlson 2017, 77).

Therefore, this study investigates the following questions:

- What constitutes the media beat in Australia?
- How did it cover two major media change events over the last decade?
- What does the metajournalistic discourse provided by the media beat tell us about journalism’s role?

The Media Beat in Australia

Reporting on “the” media can take many different forms. We have defined the media beat for this study to consist of one (or more) of three aspects:

- (1) reporting on media industries, often focusing on the business and economic aspects of media;
- (2) reporting on the role that media (as industries) play in society, for example when journalists focus on disinformation, media addiction, digital privacy, cyberbullying, and so on;
- (3) reporting specifically on journalists and journalism.

In this article, we focus especially on the third aspect, as we are primarily interested in the links between media reporting and the transformation of the (Australian) news industry as expressed in (mass) lay-offs of journalists and other dimensions of digital disruption. We furthermore recognize that this kind of journalism, both broadly and narrowly conceived, at times occurs outside of (more or less) dedicated units or beats, with coverage also undertaken by those other than specialized media reporters.

While our study is focused on Australia, as Hanusch (2017, 1575) has noted, “Australian journalism exhibits a number of similarities to other Liberal media systems and thus provides a good reference point for other Western contexts.” This includes a mix of public and commercial broadcasting, previously high newspaper circulation that has fallen sharply over the last two decades (Warren 2020) and a range of digital journalism models including online versions of legacy print and broadcasting outlets and digital-only ventures (see also Hanusch 2017, 1575). It is also relevant to note that media ownership in Australia, in particular in newspapers and their digital versions, has been highly concentrated. The sector is dominated by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp Australia, next to other large media companies including Fairfax (now part of Nine Entertainment Co.), and a range of broadcasters. The emergence of digital platforms in Australia, as elsewhere, has created significant disruption, including a high profile clash between Google and Facebook and the Australian government over its proposed new media legislation in February 2021 (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2019b; Evershed 2020). On 18

February 2021, this came to a head with Facebook's abrupt suspension of Australian media sites from its platform, a move that attracted global media coverage (see, for instance, Cave 2021). At the same time, and as in other Western countries, digital transformation has led to a significant contraction in journalism jobs, as explained below.

Historically, the Australian news media did not report on its own industry much beyond the buying and selling of stocks in media companies, but that has gradually changed since the 1980s (Bowman 1988, 4; Browne 2020). Australia's media beat since then has included a mix of news and information about media and criticism of journalism practice. Since 1999 the national daily newspaper *The Australian*, owned by News Corp Australia, has published a weekly media section. It covers the broader media and communications industries, industry trends, controversies in newsrooms, technological developments, and media policy and regulation (Dodd and Ricketson 2015). The section includes a weekly "Media Diary" column that consists of several short items focused on industry news, and contributions from regular columnists, some of whom critique media performance.

The Australian Financial Review (now owned by Nine Entertainment Co) began publishing a weekly "Media and Marketing" section in the 1980s. Generally running at three pages, the section to this day reports primarily on the business of media. In 2008, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne's *The Age* (also now owned by Nine) began weekly one to two-page sections devoted to the media and marketing industries. Coverage of the media as a beat at these two papers has waxed and waned in the past decade, but in 2021 they shared a dedicated media and telecommunications reporter, and the digital versions of the publications include a "Media & Marketing" online tag.

In 1989 the national public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), launched a weekly television programme called *Media Watch*, that, according to its first presenter Stuart Littlemore was to be "very short takes from the various media, linked with an undersold, if not deadpan, commentary" (Inglis 2006, 186). Many journalists, unused to being publicly criticized let alone ridiculed, said the programme trivialized their work or presented the industry in a poor light (Henningham 1995). Despite a couple of periods of interruption, the programme has endured for more than three decades, and a study in 2005 found that *Media Watch* was better known and seen as more effective than the formal media regulatory regime (Muller 2005). Its discourses about the quality and authority of journalism includes criticism of material produced by its own network, making the programme atypical within the media. On radio, the ABC broadcast a weekly half-hour programme, *The Media Report*, that traversed much the same terrain as the various newspapers' media sections. The programme ran from 1993 to 2016, with a break from 2009 to 2011.

