Digitally Altered: Making News in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Audience research demonstrates that online news has become a dominant source of news in Australia, especially for people under 40 years of age. Australians now obtain their news from online sites – such as Yahoo!7 News and news.com.au – in preference to traditional newspapers. Such sites are very important to the future of news journalism, yet they are vastly understudied – especially in Australia. This thesis, based on a study of a major digital aggregated online news organisation in Australia, Yahoo!7 News, investigated the question: How can the study of an Australian aggregated news site (Yahoo!7 News) contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production?

This research project collected data from observations at Yahoo!7 News, interviews with the Yahoo!7 newsworkers and a content analysis of the Yahoo!7 News site and the Yahoo!7 social networking platforms (i.e. Facebook and Twitter). The data indicates that there were three dominant issues at Yahoo!7 News related to the role of the newsworkers and newsroom practices, the production of news content and the newsworkers’ perceptions of their audience. Firstly, the newsworkers acted as gatekeepers, tightly controlling the outflow of news by limiting the involvement of the Yahoo!7 News audience with the content they generated. Secondly, success was perceived through a prism of the ‘race to be first’, which caused newsworkers to prioritise and value speed and immediacy. And, finally, the newsworkers felt that their roles as news producers were not as highly valued by the traditional journalists. This thesis will analyse and discuss the implications of the findings from Yahoo!7 News and contribute to extending our understanding of digital aggregated news production.
DECLARATION

(i) this thesis comprises only original work towards the PhD – Arts except where indicated in the preface;

(ii) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and

(iii) the thesis is fewer than the maximum work limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps and appendices

Signed:

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

This study of Yahoo!7 News, was designed to develop a better understanding of an Australian digital aggregated news site and uncover what findings from Yahoo!7 News can add to the body of research regarding online news production. In order to situate the research, this chapter will begin by providing a background of the structure and developments in the news media industry with a particular focus on Yahoo!7. This chapter will also review how changes to news audience behaviour have influenced the development of new websites such as Yahoo!7 News. It will then outline the main aims of the study and the research question, which is identifying the gap in the existing research literature that this project fulfils, and its contribution to knowledge in the area. The research methods used to achieve the stated aims and answer the research question will then be reviewed before providing a summary of the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background to the study

1.1.1 The internet and media industry

In its short history, the internet has evolved from a military-only data grid to a global phenomenon, and in doing so has become a key part of the lives of many people worldwide. Following the invention by Tim Berners-Lee of key software and technologies that formed the basis of web pages in 1990 – e.g. HTML, text browser and graphical user interface (GUI) – the internet became commercially available and by 1994 was being used by large multinational companies such as Amazon and later Google (1998).

In 2004 and 2005 social networking sites Facebook and YouTube were launched, which unleashed a social media revolution that would change the way people used the internet and accessed news. It was at this time that in the United States, the Pew Research Center’s (PRC) ‘Internet and American Life Project’ released data to show that ‘high-speed home internet users were more likely to turn to the internet than the newspaper on the typical day for news’ (PRC, 2004). The trend towards accessing news online has only intensified over time and the internet continues to increase in popularity with news consumers. In 2019, the Reuters’ ‘Digital News Report’ found that globally, there had been a shift away from offline to online news sources as
people’s ‘main source of news’ (Fisher, Park, Lee, Fuller and Sang, 2019, p.13). This shift has impacted traditional news sources worldwide in varying degrees. For example, in China and India the impact on newspaper industries has not been as severe as in countries such as the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) for a range of reasons including the technological infrastructure, population size and distribution of media ownership. In the US and UK, newspapers have struggled to maintain momentum, and profit share, as advertisers shifted their dollars online and the traditional business model for newsmaking, which relied heavily on advertising dollars and subscriptions, collapsed (Shirky, 2009).

In Australia, newspapers recorded a drop of $136 million in their advertising revenue in 2012 (MEAA, 2012), and over 1,000 Australian editorial jobs were lost at the major news companies of Fairfax and News Limited/News Corporation (Knott, 2012). Yet, because of the highly concentrated structure of media ownership in Australia, the effects could be perceived to have been somewhat minimised when compared with the US and UK. That is, none of the major metropolitan newspapers were put out of business completely during the peak of the crisis from 2006–8 (Young, 2010). However, scholars such as Tiffen and Gittins (2009) and Young (2010) have argued that these findings do not accurately represent the impact of the crisis on the Australian newspaper industry. They found that by the time the US and UK were experiencing the crisis, the worst had already happened in Australia. For example, it was between 1987 and 1992 that afternoon newspapers with a circulation of 1.22 million closed, halving the penetration of newspapers in the country (Tiffen cited in Young, 2010). As such, these writers have contended that if Australian circulation figures have looked comparatively strong, it is because they were starting from a weaker position (Young, 2010).

The response of the newspaper industry in Australia has been to launch digital operating arms, or to converge with existing digital companies in order to expand into the digital realm, and find new audiences and advertising dollars. This transition from offline news production to digital has been completed with varying degrees of success, with many newspapers forced to cut back on staffing and production while trialling alternative revenue avenues. For example, in 2011, following the lead of news organisations overseas, The Australian newspaper introduced a paywall. At the time, this transition faced significant criticism with audiences arguing that it was too late to
start charging for journalism online, however results have showed some financial benefits for news producers. In News Corporation’s last quarterly earnings, its Australian ‘digital subscribers’ were up 18 per cent on the previous year (Duke, 2019). Reuters’ research predicted that subscription and membership would be the key priority for the news industry going forward, with over half of their 2019 survey respondents (52 per cent) expecting this to be the main revenue source in 2019, ‘compared with just 27% for display advertising, 8% for native advertising and 7% for donations’ (Newman, 2019).

The shift from traditional to digital news left many journalists and scholars alike questioning the state of the news media and their role within it. Some lamented it as ‘the end of journalism’ (e.g. Aviles, León, Sanders and Harrison, 2004; Bromley and O’Malley, 1997). Editor-in-chief of The Guardian, Emily Bell, stressed that: ‘We are on the brink...[of] systematic collapse, not just a cyclical downturn’ (MEAA, 2008, p. 4). Others perceived the digital revolution as democratising and beneficial to news audiences (e.g. Paterson and Domingo, 2008).

An investigation of Yahoo!7 News has presented a chance to reflect on the impact and consequences of these developments in the field via the lens of a company that was specifically developed in response to these changes in the market. A study of Yahoo!7 News enabled a consideration of the impact that broader societal changes have had on digital aggregated news production and the people who work in these new environments. The specific conditions in which Yahoo!7 was created will be discussed in the following chapter (Chapter 2, Background) when an examination of the business itself and its place within the Australian media industry occurs.

1.1.2 News audiences

As digital technologies have become more readily available (e.g. iPhone, iPad, Surface Pro), so too has the use of these technologies in countries such as Australia, the US and the UK for news consumption (Newman and Levy, 2013). Simultaneously, the amount of time Australians spent online and the way people access news has been increasingly shifting online (Reuters, 2019). In 2018, traditional news sources remained the dominant source of news for Australians, however this trend shifted in 2019, with 57 per cent of Australians becoming reliant on the internet for most of their news, exceeding the global average of 54 per cent (Reuters, 2019).
The Reuters’ study of 2,010 Australian internet users revealed that mobile phones were ‘increasingly becoming the main device for accessing news for Australians’ (Fisher et al., 2019, p.14). From 2018 to 2019 there had been a sharp rise in the use of smartphones for news in particular, ‘from 36% in 2018 to 45% in 2019’ (Fisher et al., 2019, p.14). A Nielsen report on the state of the online landscape in Australia determined that ‘since 2007, Australians have spent more time accessing the internet than any other media in a given week. Australians now spend 23 hours and 56 minutes online per week, across all connected devices and screens’ (Nielsen, 2014, p.4).

One of the biggest news organisations that creates content for this on-the-go market in Australia is Yahoo!7. Their news websites consistently appear in the top five ‘most visited’ news websites in Australia (Christensen, 2014b) and over 4.5 million minutes were spent using their application (app) each month in 2012 (Yahoo!7, 2012a). Yahoo!7 is the Australian arm of Yahoo! International, which was one of the first web service providers, started in the US in 2006. At this time, Yahoo!7 replaced Yahoo! Australia and New Zealand, which had been in operation since 1997. Yahoo!7 was formed when Yahoo! International joined Seven West Media, which was a major media organisation in Australia that owned broadcast television (Seven Network), radio (nine regional radio licences), newspaper publishing (The West Australian newspaper, The Sunday Times, 21 Western Australian regional newspapers), magazine publishing (Pacific Magazines) and online companies (Yahoo!7). The merger would offer the Seven Network, the broadcasting arm of Seven West Media, a way to expand their content distribution networks online, find new audiences and collect any online revenue that they may have missed out on if they had remained on television only. Subsequently, Yahoo!7 became the platform for housing the content from the Seven Network, including 7Sport and Yahoo!7 Finance, as well as lifestyle and entertainment website Be, which has had a number of incarnations and names since its launch. The Yahoo!7 Homepage and webmail services would also run through Yahoo!7.

In Australia, the importance of empirically investigating a digital aggregated news site cannot be understated. Sixty-five per cent of Australians now own smartphones, with 61 per cent of those users accessing news on a daily basis (Google Report, 2013, p. 15). To date, scholars have investigated the digitisation of newspaper content as well as the impact of this on journalists and their professional culture (e.g. Cottle and Ashton, 1999; Folkenflik, 2011; Quandt, Löffelholz, Weaver, Hanitzsch and
Altmeppen, 2007; Ursell, 2001). However, at the current time, empirical studies of digital aggregated online news sites based in Australia have been lacking, even though current evidence shows that 66 per cent of Australians now use smartphones to access news weekly, and mobile news aggregators such as Apple News now reach more iPhone users in the United States (27 per cent) than The Washington Post (23 per cent) (Newman, 2019). As such, the proposed investigation of Yahoo!7 News presents a unique opportunity to study news production and the content produced by an aggregated news website, as well as the quality and range of content they offer.

1.1.3 Changes to Yahoo!7

Yahoo!7 News is an aggregated news website. An aggregated news site is defined here as a website that uses news and information from other sources to provide content for its own audience. Consequently, at Yahoo!7 News aggregation was a process undertaken by the newsworkers who collected information from various sources and reposted it onto their site, adding more information from other sites and using the variety of mixed media available to them (i.e. photo galleries, videos, hyperlinks, tweets). The newsworkers aggregated content across all of the Yahoo!7 News websites (i.e. the Yahoo!7 Frontpage, Homepage and local pages) and PumpTV (Yahoo!7 content played at fuel stations).

Their work also extended past aggregation to include updating the apps (for iPhone and Android) and social media content (Facebook and Twitter), responding to video requests, attending meetings and conference calls, and cutting video from their suite of morning news programs: Sunrise, Sunrise Extra, The Morning Show and all of the broadcasts that were aired throughout the day (four total, including updates).

At the time the this research was conducted, from 2011 to 2015, Yahoo!7’s relationship with the Seven Network was imperative to the operation of Yahoo!7 News, and Yahoo!7 more broadly, as the Seven Network provided them with the majority of the content for their websites. This worked well for the Seven Network and Yahoo!7 because Channel Seven now had somewhere to house all of their content online and Yahoo!7 had content to fill their site, which would increase audience share for both organisations.

In 2016 however, the future of Yahoo!7 took a dramatic turn when Verizon – a US telecommunications company – confirmed its acquisition of the parent company
Yahoo! International. At this time American Online (AOL), which was also owned by Verizon, and Yahoo! merged to form a new entity called Oath. However, the relationship between Yahoo!7 and Seven West Media continued even though the Seven Network had simultaneously launched 7Plus – a new long-form video platform and streaming service for their content – effectively moving their content off the Yahoo!7 network and back under their own control. Losing control of content from the Seven Network created an issue for Yahoo!7 as the organisation could no longer house content from the network on their site. For the Seven Network, and parent company Seven West Media, using 7Plus to house their content instead of Yahoo!7 would give them back control over their content, while directing traffic to their own network and reducing overheads.

The separation of the Seven Network and Yahoo!7 was finalised in 2018 when, following some internal restructuring, Seven West Media sold their 50 per cent share of Yahoo!7, which Seven West Media’s CEO Tim Worner described as enabling them to better ‘control the distribution of monetisation’ (Worner cited in Duke, 2018). While the details of the break-up had not been finalised at the time of writing, it appeared as though Yahoo!7 would eventually lose the video content from their website. Verizon’s network of companies, including The Huffington Post and ONE by AOL, could however supply Yahoo!7 with a significant amount of content and video if this does eventuate.

When Seven West Media bought into Yahoo!7 in 2006, traditional news organisations were grappling with building an online presence and turning to tech companies such as Yahoo!7 to help with their digital strategies. Seven’s taking back of their digital content therefore signalled, on the one hand, that they were now more confident to manage the digital side of the business on their own. On the other hand, the sale also suggested that for Seven West Media the cost of partnering with Yahoo!7 outweighed the benefits of having them in their suite of companies. This claim is supported by revenue and employment figures, which revealed that since 2014, Yahoo7’s profits have been under pressure due to the ongoing weakness in online display advertising, and the reduction of the company’s workforce by 10 per cent in a 2016 restructure (Samios, 2018a).

These changes to the ownership and control of Yahoo!7 capture the complexities of newsmaking in a digital era characterised by convergence: an era in which news
production can no longer be understood as concentrated and confined to one space, or in one newsroom. Rather, the changes to the structure and organisation of Yahoo!7 reveal that newsmaking involves a diverse range of organisations and individuals, each with their own goals, aspirations and understandings of how best to fulfil their company’s strategic goals. The notion of a journalistic ‘ecosystem’ as framed by Chris Anderson (2014) offers a unique way to understand organisations such as Yahoo!7. In this context the organisation can be conceptualised as a ‘living, breathing, constantly evolving organism – one that is capable of both death and rebirth’ (Anderson cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014). Yahoo!7 has adapted to changing circumstances with different company structures since its inception in 2006, and it is likely that it will continue to evolve as its ownership, access to content, and newsmaking ability, continue to change.