Two specialist digital-only titles have made media reporting a major focus of their editorial missions. *Crikey* (www.crikey.com.au) is an independent, subscriber-based publication that for more than two decades has published news, analysis (and gossip) about the news media as well as about politics, business and culture. Coverage of the media has been undertaken by a range of reporters including Matthew Knott, Margaret Simons (who is also a journalism academic), and former federal secretary of the journalism union (the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, or MEAA) Christopher Warren, whose contribution is informed by his engagement with industry change in that role prior to April 2015.

Mumbrella (www.mumbrella.com.au) which launched in 2008, describes itself “as a discussion of everything under Australia’s media and marketing umbrella”. It combines news stories about developments in the media with opinion and commentary pieces, some of which are republished articles by media academics sourced from *The Conversation*, a digital start-up that pairs journalists with academic experts. Much of *Mumbrella*’s coverage of the media in 2012 was provided by its founder, Tim Burrowes.

The Australian edition of *The Guardian* (*Guardian Australia*), which launched as a digital-only publication in 2013, provides substantial coverage of media, much of it by a former media reporter from *The Australian*, Amanda Meade. Her “Weekly Beast” column follows a similar format to *The Australian*’s “Media Diary” insofar as both consist of several short items, but the “Weekly Beast” is aimed at a more general audience, with less focus on industry comings and goings.

These examples illustrate that while the media beat was previously situated within dedicated sections of newspapers and broadcast programmes, the development of media coverage in online publications, including the websites of media mastheads, has opened up different ways of considering what constitutes the media beat as it specifically pertains to reporting on journalism, journalists, and the news as an industry.

Method

Case Study Approach

We analyze the dynamics and performance of the media beat through two case studies of major change events in two different years where the consequences of digital transformation came to a head in the form of corporate restructuring and job losses. Somewhat later than in other Western countries, it was 2012 before the impact of digital disruption led to structural changes and mass layoffs (redundancies) of Australian journalists that saw an estimated 3000 journalism jobs—more than a quarter of the total—disappear in seven years (MEAA 2017, 6). In 2012 most of the jobs lost were from the country’s two largest newspaper companies then known as Fairfax Media and News Limited. The losses of journalism jobs, along with changes to the format of newspapers and the establishment of paywalls, all became subjects of substantial media coverage. We have selected coverage of job loss at Fairfax as a case study because its announcement of a projected loss of 1900 jobs over three years in June 2012, with more than 20 per cent of these coming from editorial roles (Hemphill 2013), remains the largest single announcement of job cuts from a media company in Australia.

The ensuing years were punctuated by further journalist redundancy rounds as print and print/online companies continued to restructure and contract due to the decline of classified advertising in their print titles (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2019b). Subsequent modest gains made in securing digital revenue have been threatened by the growing dominance of Google, Facebook and Instagram (Letts 2016). The plight of the media and fears for its capacity to continue to meet the information needs of citizens led to a senate inquiry into the future of public interest journalism (Commonwealth of Australia 2018). A subsequent digital platforms inquiry held by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) recommended the development of a new code to address the power imbalance between platforms and media

companies (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2019a). The ACCC's final report noted that between 2001 and 2018, the total number of articles published in 12 selected newspapers had declined by 11 percent, and that the decline in provision of articles about a range of topics usually associated with public interest journalism, such as science, local courts, health, and local government had been steeper (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2019b, 8). The plight of some of these beats has been explored by practitioners such as political journalist Katharine Murphy (2020) and researchers have examined changes to the beats covering sport (English 2019) and science and the environment (McKinnon et al. 2018). However, analysis of the media beat has not figured in these analyses. It is within this context that our second case study of the potential closure and subsequent sale in 2020 of the newswire AAP was chosen.

Sample and Analysis

The dataset for this study was collated in multiple ways to collect a targeted, purposive sample. Following the case study approach of Carlson, the objective was to examine how the media beat, through its published reporting and broadcast programmes, covered two major change events in Australian media: the loss of jobs at Fairfax Media in 2012, and the mooted closure and subsequent sale of wire service AAP in 2020. These were not the only media companies that instigated redundancies on their workforces in these years, but they were chosen because they were arguably the most significant in those years. As there was no one media database available to construct the sample to be the basis of analysis, multiple methods were employed.

For the 2012 sample, we focused on a case study on how reporters within the Australian media beat covered the job loss and redundancies at Fairfax Media, then one of Australia's two largest newspaper companies. The database ANZ Newsstream through Proquest was used to search *The Australian* and *The Age* newspapers, with the search terms Fairfax and redundan*. The other publications and programmes we identified as part of the media beat in 2012 were the ABC TV's *Media Watch*, radio programme *The Media Report*, the online independent publisher *Crikey*, and the specialist media and marketing site, *Mumbrella*. In order to apply the same search technique and terms, searches using Google's site search function were performed for all of these sources. Anything that mentioned Fairfax and redundancies was brought into the sample. The time frame for articles selected was 1 January 2012–31 December 2012.