This study of Yahoo!7 News occurred at a time when the organisation experienced vast structural change in terms of ownership and control. The changes Yahoo!7 experienced during the course of this research have provided an opportunity to document the evolving context of a major digital news constituent, and track the implications of this for the company and more broadly. The research conducted has provided empirical data from the perspectives of the newworkers about how they work, the news that they produce, and their perceptions of their audience at a time of flux, and hence the study is unique in this way.

1.2 Overview, aims of research and research question

The research that is reported in this thesis took place over a period of four years (2011–15). The research originated from an interest in changes to the news landscape since the introduction of digital technologies, and the development of aggregated news as a popular news format for news consumers in contemporary times. Hence, the desire to investigate the inner workings of Yahoo!7 News stemmed from this interest, coupled with previous work experience at the organisation, which will be explained further in Chapter 4 (Methodology).

Online news has become a dominant source of news in Australia, especially for people under 40 years of age, and is currently the most popular way to access news for people aged 18–24 (Roy Morgan, 2018). Australians now obtain most of their online news from aggregated sites, such as Yahoo!7, rather than from traditional newspapers and broadcast television news. Therefore, the fundamental aims of this study were to:
- provide insights into a dominant source of contemporary digital news for audiences
- document and discuss how the empirical findings from Yahoo!7 News, a digital aggregated news site, add to the body of research regarding online news production.

The results of the research reported here provide important information pertaining to three areas of aggregated news site Yahoo!7: 1) the role of newsworkers and newsroom practices; 2) how news content is selected; and 3) the newsworkers’ perceptions of their audience. Studying Yahoo!7 News presented an opportunity to conceptualise the variety of forms that digital news production can take in this contemporary context, and enabled an analysis of, and discussion about, the ways in which the findings can contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production.

In order to achieve the stated aims, the research question that frames this project is: *How can the study of an Australian aggregated news site (Yahoo!7 News) contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production?* As such, the findings will contribute to the empirical and theoretical knowledge base and discussions about digital aggregated news production.

The findings also have important implications for discussions about the larger, more complex and dynamic issues regarding journalism and news production. These include consideration of whether or not online news provides the public with accurate and detailed information to function in a democratic society; the future directions of news and journalism; the impact of changes to journalistic practices for journalists, news content and audiences; and the quality and independence of journalism worldwide.

### 1.3 Summary of existing literature

In order to understand what Yahoo!7 News can contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production, this thesis will consider the seminal national and international research that has been conducted about news production and news organisations to date. An analysis of the findings from early studies of newsrooms reveals concerns about the focus of journalism and news researchers prior to when this study took place. This research provides an understanding of the context of the current project and highlights the potential of future research in the area.
Following is an overview of the five dominant phases of literature that have informed the study of offline and online news organisations, and the structure and role of news organisations to date. These will be reviewed in further detail in Chapter 3 (Literature Review). These can be considered as: 1) early news production literature; 2) liminal empirical research; 3) future of journalism research; 4) online news research; 5) aggregated news research; and 6) ethnographic online news research.

Findings from the *early news production* literature provide insights into how news was made in traditional news organisations, and describe the frameworks established for studying news that were later adapted for empirical studies of online news organisations (e.g. Møller Hartley, 2011). The *liminal empirical research* literature has been concerned with the shift from traditional to online news and the impact of this shift on traditional media organisations, newsmaking models, journalists, journalism and news audiences. This stream of literature is considered here because the present study is also concerned with the internal workings of a specific form of contemporary news, aggregated news, and the impact of this on online news production. The *online empirical research* began to explain how online news sites worked and the reality of digital news production, forming three distinct waves. In the first wave authors set ideal models for online news (e.g. immediate delivery, shared production between media producers and audiences), the second wave authors tested ideal models using mostly quantitative techniques, and the third wave used qualitative research methodologies to investigate the limitations of the second stage (Paterson and Domingo, 2008). The current study contributes to the third wave of literature by providing qualitative empirical data from inside an aggregated digital newsroom. It makes a contribution to our knowledge of the ways in which aggregated news sites work and what they reveal about contemporary online news production. The final phase of literature analysed is the *future of journalism research*. This literature has focused on the upheaval experienced by the news industry as a result of the digital revolution. For example, the loss and/or restructuring of: the role of journalists; traditional newsrooms; production techniques and revenue models. It is important to understand the broader context of changes to journalism in order to make sense of the choices, processes and transformations that have occurred at Yahoo!7 News.
1.4 Research design and procedures

In order to assess how study of an Australian aggregated news site can contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production, an approach incorporating multiple research methods – participant observation, interviews and content analysis – was designed.

The research question required data that revealed how the news site worked, that is: how the newworkers functioned in their workspace; how they regarded and completed their required everyday tasks; their newsroom practices; the content they produced and their perceptions of their audience. The newworkers’ perceptions of their audience were important to understand, as these perceptions can affect the kinds of news produced and how they are produced.

Consequently, the research incorporated three research methods: 1) participant observation; 2) interviews; and 3) content analysis (Yahoo!7 News websites, Facebook and Twitter). The data collected from the observations was used to inform the scheduled interview questions, and in this way the interviews enabled observational data to be followed up.

A content analysis of the two main pages on the Yahoo!7 News website (the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and National Homepage) and Yahoo!7’s social media pages (Facebook and Twitter) also allowed a comparison of the observation and interview data with the actual online product. As such, this use of multiple data sources enabled a triangulation of the data and a more cohesive and accurate picture of Yahoo!7 News, including how the findings from this site can contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production.

1.5 Overview of the thesis

This thesis has been structured as follows: Chapter 2 (Background), will provide more detail regarding the history of the news media industry, and in particular Yahoo!7, to provide the context of the research project. The Literature Review (Chapter 3) reviews the body of research literature regarding news production and journalism from early news centre research to digital news production. It outlines the research prior to this study, and highlights where this project makes a contribution to knowledge. Chapter 4 (Methodology) will consider the approach taken in order to answer the research
question for this study, providing a detailed description of the methods of data collection that were employed. The following three chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) report the findings of the data collected at Yahoo!7. The presentation of results begins in Chapter 5 and focuses on the role of journalists and newsroom practices. Chapter 6, which is concerned with news content, follows, and finally, in Chapter 7 the findings regarding the newsworkers’ perceptions of their audience is presented. The final Discussion and Conclusions chapter (Chapter 8) will analyse the implications of the findings by linking them with the research synthesised in the Literature Review (Chapter 3) and will demonstrate how they add to the body of research regarding online news production.
Chapter 2: BACKGROUND

This chapter provides the background to the study through a more detailed review of changes to the Australian news media landscape, news organisation owners, and Yahoo!7 News more specifically. This background will provide a context for the current study and enable a better understanding of the complexities of the contemporary Australian news media system, which is very different from other developed nations.

This chapter outlines the broader context in which Yahoo!7 was created and developed. The previous chapter (Chapter 1) reviewed the major developments in the news media industry, both globally and in Australia, since the introduction of the internet in the mid 1990s, as well as the impact of this on news audience behaviour. As a result, this chapter will begin by examining the Australian news media landscape, including print, broadcast and online news, which all have medium-specific features. This chapter will also review the business of Yahoo!7, which will establish the significance of the company in the Australian news market, as well as its role in the production and distribution of news.

2.1 Australian news media landscape

When compared with countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, the Australian media industry is one of the most highly concentrated in the world, and it is becoming even more so (see Figure 2.1) (Finkelstein, 2012). In a review of the Australian media industry in 2012, Raymond Finkelstein QC reported that two newspaper owners (News Limited and Fairfax) accounted for 86 per cent of newspaper sales in Australia in 2011 (Flew, 2013). In comparison, the two major publishers in the UK and US controlled only 54 per cent of newspaper sales and 14 per cent respectively in the same year (Flew, 2013).

The publication of all of the metropolitan mastheads in Australia was controlled by just four major publishers (Finkelstein, 2012, p.58). News Corporation Australia (previously News Corporation), owned by Rupert Murdoch, was the largest publisher located in Australia, producing 65 per cent of the total metropolitan and national daily newspapers (see Figure 2.2) (Finkelstein, 2012, p.58). Fairfax Media (owned by CVC Asia Pacific) followed, and controlled a 25 per cent share of circulation (Finkelstein, 2012, p.58). WA Newspapers, owned by Kerry Stokes’ Seven West Media, was the
third largest publisher (8 per cent), with APN (owned by an Irish company) controlling approximately 5 per cent of the aggregate daily circulation in Australia (Finkelstein, 2012, p.58).

Figure 2.1

*Number of metropolitan and national daily newspapers and owners. Source: Finkelstein (2012, p. 58).*

The two largest publishers (News Limited and Fairfax Media) competed for audience share in only two capital cities – Sydney and Melbourne – and also had one newspaper

Figure 2.2

*Share of Australian daily newspaper titles and circulation. Source: Finkelstein (2012, p. 59).*
each that was sold nationally (Papandrea, 2013). Every other metropolitan market had just one newspaper owned by News Corporation in Adelaide, Brisbane, Darwin and Hobart; Fairfax in Canberra; and Seven West Media in Perth (Papandrea, 2013). Ownership of the 37 daily newspapers that were produced outside of the metropolitan centres was predominantly held by News Corporation, Fairfax Media, APN News and Media Limited (Papandrea, 2013).

With the movement of these traditional news publishers online however, there has been increased competition with the entry of new publishers into the online news market (Martin and Dwyer, 2012). Unlike the situation in the US and UK where the major broadcasters still have the majority share of online news audiences, news.com.au, a digital aggregated news site, was the leading metropolitan online news site in Australia with 2.767 million unique users per month (Christensen, 2014b). The major newspaper sites (e.g. smh.com.au) also have a large audience, ranking second in the number of unique users per month (2.751 million) according to a poll by Nielsen (Christensen, 2014b).

The competition between online news organisations has seen a diversification of digital titles, with many of the major publishers now offering news content on the web, mobile devices and tablets (Martin and Dwyer, 2012). For example, WA Newspapers, Kerry Stokes’ newspaper company, published all of their print content on Yahoo!7 News and on the app. In addition to these major publishers, online newspapers such as The Guardian Australia and Daily Mail Australia have emerged, along with independent online producers including Mumbrella, The Global Mail, Crikey and The Conversation, as well as niche sites such as Mamamia, and The Glow, along with numerous specialist individual bloggers. Moreover, domestic news organisations have experienced growing competition from international online news services and news aggregators (e.g. BuzzFeed, The Huffington Post); news aggregation apps (e.g. Flipboard); social media services that allow the public to share and distribute information (e.g. Facebook and Twitter); and news services which encourage local and collaborative news exchange (e.g. The Local East Village). What this reveals is that while there are only a few key players in Australia who control the reporting of news and events via traditional methods (i.e. newspapers and television), the collapse of the barriers to entry online have enabled new competition in the digital sphere.
Of the traditional media now online, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is the major public broadcaster in Australia rather than a commercial media company along the lines of Fairfax (now Nine) and News Corporation. To date, news organisations in Australia have been most commonly put under the microscope by academics and the media for their reportage of events, ownership disagreements and reported bias. Aggregated online news has remained under-examined. This investigation of Yahoo!7 News will begin to analyse and critique the production of digital aggregated news at Seven West Media, which was the third largest publisher in Australia and controls a significant amount of digital space in Australia.

The next section will focus in more detail on the major news media owners in Australia, paying particular attention to the ownership and structure of Seven West Media, which was the parent company of Yahoo!7 News at the time this research was undertaken. This discussion will enable the reader to situate the company and owners within the broader news media system in Australia and suggest why Yahoo!7 News is a company that requires further analysis.

![Media interests snapshot](image)

**Figure 2.3**

*Media interests snapshot. Source: Dwyer (2016).*
2.2 News media owners

Historically, there have been only a handful of major news media owners and/or investors in Australia. These proprietors included – Rupert and Lachlan Murdoch, James Packer, Kerry Stokes, Bruce Gordon, Howard Marks, Leon Black and Gina Rinehart. Figure 2.3, sourced from the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), outlines the news media companies that these owners had interests in and the percentage of shares that they owned. It also shows that only a handful of families and connected family businesses asserted control over the Australian news media. While the details of who owns what is quite complex because it changes so frequently, Rupert Murdoch’s company, News Corporation Australia, remains Australia’s largest news media company with newspapers including *The Daily Telegraph*, *Herald Sun* and *The Australian* and a digital division, news.com.au, which has been acknowledged as Australia’s number-one site for news (Christensen, 2014b). Another noteworthy figure, James Packer, has stakes in Channel 10 (7.68 per cent), along with Gina Rinehart (8.53 per cent) and Lachlan Murdoch (7.68 per cent). For his part, Bruce Gordon was Channel 10’s biggest shareholder in 2014 (14.96 per cent) and owner of Channel Nine’s regional network arm WIN TV.

Perhaps most interestingly however, Figure 2.3 reveals that Kerry Stokes was the only person to own over 50 per cent of a news organisation in Australia, with a 73 per cent share of Seven Group Holdings until Yahoo!7’s takeover by Verizon in 2018. Stokes also controlled, or had a stake in, the Seven Network (one of the leading free-to-air television networks in Australian capital cities), *The West Australian* newspaper (the largest newspaper in Western Australia), Pacific Magazines (the second biggest magazine group in Australia) and Seven’s digital television channels 7TWO and 7Mate.

Ryan Stokes, Kerry’s son, was Chief Operating Officer of Seven Group Holdings and a director of parent company Seven West Media, which also had some mining interests. These included 100 per cent ownership of WesTrac, a heavy equipment business, and 66 per cent of National Hire, a major player in the equipment hire industry in Australia (Burrell, 2013).

Business analysts have regarded Stokes as a significant operator in a media system that was unpredictable and unstable (e.g. Cleary, 2014; Rule, 2014). A deal completed by Stokes in 2012 to sell his 25 per cent share in Consolidated Media was worth $500
million and resulted in a $430 million profit for the Seven Group that year (*The Australian*, 2013). In an era where the profits of media companies worldwide have declined – News Corporation’s profit of US$237 million in 2013–14 was down from US$506 million in the previous year – the sale placed Stokes in a strong position to make future investments, including the purchase of a $40 million stake in a rival television network, Ten (Davidson, 2013). Comparatively then, Stokes’ companies have done well in a market that was struggling, which makes Yahoo!7 News – one cog in the wheel of his media empire – an interesting news organisation to study.