For 2020, the same search principles were employed, except the search terms now were Australian Associated Press, AAP and job loss, and Australian Associated Press, AAP and closure. The search was conducted for items published from 1 January 2020 to 30 September 2020. *Guardian Australia* was included in the 2020 sample due to the extent of its media coverage that includes a dedicated media reporter. Searches were conducted through Google using the same search terms.

The result of this purposive and replicable construction of the sample was a total of 200 articles: 121 in 2012 and 79 in 2020 (see Table 1). The sample includes stories related to the 2012 and 2020 case studies that are written or broadcast by dedicated media beat reporters, and also includes other coverage of the case studies from the publications. The rationale for constructing the sample in this way was to examine both how

Table 1. Sample of media change case studies, Fairfax 2012 and AAP 2020.

Media outlet	Number of articles		Total articles $n = 200$
	2012 Fairfax Case Study $n = 121$	2020 AAP Case Study $n = 79$	
<i>The Australian</i>	79	16	95
<i>The Age</i>	11	15	26
<i>Mumbrella</i>	7	16	23
<i>Crikey</i>	16	7	23
<i>Guardian Australia</i>		22	22
<i>Media Watch</i>	5	3	8
<i>The Media Report</i>	3		3

$N = 200$ articles.

specific beat reporters covered the change, and to include other coverage of the same issues within the same publications as those who had media beat reporters. We also discuss coverage of these events in programmes and publications outside of the sample.

All articles were saved as individual documents and brought into NVivo for qualitative thematic analysis. One researcher coded the articles for a number of top-level categories, including author, year, outlet, types of sources, and whether the article was news, a media diary entry, opinion, comment, editorial or a feature story. The difference between a feature and opinion or comment piece was determined to be whether the piece was tagged as comment or opinion, or included clear first-person pronoun use. A feature article was coded as a longer piece of news reporting that included multiple sources. A secondary analysis was then conducted to explore the major themes present in the articles. An inductive, qualitative approach was taken to explore and establish themes, guided by the thematic analysis protocol set out by Saldaña (2015). Themes were identified through close reading and re-reading of the items, identifying the main topics discussed in each item, as related to the questions of this article, and a sample of the coding was checked and agreed upon with other researchers in the project to ensure coding validity and consistency.

Results

As shown in Table 2, most of the reporting we found in the two case studies consisted of news stories (106 items), items in weekly media columns such as *The Australian's* Media Diary and *Guardian Australia's* *The Weekly Beast* (37 items), comment and opinion (25 items), feature stories (21 items), and broadcast items of *Media Watch* and *The Media Report* (11).

In addition to the type of coverage, the results provide insights into who is contributing to the beat. In our 2012 sample, *The Australian* had the highest number of reporter

Table 2. Type of coverage, 2012 Fairfax and 2020 AAP.

	Total	B: Fairfax 2012	C: AAP 2020
News	106	54	52
Media Diary/Weekly Beast	37	31	6
Comment or Opinion	25	12	13
Feature	21	16	5
Broadcast	11	8	3
Total	$N = 200$	$N = 121$	$N = 79$

bylines in media reporting. Nick Leys ($n = 37$) and Sally Jackson ($n = 15$) were prominent. At *Crikey*, the main named media reporter was Matthew Knott. At *The Age*, it was difficult to discern if there were dedicated reporters tasked specifically with the beat due to there being no one prominent source of bylines. In 2020, media reporters were more easily identifiable across all outlets in our sample, with Amanda Meade at *Guardian Australia*, Lilly Vitorovich at *The Australian*, Brittney Rigby and Hannah Blackiston at *Mumbrella*, Zoe Samios at *The Age* and Christopher Warren at *Crikey*, all recording multiple bylines. Such tabulations do not properly account for the broadcast items, which are typically produced by teams of presenters and producers, or for the fact that the two broadcast programmes in our sample were short weekly broadcasts, and therefore had relatively few stories compared to digital media outlets that published daily.