With an estimated personal fortune of over $2.7 billion, it is Stokes’ news media and machinery empire that has made him one of the most powerful Australia-based media moguls of the past decade. In 2013, Stokes was listed by *The Australian* newspaper as the second most influential person in media in Australia, only missing out on first place because of the recent appointment of Robert Thomson as chief executive of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation with a goal of turning the Murdoch empire into a market leader in digital content production (*The Australian*, 2013).

Studying Yahoo!7 News will enable greater insight into the activities of one of the biggest online news organisations in Australia, whose content and employees have not yet been studied in great depth. Instead, debates have focused on the future of journalism (e.g. Hywood, 2011; Viner, 2013; Williams, 2012), with a focus on the feasibility of newspapers and their ability to maintain journalistic integrity online. These debates will be analysed in the following Literature Review chapter (Chapter 3).

To date however, researchers have not investigated an online aggregated news site in Australia to see what is actually happening; the ways they produce news and the content they create; and what these sites can contribute to our understanding about digital aggregated news production. An investigation of Yahoo!7 News will provide empirical data to add to debates about digital aggregated news production from the site of production. With this in mind, the next section will examine the company Yahoo!7 – the business and content it produces – in order to understand why it is a company of interest for this study.
2.3 Yahoo!7

2.3.1 The business

At the time this project began, Yahoo!7 was a joint venture between Seven West Media and Yahoo! International, a global internet corporation that produced news and entertainment for over 20 different countries. In the US – where Yahoo! was founded in 1994 – Yahoo! was recorded as the third most popular site in a statistical summary of US website activity produced by research company Nielsen, beaten only by Google and Facebook (Burn-Murdoch, 2012). Yahoo!7 was founded in 2006 after a deal was brokered between Yahoo! and the Seven Network. Yahoo!7 replaced Yahoo! Australia and New Zealand, which had been in operation since 1997. At this time, Yahoo! New Zealand became its own brand after Telecom New Zealand sold its 49 per cent share back to Yahoo!7 (IBIS World, 2014).

![The Yahoo!7 network 2011. Source: Yahoo!7 (2011).](image)

The newly established Yahoo!7 would provide the Seven Network, one of the major free-to-air television networks in Australia, with a platform to deliver their content to a
wider, digital audience. As such, Yahoo!7 became the digital news organisation responsible for aggregating news from the Seven Network, their regional broadcast network arm (Prime 7), Pacific Magazines, The West Australian Newspaper (their newspaper affiliate), news wires (e.g. AAP) and the web. Figure 2.4 provides a snapshot of the structure of Yahoo!7, where they received their content, and their affiliates at the time that this research project was undertaken.

However, as mentioned in Chapter 1 (Introduction), Seven West Media sold their 50 per cent share of Yahoo!7 in 2018 and moved the video streaming of its programming internally to website 7Plus. At the time of writing, Yahoo!7’s relationship to the Seven Network still enabled them to house content, but the likelihood of Yahoo!7 continuing to have unlimited free access to this content was in doubt considering the removal of all other programming from the platform. While the details about how Verizon’s local operations might be integrated into Yahoo!7 were still being determined, it appears as though Yahoo!7 would seek to, ‘create its own content and video opportunities’ (Samios, 2017) by drawing on content from Verizon and their suite of affiliated companies (including Oath, The Huffington Post, Tumblr and AOL) for the site.

The partnership with Verizon also motivated Yahoo!7 to build up their data and technology tools in order to track their audience more efficiently. Using programmatic and native advertising technology from Brightroll and Gemini – companies in the Verizon portfolio – Yahoo!7 have improved their offering to advertisers by building comprehensive data sets. In 2018, Yahoo!7 claimed that it had the largest data set in the country as a result of its search and email services and registered user database, with the ability to, ‘map 85 per cent of Australians across two devices ... which gives it a unique ability to target ads’ (Sigaloff cited in Thomson, 2017).

In 2016, Seven West Media had 4,528 employees, approximately 220 of whom worked for Yahoo!7, down from 5,119 (Seven West Media) and 373 (Yahoo!7) respectively in 2014 (IBIS World, 2016). In terms of revenue, Seven West Media posted a net loss of $444.5 million for the 2018–19 financial year, hindered by the write-down of its television licence and newspaper masthead The West Australian (Samios, 2019). Annual revenue also fell 4.2 per cent to $1.55 billion alongside operating costs, which were down 3 per cent, or $38 million, to $1.34 billion (Vitorovich, 2019).
In the previous 2017–18 financial year however, Seven West Media posted a net profit of $135.8 million, after a net loss of $744.3 million in the 2016–17 financial year. Of this profit, Yahoo!7 contributed just $1.3 million, which was a 61.8 per cent drop from 2017’s $3.4 million contribution (Samios, 2018a). The profit can partly be explained by the $16.4 million worth of redundancies that took place following the announcement by the company in November 2017 of the need to reduce the workforce and save $105 million. In the short term however, these redundancies will have a negative impact on balance sheets because of the resultant payout costs. Of the total revenue, Seven contributed $624.8 million, which was down 10.6 per cent from 2017 even though their cost of operation fell by 14 per cent to $477.4 million (Samios, 2018a).

What these statistics reveal is that Yahoo!7 have not yet devised a viable economic model, as indicated by their minimal contribution to Seven West Media’s overall revenue, which was part of the reason why they have diversified into data and technology sectors. The steps that the company has and/or is taking to increase their revenue share has implications for news audiences who access the news site for news and not, for example, sponsored content or advertising, which is why this has been an important development.

2.3.2 Site content

Yahoo!7 is an interesting news organisation to study because it is one of the main sources of news content and general information for Australians (Yahoo!7, 2012a). In 2012, Yahoo!7 recorded 4.8 million logged-in users each month (Yahoo!7, 2014a), reaching over 8 million Australians in April 2014 (Yahoo!7, 2014b). Their news websites reached 2.39 million unique users each month (Christensen, 2014b). In 2014, Yahoo!7 News was ranked fourth in a Nielsen list of the top 10 news websites (based on unique users), with 2.391 million unique users accessing the site per month (Christensen, 2014a). While their rankings have moved around quite significantly over the years, Yahoo!7 News have remained in the top 10 news websites visited (Nielsen, 2017). Yahoo!7 CEO Rohan Lund commented that: ‘one in two Australians will go to Yahoo!7, will visit our site, will look at our news, will visit our Frontpage’ (Yahoo!7, 2012c). These results should however be treated with some scepticism as these figures do not reveal the depth and quality of ‘visits’ to the Yahoo!7 Frontpage. These statistics
highlight the substantial number of Australians accessing Yahoo!7 News online and therefore it is important to investigate the content that websites such as these produce, and the people who produce it, as Yahoo!7 News has become a major source of news and information for Australians.

With regard to the structure of the site and its reach, Yahoo!7 News was just one site housed within the Yahoo!7 network (see Figure 2.4). Yahoo!7 aimed to provide content to audiences wherever they were, whenever they wanted it, and claimed that it was, ‘the online home of Australia’s number 1 TV, magazine and internet brands’ (Yahoo!7, 2012b). Their strategy was focused on having the best, and the most, content so that people were channeled into the network no matter what information they might be seeking. Investigating Yahoo!7 News will make a major contribution to determining which techniques have been used by online websites to attract and keep the audience on a webpage. The final chapter (Chapter 8) will discuss the impact of the use of these techniques on the trustworthiness and validity of online news content.

During the data collection period, the Yahoo!7 network included Yahoo!7 Lifestyle, which was the hub for food, health, fashion, beauty, homes, parenting, pets and horoscopes, as well as being the place where articles from Yahoo!7’s Pacific Magazines mastheads (Marie Claire, Who, Women’s Health, New Idea, Better Homes and Gardens) shared their content. Yahoo!7 Finance was the number-one global financial site in Australia and Yahoo!7 Sport provided updates on global and local sporting events (Yahoo!7, 2012c). At the time, their audience could also watch all of the shows aired on Channel Seven and their affiliated digital channels (7TWO and 7Mate) at Yahoo!7 TV’s 7Plus site. As well as these homes for content, the Yahoo!7 audience were able to interact with each other while watching live TV using Yahoo!7’s mobile app, Fango, which allowed their audience to chat in real time about the TV shows they were watching, vote in polls and win prizes.
Other sites located within the Yahoo!7 Network included: Flickr, the photo sharing network which was the number-one photo sharing website in Australia in 2014; Total Travel, a travel booking website; Spreets, a site providing audiences with cheap deals on restaurants, products and activities; seek.com.au, Australia’s number-one jobs, employment, career and recruitment site; realestate.com.au, Australia’s number-one property site; and The Hype, which provides entertainment news. As well as these websites, Yahoo!7 also have their own search engine, Yahoo!7 Search, which was the second largest search database after Google. They also provided Yahoo! Mail, which generated a substantial amount of the traffic to Yahoo!7 News as it was accessed from the Yahoo!7 Frontpage. With this expansive network of websites and platforms, it was possible for an audience member to click on a Yahoo!7 News story and remain solely in the Yahoo!7 network for the period of time that they were on the web. Nielsen recorded the time per person spent on the Yahoo!7 News website alone as being approximately 15 minutes in 2018, down from 28 minutes in 2014 (see Figure 2.5) (Christensen, 2014b). The news website with the greatest amount of time (per person) spent on the site was, at the time of writing, news.com.au, with an average of 33 minutes spent on their site per month in February 2018, down from 1 hour and 47 minutes per month in 2014 (Christensen, 2014b). Commentators have explained the decline in time spent on news websites from 2014 to 2018 as the result of an increased amount of time spent on social media, the withdrawal of organisations such as Fairfax Media from

![Figure 2.5](image)

*Figure 2.5  
Top 10 current events and global news by unique audience. Source: Samios (2018b).*
Nielsen ratings, and more fragmented audiences (Samios, 2018b). An investigation of Yahoo!7 News will provide data to assist discussions about why audiences are and/or are not staying on the network for longer periods of time. This analysis will take into account the types of content they produce and the specific strategies Yahoo!7 News use for keeping audiences on a page.

Delivering news in Australia is not just about having a website however. Yahoo!7 have in other places also developed a suite of applications (apps) that was downloaded over 2.7 million times in 2012 (Yahoo!7, 2012b). The app, which provided their audience with video and written content from Channel Seven’s broadcast, recorded over 4.5 million minutes spent on it in 2012 and was the number-one free Australian news app (Yahoo!7, 2012a). With the popularity of apps increasing rapidly – the average US citizen now spends over two hours each day on apps (Ballve, 2013) – Yahoo!7 has focused on increasing its app suite to include the Yahoo!7 TV Guide, Yahoo! Mail and Yahoo!7 Finance app (MarketDash), as well as program-specific apps, such as Sunrise (a morning news program), My Kitchen Rules (a popular television cooking program) and 7Sport. There were also apps to catch up on the content aired on Channel Seven (7Plus) and their digital channel (7Mate) as well as the Fango app mentioned earlier (see Section 2.2.2). These apps were available on Android and IOS (Apple operating system), with the aim of being available to as many people as possible.

While this research is focused on Yahoo!7 News, the analysis conducted here can be used as a framework for the further analysis of Yahoo!7 content, and other online websites. The analysis of digital content is becoming increasingly important as people access more information online. As such, the information should, according to professional standards of journalism, be trustworthy and accurate so that the public can make informed decisions about how to incorporate the information into their lives (Domingo, 2008). The level to which the public has been able to access the information they need in order to operate as an informed citizenry has come under scrutiny from the media and academics (e.g. Carson, Muller, Martin and Simons, 2016; Grabe and Myrick, 2016; Simons and Buller, 2015; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2018). This study will provide empirical data about the kinds of information the public are receiving from one of the major news organisations in Australia, and contribute to existing debates.
surrounding the future of journalism, as well as the impact of digital news on society and journalists.

2.3.3 Social media

This thesis also considers the social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) used by the Yahoo!7 newsworkers, and therefore it is relevant to explain the involvement of the Yahoo!7 newsworkers with these social networks, how they were managed and organised.

The Yahoo!7 newsworkers managed the content on seven Facebook pages in total. These pages included a Yahoo!7 page, as well as a national page (Australia) and five local pages (7News Sydney, 7News Melbourne, 7News Perth, 7News Adelaide and 7News Queensland). In 2015, the Yahoo!7 Facebook page (see Figure 2.6) was ‘Liked’ by 51,424 people, which could be considered a relatively low number when compared with their main competitor, ninemsn, which had received 275,320 Likes at the same point in time. The Yahoo!7 Facebook page was listed by the company on the page as a ‘News/Media Website’ and, like the Yahoo!7 Frontpage online, was the location where the newsworkers shared stories that appeared across all platforms on the Yahoo network. This included national and international stories and some stories from 7News.

Figure 2.6

*Yahoo!7 Facebook page. Source: Yahoo!7 (2015).*
Figure 2.7 is an example of a post by a Yahoo!7 newsworker on the Yahoo!7 Facebook page. Each post contained a short blurb and/or comment about the story they were posting, an image/s to go with the story, hyperlinks to the online content, and any other relevant story source information.

![Example of news post on Yahoo!7 Facebook page. Source: Yahoo!7 Facebook page (2015).](image)

Unlike the Yahoo!7 Facebook page, the 7News page (see Figure 2.8) had a large following in September 2015 (666,338 people). This could perhaps be explained by the popularity of the 7News broadcast, which in 2015 was viewed by approximately 1.38 million viewers in Australia each night (Knox, 2015). The higher audience numbers could also be a reflection of the amount of content that the newsworkers posted on this page. The Facebook content analysis revealed that the 7News Facebook page was updated over 130 times per day, which was more than four times the amount that the Yahoo!7 Facebook page was updated (Facebook Content Analysis, 2015). It was also updated for a longer period of time than the Yahoo!7 page – 24 hours a day – compared with the Yahoo!7 Facebook Page, which was updated from 9:00am to 10:30pm (Facebook Content Analysis, 2015). These almost constant updates provided the Yahoo!7 audience with more content to ‘Like’, ‘Share’ and ‘Comment’ on, for a longer period of time.