Job Loss at Fairfax in 2012

Fairfax Media in 2012 was the publisher of two of Australia's largest then-broadsheet newspapers, *The Age* in Melbourne and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. News first broke in June 2012 that the company would be culling up to 1900 jobs, as its share price plummeted, and the company moved to restructure the business in the wake of significant loss of advertising revenue. Around 380 of these would be designated journalism positions. While the main story in *The Age* announcing the cuts was a news item by a business reporter (Zappone 2012), it was an article by media reporter Nick Leys in rival publication *The Australian* that captured the drama of the day:

Staff wept at their desks, printers were told their jobs would be gone within two years, editors shook their heads at cuts so severe that management had not briefed them, and a generation of journalists stared into the face of a reality more than a decade in the making. (Leys 2012b)

Leys' story was one of only a few where the media beat reporters focused on the impact of these job losses on other journalists. More often the focus was on reporting job loss in business terms. For example, the majority of stories that reported on job loss at Fairfax focused on details of how many redundancies there would be, where they were likely to be located, and industrial action that journalists and printers took over the cuts. Typical of these was a story in *The Australian* that began: "Workplace negotiations between Fairfax Media management and representatives from the journalists union will continue into next week as they try to broker a deal over the company's move to push 40 NSW-based production jobs offshore" (Leys 2012a).

In coverage that reported on the extensive job losses in their own industry, journalists were frequently used as a story source. In our 2012 sample, there were 70 instances of a journalist being quoted across 30 different items, however 24 of these references were in the six-part feature series reflecting on the future of journalism that freelance journalist and author Gideon Haigh wrote for *Crikey*. Many journalists referred to in news stories were quoted anonymously. The relative absence of on the record comments by journalists contrasts with media executives who were the most commonly quoted on the record sources. Across both case studies, media executives were quoted 134 times across 86 items, with the most quoted executive being then Fairfax CEO, Greg Hywood in 2012. These media executives therefore contributed more to the media narrative of job losses than those journalists, editors, photographers and other production staff who

held those jobs. Other common sources used in reports were union representatives, particularly from MEAA, and government ministers. The primary focus of the narrative developed by media executives was around the need for organizational and structural change to manage the sustainability of the news business. Where the impact on the workforce was discussed, this was in terms of total numbers of job loss, with little discussion of the human impact on individuals.

But the fate of individual journalists wasn't entirely absent. *Crikey* tracked individuals who left newsrooms through reporting and crowdsourcing for a story detailing which journalists had left Fairfax (Crikey 2012) which was subsequently updated. The story was also referenced in a *Media Watch* episode, and attached to the show's transcript, becoming a legacy of those who had left in two publications ("Farewell to a generation of talent," 2012). *The Australian's* "Media Diary" also acknowledged the contributions of individual journalists, including those departing rival companies such as Fairfax, and wished them luck ("The Diary," 2012).

Aside from the business reporting of restructure and redundancy, and the stories and diary entries that recorded who was leaving, there were relatively few items that examined what these redundancies and job loss meant for the future of journalism, in the form of features or comment and opinion pieces. Notable exceptions were items written by non-beat reporters, and coverage of the significance of the job losses on the two broadcast programmes. On 25 June 2012, just days after the major Fairfax redundancies were announced, *Media Watch* opened with the segment "Brave New Newsroom" ("Brave New Newsroom," 2012) which, after quoting the statements made by the CEOs of Fairfax and News, told its viewers that:

You may never read a newspaper, in print or online. You may think you get all the news you need from TV, or talkback radio, or Google news, or even Twitter. But as a former host of 'Media Watch', the *Sydney Morning Herald's* David Marr, put it last week, everyone is affected by the changes sweeping through our two major newspaper companies.

Marr was then quoted as saying: "We're not going to understand what's lost until it's gone here. Those great big fat newsrooms were an engine in our society for understanding what goes on in our country, for understanding it and explaining it." A key theme in this segment was that these developments would diminish the unique editorial identities of *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*—papers owned by the same company that were even described as rivals in this segment.

The competitive nature of Australia's media market also appeared in comment and opinion pieces published in News Corp's *The Australian*, which argued that the scale of Fairfax's challenges were an outcome of their business decisions, rather than the impact of technological change on the media industry overall ("Proactive News strategy as media faces a crossroads," 2012), even though there were also a then undisclosed number of redundancies at News Limited in 2012. It was subsequently revealed in 2014 that the company had cut around 1000 jobs from 2012 to 2013 (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2019a, 313).