The 7News Facebook page was where the newsworkers posted news items that they considered to be of national importance. These news stories were shared from the
Yahoo!7 National News Homepage and were generally the stories from the 7News broadcasts.

Figure 2.8

Twitter is an online social networking platform, which allowed users to post hyperlinks and comments to share with their followers. For the Yahoo!7 newsworkers, Twitter was used as a platform to share links to their news content (see Figure 2.9). Like the updates on Facebook, each post generally included a brief summary about the story, a hyperlink to the content, and any relevant hashtags related to the article that would assist their audience when searching for news on particular events (e.g. #MelbourneCup) and a photo.

In the same way as Facebook, the newsworkers managed the updates on seven Twitter pages: the Yahoo!7 Twitter page (@Yahoo!7); the 7News page (@Y7News); and the five local pages (@7NewsMelbourne, @7NewsSydney, @7NewsQueensland, @7NewsPerth, @7NewsAdelaide). The @Yahoo!7 Twitter page reflected the content
published on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage online, while the @Y7News Twitter page generally echoed content published online on the 7News National Homepage.

![Example of news post on Yahoo!7 Twitter page. Source: Yahoo!7 Twitter page (2015).](image)

**Figure 2.9**

*Example of news post on Yahoo!7 Twitter page. Source: Yahoo!7 Twitter page (2015).*

The number of followers of the @Y7News Twitter account, the 7News Twitter page (103,000 followers), was significantly larger than the number of followers of the @Yahoo!7 Twitter account (8,493 followers). The larger audience for the @Y7News account corresponded to the higher rate of activity and posts on the page, with newswriters sending out over 80,800 tweets from this account versus 1,817 tweets from the @Yahoo!7 account (Yahoo!7 Twitter Analysis, 2015).

### 2.4 Summary

This chapter has outlined major developments in the news media landscape, with a particular focus on Australia, since the introduction of the internet in the 1990s. It has indicated how new media technologies have changed the ways in which news is produced, disseminated and consumed by the public. The large-scale uptake of digital services has meant that, increasingly, consumers of news have been accessing news online, via their smartphones and tablets.

The chapter has also outlined the role of Yahoo!7, part of Seven West Media, within this digital space. It has shown that, as one of the top five websites visited by Australians for news every day, Yahoo!7 is a major supplier of news content to Australians. As a result, an investigation of news production at Yahoo!7 News will
contribute to our knowledge of how digital aggregated news sites work. This investigation presents a chance to think about how digital aggregated news sites contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production more broadly, through the investigation of a company that was specifically and deliberately developed in response to market changes. A study of Yahoo!7 News also enables a consideration of the impact that broader societal changes have had on online news production and the people who work in these new environments.

The next chapter, the Literature Review (Chapter 3), will analyse the body of research literature regarding news production and journalism from early news centre research to digital news production. It will outline the research prior to this study and highlight where this project makes a contribution to knowledge.
Chapter 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

The research question that frames this project is: How can the study of an Australian aggregated news site (Yahoo!7 News) contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production? An investigation of this question will provide empirical data regarding a digital aggregated news site and enable insights into the complex dynamics of news production from within this environment. Such sites have received minimal scholarly attention even though, as we have seen, news audiences worldwide are increasingly turning to aggregators as a convenient source of news from a wide array of sources (Lee and Chyi, 2015). Studying Yahoo!7 News presents an opportunity to conceptualise one of the forms that digital aggregated news can take in this contemporary context, and enables analysis and discussion pertaining to the production and presentation of news at an aggregated digital news site.

This chapter will analyse six dominant phases of literature that have informed the study of news organisations as they have undergone substantial technological and structural change. These bodies of research can be considered as: 1) early news production literature; 2) liminal empirical research; 3) future of journalism research; 4) online news research; 5) aggregated news research; and 6) ethnographic online news research.

3.1 Early news production literature

A review of early empirical news production literature reveals the concerns and methodological focus of journalism and news researchers prior to the digital news revolution. The findings from these empirical studies provide insights into how news was made in traditional news organisations, and describe the frameworks established for studying news that were later adapted for empirical studies of online news organisations (e.g. Møller Hartley, 2011). Understanding the arguments and basic tenets of these studies provides a context for understanding more recent empirical research projects that focus specifically on online news websites.

Seminal early empirical research in the 1950s through to the 1980s focused on the professional cultures and production processes of traditional newsrooms. Within this body of research were works by Edward J. Epstein (1974), Mark Fishman (1980), Herbert J. Gans (1979), Michael Schudson (1989), Gaye Tuchman (1978) and David
Manning White (1950). The main foci of these studies were news production processes, for example, who decided what constituted news and the processes of story selection and news production. Initially, the work of these authors essentially fell into one of two groups: 1) those who believed that it was the personal subjectivities of journalists that steered content direction (e.g. White, 1950); and 2) those who argued that organisational structures influenced story selection more than individual subjectivities (e.g. Epstein, 1974). However, while the individual argument was popular in the 1940s and 1950s, extensive ethnographies of news production processes by authors such as Epstein (1974) and Tuchman (1978) later demonstrated that this individualistic explanation of news production was far too simplistic. These later studies revealed that organisational factors such as production routines, the economic structure and organisational culture of traditional news organisations were integral to the development of news content. The seminal works of each argument are examined briefly here in order to chart how knowledge about news production and organisation has developed.

### 3.1.1 Individual argument

Early studies of newsworth in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Breed, 1955; Gieber, 1964; Lang and Lang, 1968; White, 1950) centred on the psychology of journalists and how their private motives shaped the production processes of traditional news organisations. These studies also began to emphasise the importance and explanatory power of organisational and bureaucratic influences on newsworth (e.g. Epstein, 1974; Warner, 1971), adding to our understanding of why the news media perform as they do.

One notable contribution to this body of literature was a study conducted by White (1950), which attempted to explain the complexities of news production with empirical research at a morning newspaper. His work was primarily concerned with the selection of news stories by news editors – labeled ‘gatekeepers’ – who, he argued, at various points throughout the production process, controlled the news. Placing importance on the agency of the individual, White (1950) concluded that the news was a result of the personal beliefs and biases of the gatekeepers and the study became influential to further research into news production by Axel Bruns (2008), Edward J. Epstein (1974), James Halloran (1976) and Malcolm Warner (1971) as they began to counter the ‘myth’ that newsworthers were the reporters of an independent reality. Consequently, White’s
(1950) study made it evident that newsworkers gatekeeping decisions were influenced by a range of factors, including constraints (such as deadlines and routines), the organisational framework (e.g. the size and ownership of organization), social institutions (e.g. government, advertisers), and social system (e.g. economic, politics, ideology) (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009).

Authors such as Bruns (2005) extended White’s study by formulating new models to better explain processes of news selection in the digital era. For Bruns (2005), the role of journalists and commercial news organisations was imagined as being more open and collaborative than White’s (1950) gatekeeping model. He conceptualised a ‘gatewatching’ model in which journalists would copy and paste together a number of news reports in one place rather than ‘synthesizing multiple sources into one coherent news report’ as more relevant to the online news system than the traditional ‘gatekeeping’ model (Bruns, 2005, p. 6). In the gatewatching model, audiences would add information they had found to the journalists’ material, turning the whole process into a shared project between journalist and audience.

The role of gatekeeper, as imagined by White (1950), emerged as a defining role of professional journalists around the turn of the twentieth century (Vos and Finneman, 2014). However, the gatekeeping role has become increasingly criticised by scholars as overly paternalistic since the increase in popularity of online news (Bruns, 2008). Some authors (e.g. Singer et al., 2011) have even argued that a new era of audience engagement, ushered by the advent of social media, has destabilised the gatekeeping role as engaging audiences through conversation facilitation has become part of the work that journalists do (Malmelin and Villi, 2015). This current study will provide insight into these debates by determining the extent to which the concept of the gatekeeper is relevant to the aggregated news site under investigation.

The next phase of news production literature considered here, organisational research, is research that was conducted by authors such as Mark Fishman (1980), Herbert Gans (1979), Bernard Roshco (1975) and Gaye Tuchman (1978) throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These authors focused on the organisational practices of newsrooms in the United States and, unlike researchers such as White (1950), their findings indicated that newswork and, more specifically, news content, were artefacts of an organisation’s production routine.
3.1.2 Organisational argument

These studies were particularly groundbreaking because they uncovered a gap between what journalists believed they did (i.e. create news objectively) and what was actually happening (i.e. news was created within the institutional constraints of production routines).

In particular, the work of Tuchman (1978), a prolific writer on this topic, was significant. In her influential critique of how journalists made editorial decisions in newsrooms, Tuchman (1978) concluded that newsworkers in broadcast news organisations became conditioned to institutionalised behaviour over time, thereby ‘routinizing the unexpected’ (Tuchman, 1978). The findings from Tuchman’s study of a local independent television station and a daily morning newspaper became popular among researchers interested in newswork because it was one of the first studies to reveal how newsworkers based their day-to-day decisions around the constraints and timing of production processes, rather than on their own attitudes and choices.

The works of Epstein (1974), Fishman (1980), Tuchman (1978) and Schlesinger (1987) also became important for later researchers such as Jannie Møller Hartley (2011) as their research developed theoretical categorisations of news and contained valuable insights and observations from inside major news organisations, including interviews with journalists. Epstein’s (1974) analysis of three major news organisations in America (the American Broadcasting Company, Columbia Broadcasting Company and the National Broadcasting Company) supported this notion that researchers needed to understand organisations in order to be in a better position to analyse news production and content. Epstein (1974) also concluded that news output did not necessarily represent journalists’ best efforts to seek truth and serve as society’s watchdogs. Instead, based on evidence from his case study, Epstein (1974) noted three dominant organisational factors that influenced news production and content selection: 1) organisational policy (e.g. special directives from management regarding what to/what not to telecast); 2) the economic realities of news organisations (i.e. outputs are explicable in terms of what the news organisations have to do to stay in business); and 3) the recruitment of staff (i.e. in line with their acceptance of values consistent with the organisation). Overall, Epstein’s research yielded some interesting findings surrounding the nature of news production within particular organisational settings.
However, Epstein’s argument was problematic since he did not recognise the element of subjectivity involved in newwork that can enter into newworkers’ decisions about news content.

Like Epstein (1974), Fishman’s research revealed that the organisational routines of the newsroom, rather than news judgments made by individual reporters, determined the flow of newwork and news content. Working in a news environment as a reporter, Fishman (1980) found that news organisations covered events mainly through information provided to them by bureaucratic structures, such as news sources. He also discovered that reporters, when investigating a story, tended to be routed through government agencies and corporate bureaucracies in order to gain what was deemed ‘factual’ and ‘reliable’ information. This process, he argued, was a result of the stress of deadlines and other organisational pressures, which caused reporters to rely on these structures in order to maintain a steady flow of news (Fishman, 1980). For Fishman (1980) the result of reporters’ reliance on sources appeared in the form of a bureaucratically pre-packaged news product that was based on information retrieved from press releases, and government and police reports (Fishman, 1980). Fishman (1980) viewed this as problematic for audiences who, as a result, ended up being fed a one-dimensional version of events based on filtered information from political structures. The present study will investigate whether or not a similar trend towards news agency reliance was happening at Yahoo!7 News (see Chapter 6).

Schudson’s (1989) article, ‘The Sociology of News Production’, was also a critical piece of work that assisted the development of a new framework for thinking about news production and journalistic work. Schudson (1989) introduced the notion that the term ‘making news’ did not refer to the fabrication of news by newworkers. Instead, Schudson (1989) determined that news was the outcome of work accomplished in a particular social environment. News organisations therefore became bureaucratic organisations, and news became the outcome of a routine bureaucratic process.

These studies are important to consider because they firmly established the factors that contributed to journalistic work at traditional news organisations and revealed how production processes were affected by organisational and bureaucratic social structures. In summary, the findings from these studies contended that news was not an account of reality. Rather, news was seen as a social and cultural construction of journalists and their sources, as shaped by their organisational contexts. When investigating
Yahoo!7 News, this thesis will also consider how the newworkers created content based on the limitations of their organisational routine, or if more complex factors were at play.

The aim of the early news production literature was to deepen our understanding of news production processes and the role of journalists within this process. The liminal empirical research examined in the next section was also concerned with developing knowledge about news production processes, yet the main focus was not on how decisions were made in the newsroom. Rather, the liminal empirical research literature has been concerned with the shift from traditional to online news and the impact of this shift on traditional news organisations, newsmaking models, journalists, journalism and news audiences.

3.2 Liminal empirical research

The liminal research approach can be broadly categorised as either crisis or reformist research. Crisis researchers (e.g. Cawley, 2008; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Ursell, 2001; Zavoina and Reichert, 2000) have focused on how the shift to online news has been detrimental to journalists and journalism in general. Conversely, reformist researchers (e.g. Curran, 2010; Deuze and Marjoribanks, 2009; Gowing, 2009; Rosen, 1999;) perceived digital newsrooms and technology as being conducive to the creation of high-quality journalism, as well as rich and varied news content. The works of crisis and reformist researchers are quite easily distinguishable – crisis researchers are pessimistic about the impact of online news; reformist researchers are more positive. Both groups of researchers are essentially concerned, however, with how online news has impacted upon the profession of journalism. An analysis of these streams of literature is therefore necessary here as the present study is also concerned with the nature of news production and presentation at a digital aggregated news site.

3.2.1 Crisis

The major shift from traditional to digital newsrooms has generated debate amongst authors who are concerned about: the impact of a more digitally centric news system on the ‘art’ of journalism; heavier workloads; mounting cross-platform content demands; the 24-hour news cycle; more low-pay freelance work; increased marketplace competition; and a fragmented news audience (e.g. Cawley, 2008; Lawson-Borders,
Within this crisis literature, researchers tended to belong to one of two broad schools of thought – technological determinists or culturalists. Technological determinists perceived technology as the determining force of journalists’ actions and behaviours. Conversely, culturalists argued that the use of technology within newsrooms was reliant upon the goals and judgments of the journalists themselves. To generate a better understanding of these differing perspectives within the crisis literature the two competing contextual frameworks will now be examined.

3.2.1.1 Technological determinists

John Pavlik (2000) in the United States wrote a number of articles regarding the negative relationship between technological innovation and journalism, and was one of the key advocates within the field of crisis literature. His technologically deterministic standpoint was made clear with his assertion in one study that, ‘journalism has always been shaped by technology’ (Pavlik, 2000, p. 229). And, in another, ‘for journalism, function has often followed form’ (Pavlik, 2001, p. 203).

By reflecting on the history of journalism, Pavlik (2000) argued that changing technology has influenced journalism in four main areas: 1) journalistic practice; 2) news content; 3) newsroom organisation; and 4) the relationships between news organisations and their audiences (Pavlik, 2000). However, Pavlik’s findings were not based upon empirical data and, subsequently, findings from later empirical studies of news production (e.g. Cottle and Ashton, 1999; Harrison, 2010; Klinenberg, 2005; Marjoribanks, 2000; Ursell, 2001) found that the technological determinist approach was not an appropriate framework for understanding the complex relationship between technology and journalism. Ethnographic and empirical studies of traditional news organisations have provided invaluable insights into the nature and determinants of news production, and have acted as a necessary corrective, therefore, to more speculative claims such as Pavlik’s. Nevertheless, these technological determinist perspectives are important to consider as they provide an understanding of how the liminal research literature has progressed to include more holistic schools of thought, such as the culturalists.
3.2.1.2 Culturalist

Through her investigations of three television broadcast stations in the United Kingdom, Gillian Ursell (2001) argued that journalistic practice was not shaped deterministically by technology. Rather, Ursell’s work made it evident that further investigation into the conditions and contextual characteristics of individual news organisations was required for a better understanding of the impact of technology on journalistic practice and, more broadly, journalism. The present study addresses this call to action with an investigation of the conditions and contextual characteristics unique to a major digital aggregated news website in Australia.

While Ursell's empirical findings formed the basis of her study, her work was also particularly useful as it provided a comprehensive summary of the arguments made by those authors who associated new media technologies with falling standards of journalism and increased stress amongst journalists (e.g. Bromley and O’Malley, 1997; Parker, 1995; Sparks, 1991; Stephenson and Mory, 1990). In short, Ursell (2001) determined that the main areas of debate regarding new media technologies surrounded how they have either: 1) blurred the boundaries between journalists and non-journalists (Stephenson and Mory, 1990); 2) forced journalists to become master technical operators (Parker, 1995; Bromley and O’Malley, 1997); or 3) distracted journalists from fulfilling traditional journalistic values (Sparks, 1991). Ursell's study revealed that new media technologies were not responsible for the perceived deterioration of news standards, since broadcasters did not have identical allegiances and mandates. Instead, Ursell (2001) argued that institutional factors impacted on how new technologies were used in the production of news, and its quality (Ursell, 2001).

Cottle and Ashton (1999) and Marjoribanks (2000) also took a culturalist approach to their research. Their theories were notable, since they were amongst the first group of authors to formulate an argument against deterministic explanations of new media technologies. As Cottle and Ashton (1999) concluded:

Technological developments ...are... incorporated and deployed for strategic and competitive advantage; they do not, in and of themselves, dictate corporate policy much less determine how they are incorporated in practice (p. 39).

Cottle and Ashton’s empirical research at a regional multimedia – broadcast television and radio – British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) newscentre in 1999 was particularly groundbreaking since the role of technology on processes of production
had received only a relatively small amount of theoretical attention before this time.
By approaching news technology as a ‘creature of our own making’, one that was, ‘put to work within determinant social environments’ Cottle and Ashton (1999) made an argument for the dismissal of the idea that technology was the cause of change to news processes (Cottle and Ashton, 1999).

Cottle and Ashton’s research revealed that even though new technologies had facilitated a change in the working practices of journalists, they were unlikely to encourage radically new directions in newsmaking, despite the perceived turmoil experienced by the new, 'multi-skilled, multi-media' working environment (p. 41). In their research both Cottle and Ashton (1999) and Marjoribanks (2000) reiterated the stress and pressure that the introduction and naturalisation of news technologies can have on newsworkers, which was a recurring concern within the crisis literature (e.g. Bromley and O’Malley, 1997; Parker, 1995). However, Cottle and Ashton (1999) argued that this ‘stress’ was a result of the redundancies and/or the redesignation of roles that flowed from the introduction of the technologies, which, he argued had caused increased workloads and an escalation in soft news and ‘inaccurate’ reporting rather than the introduction of new technologies themselves (Cottle and Ashton, 1999, p. 37).

Marjoribanks (2000) has also conducted extensive research into the impact of new technology – that is, computerised editing and printing technology – on workplace reorganisation in Australia. Using three case studies of newspapers owned by News Corporation in Australia, Britain and the United States, Marjoribanks (2000) developed a ‘relational model’ for theorising labour processes, which recognised the role of the state, unions and employers in the implementation of new technology. He argued that differences in national context, for example, were responsible for how new technologies were utilised in newsrooms. His later research centred on management and journalism practice, sport and new technologies (e.g. Marjoribanks, Muller and Gawenda, 2018; Sherwood, Nicholson and Marjoribanks, 2017) but, never with an online focus.

In a study incorporating interviews with nearly 70 news professionals at approximately a dozen online newspaper organisations, across 10 Western democracies, Alfred Hermida (2011) addressed normative concerns about changes to news processes at online newspapers as a result of an increase in participatory journalism. Similarly to
Cottle and Ashton (1999), Hermida (2011) found that while digital technologies have made it easier for audiences to more actively consume news, journalists and newsworkers were still blocking audiences from contributing to content and key processes of news production. In fact, Hermida’s findings suggested that the majority of news professionals at online newspapers still did not perceive their audience as actively involved in the production of news content, even though the online newspapers Hermida (2011) investigated invited their audience to provide them with more information to use on their sites (e.g. photos and video). The ways in which digital news has empowered citizens to change or challenge established news processes is a research area that still requires further investigation.

Where Hermida’s study focused on the role of technology in processes of change in newsrooms, his research partner, Ari Heinonen (2011), looked further into the relationship between journalists and audiences throughout these processes. Using data from interviews with journalists, Heinonen (2011) focused particularly on journalists’ views of their audiences and the role that digital technologies have played in the evolution of these views. Like Hermida (2011) he found that technology had enabled news audiences to become more active at the first and last stages of the news production process. He extended Hermida’s work, however, by arguing that it was at these first and last stages of production that journalists valued the contributions of their audience the most. Consequently, his findings revealed that journalists at online newspapers did not consider content from their audience as reliable or professional, and that journalists used these reasons to retain control over editorial content (Heinonen, 2011).

This research is useful as it provides empirical evidence to suggest that even though technologies have enabled audiences to more easily provide information and feedback, their contributions have not impacted too greatly on news processes, how journalists perceive their audience, or how they work (Heinonen, 2011). As audiences become more adept at producing and publishing news – instead of just contributing to it or commenting on it – the extent to which editorial routines change will require further investigation. The present study will reveal if these patterns exist within an Australian digital aggregated news context.

Interestingly, after further research into the impact of new media technologies on journalism, media and society, Pavlik (2008) presented findings in his book Media in the Digital Age which suggested that he no longer subscribed to the technological
determinist school of thought. In this study, Pavlik (2008) evaluated different dimensions of the industry – from digital delivery systems to the varying needs of audiences and content producers – to provide a better way to understand the complex issues associated with the digital age for the news industry and news organisations. From his analysis, Pavlik (2008) determined that new technologies had the ability to enrich the roles of journalists, yet whether or not the technologies ended up improving or worsening the work practices of the journalists was dependent on organisational policies and individual practices. Pavlik’s research findings provide grounds for further research in newsrooms in order to determine how technologies are used and their impact on journalists.

3.2.2 Reformist

While the crisis stream of research emphasised the significant challenges confronted by newsworkers, authors such as James Curran (2010), Nik Gowing (2009) and Jay Rosen (1999) also wrote about how new media technologies have provided opportunities to positively reform journalism, for example by enabling more efficient production routines and supporting journalists’ skill development. These authors agreed that online news offered new spaces for journalists to engage with new technologies in creative and innovative ways: ‘Journalists now have instant access to a rich store of public and other information, and can incorporate more readily a range of different news sources’ (Curran, 2010, p. 467). Authors that have subscribed to this approach have argued that new media technologies have reconstituted production processes and newswork, leading to the development of higher quality and more sophisticated news products.

In 2010, Curran (2010) analysed existing theories regarding the future of journalism, noting that they were so vast and varied that it was difficult to be confident about the future role and direction of journalism. Nevertheless, following a comprehensive analysis of each ‘ideal-typical’ perspective, Curran (2010) concluded that the future of journalism lay in what he labeled ‘public reformism’ (p. 472). This approach called for concerted action on behalf of all employees at news organisations, and encouraged the industry to steer its own direction instead of passively accepting the future. Curran’s study also suggested that the democratic performance of the news media could be improved through a number of initiatives, including the support of ‘green shoots’, web-
based journalism. As a result of his research, Curran (2010) encouraged participants across offline and online news platforms to take affirmative action to support independent news production.

3.3 Future of journalism research

The creation of a digital news medium has caused many authors (e.g. Blondheim and Liebes, 2009; Douglas, 1999; Goodwin, 2013; Waterford, 2000; Weber, 1997) to reflect on the operations and practices of traditional journalism in order to understand contemporary and future roles. For example, according to the proponents of the ‘golden age’ theory, the mid 1960s to the late 1990s was a time when journalists were more hard-working, objective, accurate and driven to uncover ‘the truth’ through in-depth interviews and analysis. It was during this time that journalists purportedly most closely enacted the ‘ideals’ of journalism – to fulfill an egalitarian purpose and produce high-quality news for the public. This was also a time when display advertising revenue models were most efficient, making it easier for commercial news organisations to spend money on creating this allegedly high-quality journalism.

Another body of work suggested that traditional journalism has never experienced a ‘golden age’ (e.g. Bernstein, 2010; CNN, 2017). Researchers who made this argument (e.g. Attaway-Fink, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Underwood, 2001) contended that: commercial news organisations were then, and always have been, driven by profit; journalists have always used audience metrics to guide content decisions; others (e.g. government and public relations agencies) have always fed news to journalists; and news content has always been entertainment focused.

Whatever the view, the increase in popularity of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s brought high hopes amongst authors (e.g. Rosen, 1999) that the new platform would allow journalists the chance to break free from the constraints of news organisations, perhaps allowing them to live up to the ideals of the golden age by producing their own work, holding the powerful to account, and working more collaboratively with ‘the people’ (e.g. Bruns, 2005; Engelhardt, 2014; Shafer, 2009).

In essence, it was thought that digital news could bring about a modern-day ‘golden age’ driven by the unique capabilities of the internet (Domingo, 2008). New websites were launched that were crowd funded and open to contributions from the public.
Journalism schools started teaching students how to operate online, and academics such as Rosen (2009) and Shirky (2009) argued that the internet had potential as a democratic tool. As Domingo (2008) highlighted, ‘participatory journalism’ became the buzzword of the new era.

However, much like perception of a print ‘golden age’ in the 1960s, online news has also not lived up to its idealised potential. The capacity of anyone to create and distribute news has contributed to public confusion about what is real news and what is fake news (McBeth and Clemons, 2011; Stecula, 2017). The major news organisations are still the most popular sources of information for the public (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel and Shearer, 2016) and they still tightly control the outflow of news by limiting how the public can contribute to their websites (Russell, 2011). In addition, more and more journalists have unstable and transient working conditions and higher expectations of output (Canning, 2016). Yahoo!7 News is a product of these contexts and processes.

Dramatic changes to the profession of journalism and news production spearheaded by the introduction of the internet acted as the catalyst for authors to speculate and hypothesise about the future. This has resulted in a range of studies in which concern has been expressed about the future of journalism, and strategies about ways to ‘save’ it have been considered (e.g. Bird, 2009; Franklin, 2012; Rosen, 2009; Shirky, 2009).

The issues identified as being of most concern have been: 1) the disappearance of the traditional economic model for news, with no viable one-size-fits-all replacement (see Jones and Salter, 2012); 2) the restructuring, convergence and ultimate disappearance of traditional newspapers altogether; 3) the reduction in the size of the workforce of heritage news organisations and the loss of traditional journalistic skills as newsworkers become more digitally attuned to news events and the delivery of them to audiences; and 4) the blurring of the lines between news and entertainment, which some authors have argued has resulted in news that is characteristically ‘softer’ than traditional news forms were (Prior, 2003; Zaller, 2003).

Franklin (2012) also noted the impact of the internet on the changing news habits of audiences. In the digital age, people consume their news at times that are varied and convenient for them, from a wide range of sources, in formats that are most appropriate at their time of need. Audiences no longer have to wait for a newspaper to appear at the beginning of each day. They do not need to tune into a news bulletin at a specific
time to find out what is going on in the world. They are constantly connected, receiving information and sharing it from computers, laptops, iPads and smartphones. Research confirms this phenomenon, with news audience data revealing that fewer people access their news from newspapers (American Press Institute, 2014). In addition, young people (aged 18-34) – the future readers and audiences of digital news media – have been increasingly accessing news in a variety of different ways (e.g. social media, apps, news websites) outside of traditional models (American Press Institute, 2014).

In Australia, the state of the news media – in particular how it has been impacted upon by technology, the role of journalists in these digital environments, and the future of Australian newspapers and journalism – has been written and spoken about at some length (e.g. Simons, Oderberg, Zavos, Wilson and Barren, 2014; Torney, Wilson, Johnston, Forbes and Simons, 2014). These commentators have voiced uncertainty about the future of news, especially around budget cuts and the resultant reduction of the quality of the news content produced. Otto, Glogger and Boukes (2016) noted a trend towards entertainment or tabloid-style news, visuals over text, headlines over facts and captions over analysis, and claimed that this had weakened the media’s role to educate citizens. These observations are well known in political communication research, and digital news media research, and have generated varying calls to action from scholars. Matthew Ricketson (2012) for example, argued for all news organisations to make, ‘civic society central to their work’ and for journalists to reflect on the work that they produced (p. 12). For Ricketson, concerns regarding the tabloidisation of the media were considered reasonable, yet he also maintained a strong belief in the power of journalism to inform and educate the public online by promoting a high-quality news product.