Other notable comment or opinion pieces were published in *Mumbrella*, where an article by a PR practitioner that argued that the Fairfax redundancies might benefit PR attracted such negative responses from journalists that the author and her agency boss both issued apologies (Alldis 2012). The only two comment or opinion pieces found in

The Age on the Fairfax redundancies were an editorial that made the case for editorial independence in the midst of a potential board takeover by mining executive Gina Rinehart (“Independent media serve the public interest,” 2012), and an opinion piece from a former senior editor Mike van Niekerk that was a response to a *Media Watch* episode that focused on the redundancies at Fairfax (van Niekerk 2012). In that episode, *Media Watch* had shown an old quote from him that indicated he would leave the industry if funding to investigative journalism was reduced, and tied that to the fact he had taken a redundancy in the 2012 round (“Farewell to a generation of talent,” 2012). Van Niekerk’s response represented a strident defense of the quality of Fairfax’s journalism. Noting that he had not been approached for comment, he stated that if he had he would have pointed out

that despite the loss, irreplaceable in some cases, of quality and experience, there remains at *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* as well as much experience, a younger, rising generation of awesome talent adapting well to the new, digital-first presentation of news and features. (van Niekerk 2012)

Six of the 16 features within our 2012 sample were written for *Crikey* by Gideon Haigh for his series “Future of the Media” that was subsequently published as a book (Haigh 2012). Topics included paywalls as a business model, social media’s impact on the news, the changing role of the editor, sources and the importance of newswire AAP in Australia’s media landscape. These examples illustrate the extent to which much of the commentary on the future of media in 2012 reflected on the challenges of responding to digital disruption and threats to revenue. Eight years later, AAP suddenly faced closure—and this is the focus of our second case study.

Proposed Closure of AAP 2020

Australian Associated Press (AAP) is Australia’s only national newswire. It was founded in 1935 by Keith Murdoch—father of Rupert. In March 2020, it seemed to come as a shock to many in the media industry when CEO Bruce Davidson announced that AAP would close. The decision, which was expected to result in the loss of hundreds of jobs, was made after AAP’s two largest shareholders, Nine Entertainment Co. and News Corp Australia were reported to have “severed their longstanding partnership with AAP in an effort to cut costs amid a challenging media advertising landscape” (Grieve, Samios, and Hunter 2020). While closure was avoided through the sale of the company in June, in its new incarnation AAP was reported to have lost approximately half of its editorial jobs, and in September 2020 a crowdfunding campaign was launched to shore up its survival, before the Australian federal government stepped in with a \$AUD5 million grant (Meade 2020b).

The media beat coverage of AAP’s turbulent 2020 began with a focus on its anticipated closure, and then shifted to its possible sale and subsequent financial struggles. AAP CEO Bruce Davidson was the most quoted source in these stories, which often focused on the sale process. To quote one typical story: “Australian Associated Press chief executive Bruce Davidson has been in talks with private investors about acquiring some of the operations as its core newswire service faces closure” (Samios 2020). Related stories reported on the new internal newswire service planned by News Corp. As one report in *The Australian*, owned by News Corp, stated: “News Corp Australia is understood to be looking at setting up an internal newswire to produce

content for its vast media operations, including newspapers, websites and Fox Sports” (Vitorovich 2020b).

The threatened closure of AAP, however, also triggered a focus on the wider role that it played in Australia’s news landscape, and by extension, the capacity of the media to perform its fourth estate function. For example, *Guardian Australia’s* media reporter Amanda Meade’s included this line in a news story: “The loss of the news wire will have a major effect on public interest journalism and the coverage of local courts, as well as regional and rural news” (Meade 2020a).

As in 2012, comments and opinion articles examining the implications of this major change event were mostly contributed by non-beat reporters in our sample. The head of a media agency wrote in *Mumbrella* that the proposed closure of AAP “felt like a body blow not just to those immediately impacted by the business’ closure, but by the wider media ecosystem” (Skapinker 2020). *Mumbrella* also republished an article by journalism academic and president of the Journalism Education & Research Association of Australia, Alexandra Wake, that emphasised the broader consequences of the loss of AAP, which, she argued, “should be mourned not just by news men and women across the country, but by every single person who cares about democracy and the valuable work journalists do in keeping the public informed and the powerful to account” (Wake 2020).

Coverage of AAP’s predicament also brought rivalries between other media companies to the fore, particularly in the context of what roles they might have played in the demise of the wire service. An argument emerged between *Guardian Australia’s* editor, Lenore Taylor, and AAP chairman and News Corp executive Campbell Reid, after Taylor wrote: “We relied on AAP when *Guardian Australia* launched. Holding power to account just got a whole lot harder” (Taylor 2020). Reid responded by calling it “gobsmacking hypocrisy”, accusing *Guardian Australia* of making “decisions [that] have contributed to the closure of AAP” (Vitorovich 2020a). Reid also reacted to comments from the MEAA that both News Corp and Nine Entertainment “needed to answer to the ‘disturbing revelations’ that the closure wasn’t only motivated by financial reasons” but was also designed to “hurt their smaller rivals” who subscribed to the wire service for news (Rigby 2020). His response that the journalism union was peddling “conspiracy theory nonsense” was quoted in both *The Australian* (Vitorovich 2020a) and *Mumbrella* (Rigby 2020). News Corp’s new internal newswire service was also reported on in *Guardian Australia*, which covered a speech made by the head of Australia’s Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), Rod Sims to Australia’s National Press Club. Here Sims flagged the issue of media diversity, noting that the ACCC “would closely monitor how the company’s recently established newswire competes with the salvaged news agency Australian Associated Press” (Hurst 2020).

More industry unity was shown, however, when it came to the perceived threat of “digital giants” Facebook and Google to the viability of commercial media. The theme became more prominent in our sample following the Australian government’s attempt to secure a draft media bargaining code put forward by the ACCC that would force Google and Facebook to pay for the use of news through their platforms (Nicholls 2020). With AAP threatened, this was a response supported by much of the industry, with media executives, union representatives and government spokespeople all endorsing the notion that government regulation on digital platforms was needed. For example, *The Australian* on 5 March 2020 reported that AAP chairman (and News Corp executive) Campbell Reid

echoed the union's sentiments, saying the impact of news stories published free of charge by social media networks and search engines had forced the closure of the outlet known for impartial, accurate, and comprehensive reporting. 'The AAP decision is a wake-up call for Australia that the detrimental impact the digital platforms are having on media companies is very real and has now reached a tipping point,' he was quoted as saying. (Dudley-Nicholson 2020)

While the Fairfax case study in 2012 included extensive coverage of who was leaving newsrooms, a feature of coverage of AAP in 2020 was the relative absence of stories identifying and acknowledging individual journalists whose jobs were lost. This is perhaps due to the convention that journalist bylines do not regularly appear in newswire stories, meaning that the journalists themselves had less visibility than their counterparts at major newspapers.

Also notable over this period was the input of journalism academics in providing commentary about the implications of industry restructure, both in *The Conversation* and in a range of other publications outside of our sample. For instance, Susan Forde, who was a co-author of a 2009 study of AAP (Johnston and Forde 2009), contributed a commentary piece on the plight of the organization in the online publication *Inside Story* in March 2020 (Forde 2020), arguing that AAP had become a victim of Australia's changing media landscape.

Discussion

This study found that the media beat in Australia consists of both traditional beat reporting conducted by specialized journalists, and other experts and stakeholders who participate in times of change. However, the constitution of the beat varies according to format, the extent to which reporting on media is a priority of the publication or outlet, assumptions about the audience, and the corporate interests of each particular outlet. The inclusion of coverage of the media by non-beat reporters, including industry figures, business and general reporters, as well as academics, confirms the extent to which the media beat is flexible and porous. For our study it is significant that coverage of the media has extended beyond industry news and media criticism substantially since 2012, including through the launch of *Guardian Australia*, in 2013, and that the publishing and republishing of work by media academics (who might be seen as stakeholders for the sustainability of journalism) reflects a broader shift in understanding of the vulnerability of the news industry. As such, the beat has evolved since 2012, especially online, at a time when many traditional print beats, such as court reporting and local government reporting, have contracted (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission 2019b, 280).

When it came to covering major change events in journalism, we found commonalities between 2012 and 2020. In both case studies, dedicated beat reporters contributed more to reporting news of industry change than to the provision of commentary and opinion. The stories most commonly took the form of business news items, using media executives as sources most frequently, and focused on reporting which jobs would be lost and how newsrooms would be restructured. Stakeholders from business, media executives and academics were more likely to be the voices providing reflection on these change events and their potential consequences, through explainers and opinion pieces. Both case studies also found coverage that underscored corporate rivalries, though this was modulated by genuine empathy for journalists whose jobs had disappeared from

competitors (in some cases). It appears that the media beat in Australia is similar to media beats in other case studies in that it often relies on routinized reporting that favours high-authority sources (Magin and Maurer 2019). This supports the analysis of Chyi, Lewis, and Zheng (2012) in their study of business reporting of the 2008–2010 newspaper crisis in the US, which identified an overreliance on media company sources at the expense of a more holistic portrayal of industry change.