Industry reports have also been published with the aim of gaining a better understanding of what Australians are seeking from their news services. One such report, the ‘Digital News Report: Australia’ (Park, Fisher, Fuller and Lee, 2018), drew on the survey data of over 2,000 adults who had consumed news in the last month in order to track the changes of their news consumption habits over time. The data reported showed that there was an increased willingness amongst Australians to pay for online news, and a high level of public concern about ‘fake news’ (Park et al., 2018). Following up these results with research from within newsrooms, to gauge the level of concern that newsworkers have regarding ‘fake news’ and to determine what steps are
being taken to prevent the publication of fake news, could be beneficial for alleviating any concerns of the public.

These issues related to the growth and future directions of online news and aggregated news sites are relevant here since the current project investigates the inner workings of a digital aggregated news site and this can form the basis of a consideration of future growth trajectories, as well as the ways in which the news industry is constantly evolving to respond to new technologies and the needs and interests of a growing audience demographic. The body of research considered next, online news research, is therefore also relevant to analyse because of the interest in the current project on a specific form of online news, aggregated news.

3.4 Online news research

In the 1990s, the use of the web for news distribution initially motivated a strong wave of hope for change amongst journalists and scholars who had been critical about the quality of traditional journalism. Authors such as Peter Dahlgren (1996) claimed that classical journalism was ‘waning’ as a result of the focus of news organisations on advertising, the mixing of entertainment and information, the fragmentation of audiences, and the detachment of news production from the concerns of the audience (p. 61) (see also Hall, 2001; Lowrey and Anderson, 2005).

Jim Hall (2001), journalist and scholar, produced one of the first and most seminal works in this field of research in 2001. His book, Online Journalism, studied how the rise of the internet had fundamentally changed the way the public consumes, interprets, processes and interacts with news, and suggested compelling challenges for researchers regarding the nature of news and journalism in the digital age, which focused on objectivity, and the separation of editorial and advertising content. Hall (2001) argued that in the digital age interactivity should be considered as one of the core processes of journalism, and lamented at what he regarded as being the ‘capitalist’ controlled digital media system, where news organisations were driven by profits and dominated by advertisers. Hall (2001) concluded his research with a call to action for journalists to assist their audiences in navigating and understanding the plethora of information on the web.
3.4.1 Political economy of online journalism

In their book *Digital Journalism* Jones and Salter (2012) also provided an overview of the major issues, challenges and debates facing journalism online. They argued that one of these key issues was the business, or the political economy, of online journalism. Historically, they claimed, political economy had constrained the democratic ideals of journalism as investors sought to use journalism to make money and a handful of individuals and large corporations controlled, and profited from, media ownership (Jones and Salter, 2012). They suggested that the internet offered an opportunity to minimise this control, by creating a space for any number of people to contribute to the news information economy (Jones and Salter, 2012). However, Jones and Salter (2012) contended that this ideal was restricted by, ‘the economies of space online’, with evidence pointing towards the continuation of corporate dominance of online journalism (Jones and Salter, 2012, p. ix).

They maintained that the challenges associated with the political economy of online journalism were related to its reliance on traditional revenue streams such as advertising and subscriptions, which had been regarded as unaltering for traditional media (Jones and Salter, 2012). However, it became evident that the old models of profit-making, that had supported newspaper publishing and commercial radio and television broadcasting were not sufficient for sustaining the business of online journalism, which opened up a market for additional and cheaper advertising space. Additionally, Jones and Salter (2012) highlighted that the reluctance of news executives to embrace the potential of the internet for improving news production in its infancy was a major contributor to the faltering economic model.

Authors such as Shirky (2009) have made a case for the democratic potential of online journalism by arguing that the production of online news reduced the dominance of large corporations to be the sole provider of news content, and that it was indeed possible for citizens to coordinate news production at local levels. However, what he did not take into account was the resources required to produce original investigative reporting. Whilst the notion of the citizen journalist, the prosumer or prod-user, is at its core democratic and liberating, the internet has also enabled a different kind of social exclusion (Jones and Salter, 2012). A social exclusion that only enabled people with access to technology, the internet, finances, education and expertise the ability to
participate (Jones and Salter, 2012). For example, one Nieman Journalism Lab report estimated that a *New York Times* investigative piece could cost up to $400,000 (Jones and Salter, 2012).

The research of political economist Robert McChesney (2013, 2002) extended this notion when he argued that online media did not pose a threat to the power and influence of large media organisations. He reasoned that because large news organisations were willing to take financial losses on the internet, were the main contributors to funding start-ups, had established audiences, existing digital content that could be transferred across media channels at minimal cost, and also the ability to cross promote content, online journalism was not going to have the capacity to destroy the media giants, or indeed minimise their influence (McChesney, 2002).

Due to the breadth and variation in the operation of online news organisations, understanding the political economy of online journalism is useful for explaining the intricacies of the medium, the dynamics of the market, organisational change, commercialisation and the varying ways in which online news is produced (Altschull, 1997; Ehrlich, 1995; McManus, 1994). However, Cottle (2003) called for further research into the complexities of online journalism, more specifically, ‘how the contradictory tendencies of the marketplace are managed and negotiated within the arenas of news production’, to facilitate better understandings about how exactly they might impact the forms and features of news (Cottle, 2003, p. 19). This research would broaden our perspective from the political economy expectations alone (Cottle, 2003).

### 3.4.2 User-generated content

The presence of user-generated content (UGC) has become an integral part of online journalism as news organisations share their content and invite their consumers to contribute to news stories in a variety of ways (e.g. comments, news content, graphics and video). As a result, the body of literature describing the ways in which user-generated content has expanded in recent years. The extensive work of Singer et al. (2011) provided one of the first comprehensive accounts of UGC in Western democracies by analysing how UGC was managed by a variety of online news organisations. Since this time the breadth of research has expanded to focus on how journalists’ have managed the work that UGC has created (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2015), the value of UGC to journalists (Heinonen, 2011), the
impact of UGC on democracy (Östman, 2012) and how user generated content influences the political economy of online news (Vujnovic et al., 2011). Scholars have also suggested redefinitions of the term ‘user generated content’ in order to better represent the contributions of the public. Bowman and Willis (2003) for example, refer instead to ‘participatory journalism’, which incorporates, ‘the (UGC) phenomenon in the larger context of participatory culture’ (Vujnovic et al., 2010, p. 286).

In 2017 Manosevitch and Tenenboim (2017), proposed an analytical framework for evaluating and understanding the role of UGC at online news websites that focused on user contributions within the websites of online newspapers. The framework that they developed separated the business and practice of journalism from journalism being regarded as a form of democratic empowerment for citizens (Manosevitch and Tenenboim, 2017). What they found was that for online news organisations UGC was an additional avenue for, ‘drawing website traffic, enticing users to stay longer, strengthening brand loyalty, and reducing production costs’ (p.744). Similarly, Jenkins (2006) argued that online newsrooms did not create opportunities for people to participate in order to achieve, ‘democratic goals related to fostering participatory culture and empowering the public’ (p.254). Rather, he argued that the opening of participatory channels was driven by the economies of online news organisations, as a way to, ‘cement consumer loyalty at a time when market fragmentation and the rise of file sharing threatened old ways of doing business’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 254). With regard to UGC creating a public sphere, Manosevitch and Tenenboim (2017) found that UGC could be successful in generating, ‘public debate on highly contested issues’ (p.744). However, they also argued that journalists were still very much in control of news production and the types of information that were published. Other research however, has suggested that online news sites can develop more reciprocal relationships with their audience if structural and operational changes are made that encourage consistent and deliberate use of UGC (e.g. Stroud, Scacco, and Curry, 2015). Yet, as Manosevitch and Tenenboim (2017) outlined, this investment in structural and operational change also required a shift in resources and journalists’ work routines, that would be challenging in practice.
3.4.3 Online journalists’ work

Scholarly research to date has focused on the labour of online journalists’ (e.g. Boczkowski, 2009), with Nicole Cohen’s (2019) research in the United States one of the most recent contributions to the field. Using a labour lens, Cohen’s study with 12 self-defined ‘digital journalists’ found that online journalists were responsive to their ever-changing work conditions and that this was of benefit to journalism more broadly (Cohen, 2019). Cohen’s work also included a comprehensive review of the literature regarding the labour and working conditions of online journalists, in which she called for more research to be done on the ever-evolving aspect of online journalists’ work. The literature considered by Cohen (2019) is discussed here as these studies lead us towards a better understanding of the material conditions of online aggregated news production, which is of concern to this study (p.571).

As digital-first news organisations developed, the first studies of digital journalism were focused on the impact of the medium on the journalists’ themselves. In essence, the ‘crisis’ literature, previously reviewed in Section 3.2.1. This literature focused on the more negative aspects of online journalism including: stress and burnout associated with the need to multitask; the creation of more flexible, yet insecure, working arrangements; the requirement of media companies’ to produce massive amounts of content, for a variety of media platforms; media concentration; declining print advertising revenue; and shrinking staff (see Daum and Scherer, 2017; Nolan, 2014; McChesney, 2013; Peters, 2010; Testa, Reinsberg, Misener, and Burton, 2014; Shade, 2015). Scholarly research, however, has had little to say about digital journalists’ working conditions, leading several researchers to call explicitly for research into working conditions in digital journalism (see Deuze and Witschge, 2017; O’Donnell, Lawrie and Sherwood, 2016; Örnebring, 2010). The recent research on work and labour in media and cultural industries (see Maxwell, 2015) affirms the need to examine labour relations in all forms of media and cultural production to understand the material conditions, attend to issues of power and struggles for social justice, to propose policies and practices for improving working conditions and, in turn, media and culture generally (Cohen, 2019). While digital media companies continue to hire journalists, they are also reorganising, merging, and shedding staff and as a result there is a need to
know more about the material conditions of online and aggregated news production in this rapidly evolving context.

These studies provided valuable insight into changing journalistic work conditions, yet they primarily focus on print journalism undergoing digitalisation. Despite several vital studies addressing the nature of journalistic work in a digital age (see Agarwal and Barthel, 2015; Bakker, 2012; Creech and Mendelson, 2015; Neilson, 2012; Salamon, 2016; Steensen, 2009), we still have a limited understanding of the work experiences of digital journalists’, that is, those who specifically work in the constant flow of online news production. We have even less knowledge about aggregated online news and newsworkers. The current study provides an opportunity to analyse the work experiences of online aggregated newsworkers in the context of the research that has already been conducted at print media companies undergoing digitisation.

3.4.4 Waves of online news literature

In 2008, Domingo (2008) provided a comprehensive overview of the existing online news literature in his analysis of the varying theoretical traditions that have informed the body of online research. His analysis identified three distinct waves of research. In the first wave, ‘normative and prospective studies’, researchers strategised ‘ideal’ online news models based on the unique capabilities of the internet (e.g. sharing, linking, multimedia, immediacy). In Domingo’s later writings he referred to these ‘ideals’ as ‘utopias’, for example ‘the utopia of immediacy’ and ‘the utopia of multimedia’ (2008, p. 115). The arguments made by researchers such as Boczkowski (2004) and Pavlik (2001) in this wave were positioned in a technologically deterministic way, similar to the liminal researchers discussed earlier. These authors argued that online news could revolutionise the news media system and perceived digital technologies as the cause of fundamental changes to traditional print and broadcast journalism (e.g. Hall, 2001).

In the second wave identified by Domingo (2008), ‘empirical research based on the theoretical assumptions of the first wave’, researchers tested the ‘ideal’ online news models established by the first-wave authors and found that, in reality, these ideals were not being met (e.g. Deuze, Neuberger and Paulussen 2004; Kenny, Gorelik and Mwangi 2000; Van der Wurff and Lauf, 2005). For example, Deuze (2001) found that neither ‘hypertextuality, multimediality nor interactivity’ features were being utilised, and
websites were offering the same content online as in their traditional mastheads. However, researchers in this wave concluded that online news would eventually live up to the ideals predicted by the first-wave authors, however more time was needed to achieve these goals (Domingo cited in Paterson and Domingo, 2008). Studies in this wave were largely quantitative (e.g. surveys) and/or based on web content analysis (e.g. Boczkowski, 2002).

Domingo’s (2008) third wave – or the ‘empirical research based on a constructivist approach to technological change’ wave – began to incorporate qualitative research methodologies in order to unpack the limitations of the second wave. These research methods resulted in the technological deterministic perspective being replaced with a constructivist perspective, which meant that more authors were concerned with the ‘process of innovation’ as opposed to the ‘effects of the innovation’ (Domingo, 2008).

In addition, the ‘ideal models’ of online news were considered less as a ‘goal’ for online journalism, and more as one of many potential outcomes for the news medium (Domingo, 2008). Researchers performed in-depth case studies in order to understand the ‘routines and structures of online newsrooms’ and to explain ‘the context and dynamics of online journalism’, which they found to be unique at each online news media organisation (Domingo, 2008). By analysing a vast array of online news contexts, making online news could be understood as an ‘open process through which professionals [were] defining a new news medium’. In this ‘open process’, it was argued that there could be a range of solutions for making online news that were site dependent and, at the same time, homogeneous responses to particularities unique to the online news system (Domingo, 2008). These waves of literature outlined by Domingo (2008) set the foundation for a closer analysis of the body of online ethnographic research that has occurred to date.

3.5 Aggregated news research

In order to situate this research project, the thesis will now review the existing research literature on aggregated news. This discussion will highlight the connections between the literature regarding aggregated news, the production-based research and studies of online journalism that have been reviewed in the previous section.
The term ‘aggregation’ has been used to refer to a wide set of practices, across a variety of organisations that include automated aggregators like Google News, mobile app Apple News and website Buzz Feed, all of which link to hundreds of tweets capturing the latest social media trends. Therefore, first, it is important to define the term aggregation. This thesis draws on Mark Coddington’s (2019) definition of news aggregation as, ‘taking news from published sources, reshaping it, and republishing it in an abbreviated form within a single place’ (p. 5). The definition exemplifies the work that the Yahoo!7 newsworkers performed at the time of this investigation.