However, a key difference between our case studies was the heightened emphasis on the importance of public interest journalism in 2020. In 2012, the coverage of industry change focused on what corporate restructuring would mean for the distinctiveness and depth of coverage, and whether corporations were making the right decisions about adapting their business models to digital revenue streams. In 2020, by contrast, there was less emphasis on job loss in the coverage than on the structural implications of what the demise of Australia's only wire service would mean for the provision of news across the media. The fact that AAP was less familiar as a news brand to audiences than popular mastheads such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* meant that discussion of the critical role of newswires in the production and dissemination of public interest journalism became a common element of the news coverage. This is an interesting development in the light of Williams' contention that the public is underinformed about the consequences of cuts to journalism (2017). While there was still evidence of corporate rivalries in coverage, we also found that the beat almost uniformly embraced the Australian government's proposed digital bargaining code, which was designed to ensure that news media companies could negotiate to receive payment from digital giants Google and Facebook for news content published on the tech giants' platforms (Nicholls 2020).

In important respects, Australia's media beat in 2020, in its coverage of AAP, focused on identifying how financial vulnerabilities could diminish "the cultural authority of journalism" (Carlson 2016, 350). The prominence of stakeholders with an interest in public interest journalism in the coverage, both from within and beyond the media beat, underscored what was at stake when it came to the fragility of business models that have previously withstood many of the challenges of digital disruption. Embedded in much of the coverage of the proposed closure and sale of AAP, its crowdfunding efforts, and ultimately the securing of \$AUD5 million of government support, was recognition of the challenges of commercial survival within Australia's transformed media environment. At the same time, media coverage brought traditional corporate rivalries to the surface, and called into question what mechanisms might be required to ensure that the slimmed down version of AAP would be able to operate fairly within a competitive environment.

We found that the media beat in Australia covers both news about media and about those who work within it, and also includes commentary on the sustainability and future of journalism. Based on the evidence presented in this article, the media beat is more than mere press criticism. Indeed, we have argued that the entire media beat can be considered to be a form of metajournalistic discourse, in that it provided the basis for how the role and performance and sustainability of journalism is broadly understood and contested. In this view, journalism maintains its cultural authority as "a practice capable of supplying valid knowledge of events in the world" when journalists and their audiences share understandings of news practices (Carlson 2016, 350). A question that arises from this analysis that is beyond the scope of this article is whether the rescue of AAP

(albeit in a contracted form) was influenced by the media coverage that its proposed closure generated. Future research, both in Australia and elsewhere, could also examine how audiences engage with such coverage more generally, and the extent to which they care about developments in journalism and threats to its sustainability, as well as journalistic performance.

These insights from our Australian case studies enhance understandings of the purpose and role of the media beat. While it provides factual information about industry change, it has a broader role in creating a discourse on how journalism deals with threats to its sustainability and its capacity to carry out its mission in the public interest. We also need to note which voices and perspectives are being presented in the media beat, and which are missing or represented only infrequently. As in other areas of media coverage, and as demonstrated in this article, some voices and perspectives are privileged over others.

Conclusion

Through its analysis of two case studies, this article has demonstrated that the media beat in Australia develops both narratives of journalism and narratives about journalism using a combination of dedicated media reporters from a diverse range of industry backgrounds and other contributors. The media beat can be understood as a hybridized and highly flexible aggregation of different kinds of reporting across a range of formats. In our sample, beat reporters ranged from dedicated specialist journalists in traditional newsroom roles, to a former journalist union leader, a start-up publication owner, and broadcasters at a specialist television programme focused on media accountability. In this way, the article also contributes to analysis engaging with journalistic authority, in this case in the context of who reports and comments on the media industry, both in terms of the “facts” of job loss and sustainability, and in reporting and discussion of the broader context of change (Carlson 2016, 2017). We note in particular a shift between 2012 and 2020, where we observe a stronger focus in the media beat on the broader implications of a major change event on the fate of public interest journalism, and what that means for democratic societies.

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