It is challenging to determine the precise extent of how prevalent aggregation is in today’s news environment partly because it is difficult to separate aggregation from traditional reporting (Coddington, 2019). However, there are several indicators that aggregation has, to some extent, become a common practice across a wide variety of news websites (Coddington, 2019). For instance, several major news organisations in the US, including The Washington Post and CNN, have established their own aggregation teams, who have been tasked with producing quick stories on subjects of popular interest (Coddington, 2019). Researchers too have commented on how aggregation has become a core part of online journalism. For example, upon returning from an internship at a German online news organisation, Dominic Boyer (2013) exclaimed that, ‘[N]ewsmaking today is as much about managing multiple fast-moving flows of information already in circulation as it is about locating and sharing “new” news’ (p. 2).

To date, most of the research regarding news aggregation has focused on the institutional aggregators, with specific focus on the extent to which aggregation has taken over from traditional journalistic work, the impact of aggregation on journalism and journalists more broadly (e.g. Boczkowski, 2010; Witschge, 2013). Parallels between the aggregation literature and the online news research literature are notable in so far as aggregation research has also, generally, focused on crisis events (see Section 3.4.4). Journalists and media critics have spent much of the past decade debating whether aggregation’s impact on journalism has been harmful or benign and, it seems, have largely found the results to be equivocal. Accordingly, scholars such as Coddington (2019) have suggested that aggregation could be more aptly described as ‘haunted’ by traditional reporting as opposed to inherently good or bad (p. 12). The professional identity of aggregated newsworkers was haunted, ‘by the norms and ideals
of journalistic professionalism’ (p. 12). He went on to argue that those working at news aggregator sites held traditional journalistic standards in high regard, but lamented that they could never quite prove themselves, or reach the status of respected journalist (Coddington, 2019).

It is here that the link between the online news and aggregation literature becomes especially relevant in the context of this study, since both streams of literature engage with the implications of the work of digital journalism more broadly. For some authors, the work of digital journalism has evolved to encompass highly specialised and technical knowledge bases which are considered valuable in a news environment that requires ‘tech-savvy’ multitaskers (Usher, 2016). However, the majority of the literature regarding the work of digital journalism explains the marginal status, the entry-level positions and the uphill climb of digital journalists to be treated as equals and professionals by their peers (e.g. Agarwal and Barthel, 2015; Møller Hartley, 2013; Vos and Ferrucci, 2018). In both its ‘hauntedness and marginality’, aggregation has been similarly described by authors such as Coddington (2019) as, ‘knockoff knowledge creation’ (p.14). Aggregation, Coddington (2019) explains is, ‘a process of creating knowledge that imitates more established forms of knowledge production (in this case reporting) but is ultimately derivative of that knowledge’ (p. 14). The findings from this study will provide evidence as to whether or not the newsworkers at Yahoo!7 sympathise with these arguments, or if they feel differently towards the work that they do and the content they produce.

3.6 Ethnographic online news research

It is now relevant to review the ethnographic research that has already been done in online newsroom as this study is also concerned with the inner workings of digital newsrooms. As Domingo (2008) noted, ethnographic research grew in popularity as a research method throughout the second and third waves as it offered a way to qualify the theories made by first-wave authors, and also a way to gain an understanding of the unique circumstances of each newsroom.

The first and second editions of David Domingo and Chris Paterson’s Making Online News (2008; 2011) focused specifically on the work that has been done by online newsroom ethnographers. This research is considered here in order to give context to
the current research project and to pinpoint some areas for future research at Australian digital aggregated news websites.

The research analysed in the following sections is representative of Domingo’s (2008) second and third waves of research in online journalism and discussed in themes. Importantly, it should be noted that the ethnographic research compiled by Domingo and Paterson (2008; 2011) does not include an investigation of an Australian online news organisation, or an aggregated news website such as Yahoo!7 News.

3.6.1 Online news values studies

Ethnographic online journalism research to date has analysed the news values of online organisations and predominantly found that online organisations aspire to the same standards as traditional news organisations, with the immediacy of news delivery and breaking news the highest priority in most multimedia newsrooms (Domingo, 2008; Møller Hartley, 2011).

Both Domingo (2008) and Møller Hartley (2011) discussed the prominence of breaking news as a feature of online newsrooms in their ethnographic studies. For his part, Domingo (2008) investigated the organisational decisions that have caused breaking news to become the dominant news value. What he found was that the continual striving of online news organisations for immediacy ‘displaced’ other online news ‘utopias’ such as in-depth reporting and ‘multimedia-rich media reports’ (Domingo, 2008, p. 119).

Møller Hartley (2011) took a different approach by revisiting Tuchman’s typology of news, developed in her seminal newsroom ethnography of 1973. In her original typology, Tuchman (1973) distinguished between soft and hard news. Hard news, according to Tuchman (1973), ‘concerns events potentially available to analysis or interpretation and consists of “factual presentations” of events deemed newsworthy’ Tuchman, 1973, in Berkowitz, 1997, p. 176). Soft news was a story that could be published on any day, and was generally focused on subjects of human interest. Møller Hartley’s (2011) study sought to extend this typology to include different kinds of story, such as breaking news and exclusives. She found that despite technological innovation Tuchman’s categories were still relevant to online news and suggested that only the nomenclature required expansion in order to accommodate new categories such as ‘breaking news’, which she described as the internet’s version of the ‘exclusive’
(Møller Hartley, 2011). The current research project will determine whether or not Møller Hartley’s conclusions are relevant to digital aggregated newsrooms such as Yahoo!7 News by assessing the importance of breaking news and exclusives to the organisation. This will be explored further in Chapter 6 where the content produced by Yahoo!7 News is analysed.

3.6.2 Convergence

Other ethnographic studies of online newsrooms (e.g. García, 2008) have noted stress amongst newsworkers with the merger of old and new media (i.e. convergence) and documented how journalists and organisations have managed the shift (e.g. Cawley, 2008). Authors such as Sue Robinson (2011) found that tensions between the ideals of traditional journalism and the expectations of multimediality have resulted in conflicting goals and objectives in newsrooms. Robinson’s study, which critiqued the transition of The Capital Times newspaper in the US state of Wisconsin, showed that journalists there had lost sight of their traditional news values and identity as they began to produce news in different formats. She found conflict between management, who expected journalists to adapt to new production techniques and embrace the open and democratic ideals of the web, and the journalists themselves, who felt overwhelmed and challenged by the new skill set required to do their work (Robinson, 2011).

Anja Bechmann (2011), David Domingo (2008), Steve Paulussen, Davy Geens and Kristel Vandenbrande (2011) also used ethnographic research techniques to investigate the ability of online newsrooms to put the ideals of interactivity and/or ‘multimediality’ to use successfully in converged newsrooms (Paulussen et al., 2011). Paulussen et al. (2011) discussed the theme of ‘collaboration’ by presenting a literature review of recent research on convergence and online journalism, combined with their own ethnographic research at two news organisations in Belgium. They summarised the factors that shaped the development of collaborative initiatives across offline and online media with citizens and found that, even though journalists’ attitudes played a significant role in the adoption of newsroom innovation, other practical and structural factors were equally important (e.g. training, rewarding, hierarchical and physical structure, routines and workflow). As such, the adoption of innovation in newsrooms was argued to be a ‘social process’ that was shaped by the broader context within and outside the newsroom (Paulussen et al., 2011).
Bechmann’s (2011) more specific analysis of the ‘Superdesk’ at a multimedia news organisation – a particular tool employed by a cross-media company to encourage and enable offline and online media collaboration – found that physical proximity could create a shared sense of place for broadcast and online editors working across different mediums, but it did not necessarily make them better at cross-media production.

Domingo (2008) suggested that the ideals and practices of traditional journalism have made it difficult for online newsrooms to embrace the ‘ideals of interactivity’ as they did not correlate with the production routines of traditional news outlets (p. 680). Bechmann (2011), Domingo (2008) and Paulussen et al. (2011) all highlighted the resistance of online news organisations to define their new roles and identities in an online news environment and to move away from traditional production processes.

These convergence studies are relevant to consider here as Yahoo!7 News was undergoing a merger with Channel Seven (their broadcast television partner) during the data collection phase of this project. Consequently, the extent to which shared space does and/or does not foster greater collaboration and integration can be examined in the context of Yahoo!7 News as the newworkers worked in the same office as the 7News reporters at Channel Seven Studios, Sydney, Australia. These findings will be discussed further in Chapter 5 where the news production processes of the newworkers are investigated.

3.6.3 News agency studies

Ethnographic work has also begun to focus on the role of news agencies in online news production processes (e.g. Quandt, 2008). In an investigation of Reuters and the Associated Press – two major news agencies – Paterson (2011) highlighted how the content used by news organisations was produced, and how agencies have adapted to convergence (Paterson, 2011). He argued that the dominant role of news agencies in the production process of news organisations had shifted the role of traditional news editors – from professionals who sought out and investigated original stories, to managers of a never-ending, relentless stream of material from news agencies.

This theme of reliance on news agencies for news content has been raised by other authors (e.g. Firdaus, 2011; Paterson, 2011) and this current research will also determine if it is a notable characteristic of the news production process at Yahoo!7 News. The implications of this will be discussed further in Chapter 8 (Discussion and
Conclusions). We need to better understand the news organisations that aggregate news – that is, the people who work there and how they work, the content they produce and their relationship to their audience, as well as the ways in which reliance on news agencies impacts on news production – if we are to gain insight into how digital aggregated news sites function.

3.6.4 Recent newsroom ethnographies

Since Paterson’s (2008; 2011) collaborative works that brought together news ethnographers worldwide, there have been a few notable additions to the field of literature. Chris Anderson (2011; 2013a; 2017) is one of the most prolific researchers of newsroom ethnography and has written extensively about the methodological benefits of conducting ethnographies, suggested new frameworks for ethnographic analysis, and undertaken his own ethnographic work in numerous newsrooms in Philadelphia in the United States. His ethnographic work has provided rich analyses of how the production routines, organisational structure and authority of journalism have changed as a result of economic hardship and the shift to digital. In a study of news production in Philadelphia, Anderson (2013a) found aggregation to be a central part of online news production, explaining that news aggregation and reporting were the, ‘two dominant forms of newwork [that] now exist in the digital age’ (p.52). Anderson (2013b) also explored how journalists’ conception of their work and the public had changed as a result of working online. He too found that the deeply entrenched institutional work model of traditional journalism present in the digital realm (Anderson, 2013b).

Elsewhere, some ethnographic work at newsrooms in developing nations such as Africa (e.g. Mabweazara, 2016) and India (e.g. Batabyal, 2014) have begun to reveal the implications of new developments in digital technologies on the routine practices of traditional news media organisations outside of Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. More recent work in Western nations has focused on traditional news organisations – for example Thomsen’s (2018) investigation into public service television in the UK and Denmark. Likewise, in Australia specifically, research has generally focused on traditional news organisations (e.g. Marjoribanks, 2000).
To date, no research surrounding the state of the news media in Australia or online news has been conducted at a digital aggregated online news site such as Yahoo!7. Such sites are very important contexts in which we can study the future of news journalism, yet they remain vastly understudied. As such, this research project will provide valuable information about the inner workings of one of Australia’s most visited news websites. This empirical data can be compared with and contrasted to the research of news organisations internationally, and will add to knowledge and contribute to the debates about changes to journalism practice and culture. Investigating aggregated news websites is critical to our understanding of the state of the news media, and what is actually happening in the wide variety of online newsrooms that exist.

The following chapter will outline the methodology used to conduct this research project, highlighting why each research method was chosen based on the research aims and question. Then the results from the investigation will be analysed in order to determine how the study of Yahoo!7 News can contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production.
Chapter 4: METHODOLOGY

This research project will contribute to the research corpus on digital aggregated news production. The empirical data derived from the project will deepen our understanding of the unique complexities and characteristics of digital online aggregated news: its production; its content; and its newsworkers’ perceptions of their audiences. Through direct exposure to Yahoo!7 News and the newswriters in their organisational culture, this project strives to lend some coherence to the processes involved in digital aggregated news production and contribute to our understanding of online news production more broadly. This chapter will first consider the approach taken in order to answer the research question posed for this study. It will then provide a more detailed description of the methods of data collection that were employed – observation, interviews and content analysis, which directly address the research question.

4.1 Data sources

In order to answer the key research questions posed by this project – i.e. how can the study of an Australian aggregated news site (Yahoo!7 News) contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production? – an approach incorporating multiple data sources was utilised – observation, interviews and content analysis.

The research question required data that revealed: how a digital aggregated news site worked; how the newswriters functioned in their workspace; how they completed their required everyday tasks; their newsroom practices; the content they produced; and their perceptions regarding their audience. The data collected from the observations was used to inform the scheduled interview questions and in this way the interviews enabled an in-depth follow-up to the observation data regarding all three areas of interest. A content analysis of the two main pages on the Yahoo!7 News website (Frontpage and National News Homepage) and the social network pages has also allowed a comparison of the observation and interview data with the actual online product (content) produced by the newswriters on specific days. As such, a multimethod approach enabled the data to be triangulated and a more cohesive, accurate picture of digital aggregated news to be developed. Ethical clearance was obtained for this study from the University of Melbourne. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the methods used and how they were
applied in this study. The following section will discuss the methods outlined above, and provide specific details about how they were incorporated into the methodology.

**TABLE 4.1**

**Summary of data collection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHOD</th>
<th>DATES</th>
<th>DETAILS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observation</strong></td>
<td>21 Nov–25 Nov 2011</td>
<td>9 x newsworkers observed at Yahoo!7 Wharf Bay (Sydney, Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5 days)</td>
<td>4 x newsworkers observed at Martin Place (Sydney, Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26 Nov–30 Nov 2012</td>
<td>4 x newsworkers observed at Yahoo!7 Wharf Bay (Sydney, Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5 days)</td>
<td>3 x newsworkers observed at Martin Place (Sydney, Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviews</strong></td>
<td>23 Nov–24 Nov 2011</td>
<td>3 x interviews:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2 days)</td>
<td>• Head of Business Development, Transactions Yahoo!7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Head of News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Head of News and Sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Feb–22 Feb 2012</td>
<td>4 x interviews:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Frontpage Editor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Multimedia Product Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• 2 x Multimedia Producers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 2011–Feb 2012</td>
<td>Follow-up interviews conducted via phone and email with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Head of Business Development, Transactions Yahoo!7</td>
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<td>• Head of News</td>
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<td>• Head of News and Sport</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Local and National News Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Multimedia Producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Analysis:</strong></td>
<td>10 Feb–21 Feb 2014</td>
<td>56 x pages analysed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yahoo!7 News</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>168 x stories analysed (84 x stories on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage, 84 x stories on the National News Homepage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>124 Facebook posts analysed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>124 Twitter posts analysed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Analysis:</strong></td>
<td>21 Oct–24 Oct 2015</td>
<td>124 Facebook posts analysed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facebook and</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>124 Twitter posts analysed</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Twitter</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Component one: participant observation

Participant observation as a method is useful for gathering information about a social context as it involves viewing the daily activities of the subjects being studied (Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock, 1999). While the method can involve participation in the routine activities of those being observed, it is important that the researcher maintains a sense of objectivity through distance (Bernard, 1994). Bernard (1994) defined participant observation as, 'the process of establishing rapport within a community and learning to act in such a way as to blend into the community so that its members will act naturally, then removing oneself from the setting or community to immerse oneself in the data to understand what is going on and be able to write about it' (p.2). Participant observers should therefore be, according to DeWalt and DeWalt (1998), attentive, open and interested in learning about the people and context they are studying. They should be willing to make mistakes, learn from them, be flexible and prepared for the unexpected (DeWalt and DeWalt, 1998).

For this study, participant observation was particularly useful because it facilitated viewing the newsworkers as they performed their daily tasks, listening to conversations between the newsworkers (in person and via phone) as they read emails, and as they interacted with colleagues in editorial discussions. It was intended that the observations should generate a better understanding of the Yahoo!7 News social environment. The data derived from the observations (field notes) would inform and answer the research question posed by this study, which is concerned with finding out more about how digital aggregated news sites work and what these workplaces reveal about digital aggregated news production. Observations will provide information pertaining to the unique newsmaking processes of Yahoo!7 News, their daily routines and the news content produced.

Other studies of news organisations have also used observation to study a variety of offline and online media outlets, including television, radio and newspaper organisations and, more recently, digital newsrooms. The method has been particularly valuable for studies mentioned in the previous Literature Review (Chapter 3) (e.g. Argyris, 1974; Epstein, 1974; Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 1987; White, 1950) that have analysed similar phenomena to this study (e.g. newsmaking processes, daily routines, the bureaucratic nature of news media outlets, their competitive ethos,
professional ideologies, source dependencies and cultural practices of the news media) (Cottle, 2007).

When observation is employed in a study, it is most often the case that the participants are aware of the fact that they are being observed and know that a researcher is present (Mikos cited in Struppert, 2005). Some researchers prefer observation of this kind, as the participants know that they are being observed and do not deliberately withhold information or feel misled about the purpose of the activity (Mikos cited in Struppert, 2011). With this in mind, when observing for research purposes, it is important to be aware of how a researcher can influence participant behaviour (Mikos cited in Struppert, 2011). While the newsworkers in this study were aware of the researcher during observational periods, the researcher also took steps to influence the context and the participants as little as possible. For example, the researcher was careful not to interrupt the work processes of the newsworkers. Instead, questions were noted down and reserved until assigned interview times, and/or held until a break or the production process for a particular news item was completed. In addition, the researcher sat behind the newsworkers while they were working to minimise the newsworkers’ awareness of their presence, and stood back from conversations that the researcher was not involved in.

Whilst observation has proven to be a useful method for gaining a better understanding of the inner workings of print, broadcast and online news media organisations (e.g. Anderson, 2013a; Argyris, 1974; Cottle and Ashton, 1999; Epstein, 1974; Hetherington, 1985; Tuchman, 1978), one of the main hurdles for researchers wanting to conduct observation has surrounded access (Deacon et al., 1999). To gain the access required for observation, previous studies of news and journalism have required researchers to take an active, professional role within the news organisation they wished to investigate (Deacon et al., 1999). For example, in one study of the inner workings of an American metropolitan newspaper, the researcher, Chris Argyris, was employed by the newspaper to assist with the development of an organisational change strategy while he conducted a sociological research project. The role taken up by Argyris (1974) within the organisation afforded him access to an office, internal meetings and unlimited observation, which undoubtedly assisted his research project.

As well as gaining access to news organisations via employment, previous studies of news organisations incorporating observation have, generally, been conducted by
researchers who have contacts and/or previous work experience in the news industry (e.g. Ferguson, 1983; Hetherington, 1985). For example, British journalist Alastair Hetherington was able to conduct a study of a traditional news organisation incorporating observation methods, as a result of his earlier professional work and contacts at The Guardian newspaper and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The level of detail he was able to construct from observations at these organisations undoubtedly came from the access he was granted as a professional (Hetherington, 1985).

Like Hetherington (1985), this researcher is a former employee of Channel Seven (television partner of Yahoo!7), with four years of experience there (2007–11). Throughout the researcher’s time at Channel Seven, she was responsible for executing cross-platform advertising campaigns for the Seven Network’s major advertising partners (e.g. Bunnings, Myer). Many of these executions required the researcher to develop strong working relationships with Channel Seven, magazine (Pacific Magazines), online (Yahoo!7) and mobile (3 Network) employees. As such, the researcher was able to draw on her professional credentials, familiarity with the people, jargon and practices to obtain access to Yahoo!7 News, which has undoubtedly made this research project a more fluid process than if the researcher had been a non-media professional. The Yahoo!7 staff indicated that they felt comfortable allowing the researcher access to their offices, speaking about their work and processes of news production. Likewise, having a prior awareness of the processes that were an essential component of their work enabled the researcher to talk with confidence to the newworkers about their work, how they make news, the content they produce and their perceptions of their audience.

This is not to say that invaluable insights might not have been gained from observations made by a researcher who had not been involved in the news industry. Conversely, non-media professionals have contributed invaluable information regarding the organisational, bureaucratic and professional nature of news production and news manufacture (e.g. Tuchman, 1978). Rather, what is suggested here is that researchers who have been employed and/or are employed by a media organisation are able to conduct observation with greater ease than an ‘outsider’ because of their ease of access, confidence with participants and certain organisational processes.
Perhaps one of the best critical analyses of the problems encountered during embedded, observational research came from Simon Cottle (2007). He argued that research derived from observation could be weak in four general areas: 1) it was open to external influences (e.g. the marketplace and/or cultural discourses); 2) it could have methodological blind spots resulting from a researcher’s inability to access certain areas of the business (e.g. senior management and key meetings); 3) the research could end up being reflective of the researcher’s own epistemological concerns; and 4) it is difficult to get a full picture of what is going on when many of today’s online news organisations are spread across multiple locations.

Due to these limitations, authors who have studied research methods (e.g. Deacon et al., 1999; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a, 1998b; Cottle, 2007; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995) have suggested that observation works best when used in conjunction with other data collection procedures and forms of analysis. This is why this study combines observation with interviews and content analysis. Cottle (2007) argued that in combining methods it is possible to ‘provide a stronger basis on which evidence and findings can be triangulated…claims and accounts produced from one source can be contrasted to those from another’ (p. 4). In this study, alternative research methods and multiple data sources were chosen to complement observation and to avoid the possible limitations raised by Cottle (2007).

In regard to this project, the use of observation enabled the researcher to observe how Yahoo!7 News worked. By watching how newworkers conducted their daily tasks, and listening in on their discussions, the researcher was able to find out a lot more than would be possible from asking newworkers to retrospectively describe their work in an interview (Deacon et al., 1999). If the researcher had only asked newworkers what they did on a day-to-day basis or questioned their thoughts on the content that they produced, they would have given a considered response. However, it is unlikely that the newworkers would have reflected on these activities up to this point, making it more difficult for them to actually be able to speak about the intricacies of their work in an interview context (Deacon et al., 1999). Using observation has therefore provided an opportunity to produce an independent assessment of the claims of the newworkers, rather than just being dependent on second-hand reflections generated from interviews (Deacon et al., 1999).
Observations have also been used for this study because of the benefits associated with receiving results immediately (Deacon et al. 1999). As Deacon et al. (1999) highlighted, ‘There is no time lag between the event happening and the researcher’s access to it’ (p. 259). In studies of news organisations, both traditional and digital, this immediacy resulting from observation is considered to be critical, since the processes involved in news production can often be fleeting and unrepeatable (Deacon et al., 1999). Undoubtedly, given the particularity of news production at any news site, being present at the point of production has its advantages. For instance, while at Yahoo!7 the researcher was able to explain ‘out of the ordinary’ events (e.g. breaking news) that occurred outside of the normal production routine (Deacon et al., 1999).

Hence, studies using observational methods offer a more flexible approach that permits researchers to modify their assumptions as the research progresses, meaning that hypotheses can be tested by complementary methods (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 259). Following Denzin and Lincoln (1998a), as the observations at Yahoo!7 News rolled out, the researcher was able to alter the problems and questions being pursued as a greater knowledge of the people and events occurring was developed within the social context being studied. These problems and questions could then be answered on the remaining days of observation or during interviews with the newsworkers.

Participant observation has enabled the researcher to report on the actual production processes of Yahoo!7 News, which have become increasingly complex and differentiated by demands for digital news content. A research method based solely on existing academic literature would have been unable to provide an accurate account of the invisible, immediate and complex processes that are inherent in and unique to news production at this site (Cottle, 2007). Participant observation was therefore employed in this study to, most importantly, yield insights into the inner workings of Yahoo!7 News, the newsworkers and newsroom practices.

As Table 4.1 outlined, the structure of the observation took the following form. Twenty newsworkers were observed across two weeks in 2011 (one week) and 2012 (one week). At the time of data collection Yahoo!7 newsworkers in Sydney, Australia were distributed across two sites: 1) Yahoo!7 (Wharf Bay, Sydney, Australia) and; 2) Martin Place Studios (Martin Place, Sydney, Australia). The newsworkers were observed at both locations. All newsworkers observed were made aware of the purpose of the study and provided active consent to being observed while working. During
observations the researcher sat behind each newworker while they worked and took field notes about what they were working on. The layout of the offices was noted as well as the technologies, programs and devices each newworker used, the timing of each activity, the details of what was happening on their computer screens (e.g. stories they were working on), their conversations with each other in the office, over the phone and via email. The researcher also noted down details of any conversations she had with the newworkers during observations and any specific feelings experienced during the observational period (e.g. tense, rushed, busy, bored).

Following each day of observation, the field notes would be reviewed and typed up, and a list of questions and/or things that were unclear from the day’s happenings would be made for follow-up during interviews, or on the remaining days of observation. Answers to these questions were then added into the field notes.

Working with a large volume of notes, collected over a number of weeks, could have created practical problems related to data filing and organisation. However, this was overcome through the development of a system of data storage and organisation. This system involved filing and coding the data retrieved at the end of each day of the data collection period, once the notes were typed. The use of this technique ensured that the observations were not only fleshed out, but also recorded and coded in a timely and accurate manner.

The observations were analysed using a thematic approach (Thomas and Harden, 2008). Thematic analysis coded the data ‘line by line’ and generated patterns of the descriptive themes that arose (Thomas and Harden 2008). Researchers such as Thomas and Harden (2008) have argued that this form of coding is the most accurate way to ensure that participant voices around central themes are clearly articulated and easily heard. Through this process of sorting and classifying, three dominant themes began to emerge. These were related to: 1) the newworkers and their production processes; 2) news content; and 3) the newworkers’ perceptions of their audience. These emerging themes then guided the formation of the interview questions to the various newworkers in the organisation that followed the observational phase (see Appendix 1).

While on site, the researcher tried to remain in the background as much as possible so as not to disrupt or influence the situation. The decision to adopt this research
The approach had an interesting implication. The researcher was not considered an employee of Yahoo!7, so the employees sometimes spoke to the researcher as they were going about their daily tasks. For example, when they did something that the researcher had not seen before, such as using a new program, when they had a gap in between their tasks, when they had a query regarding the researcher (personal or professional), or the research project. This provided interesting insights from their perspective about their work as they were doing it. In these instances, the researcher explained to the employees that observation was the main priority and asked questions only when absolutely necessary, that is, when an employee was doing something that the researcher did not understand. Having worked with Yahoo!7, the researcher was able to understand most of the tasks being undertaken, the programs being used and conversations held. The observation data was later triangulated with interview data from employees and content analysis.

The participants may not have been aware of some of the comments they had made during observations. Therefore, the newsworkers observed and those who participated in interviews were each assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity as much as possible. The use of pseudonyms was the best way to protect the newsworkers from being associated with potentially negative comments, which could have impacted on their future career prospects.

### 4.3 Component two: interviews

Interviews were specifically chosen as the second method for this study for two reasons. First, to gain a greater insight into the three emerging themes from the observational data analysis, and second, to better understand newsworkers’ subjective experiences at work (Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). One of the most effective ways to determine how a study of an Australian aggregated news site can contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production is by talking to the newsworkers themselves about their perceptions and experiences at work. As such, the data collected from interviews with the newsworkers was combined with observation and content analysis, to show how digital aggregated news sites operate from the perspectives of the newsworkers, and reveal what these perspectives can tell us about digital aggregated news production.
In this study, interviews were conducted with the participants face-to-face and over the phone, which are two of the most common research methods used in the social sciences (Diekmann cited in Struppert, 2011). While qualitative interviews can be relatively semi-structured in order to allow for participants to answer outside existing constraints, this study was based on a set of guidelines, as outlined by Susanne Keuneke (cited in Struppert, 2011), wherever possible, which directed the researcher to ensure that important aspects were mentioned throughout the interviews (Keuneke cited in Struppert, 2011) (see Appendix 1).

Following these guidelines each interview closely resembled a natural communication situation and took place in a relaxed setting. At the beginning of an interview the researcher first explained the purpose of the study to the participant, highlighted the importance of the interviewee’s personal opinion, and the fact that there could be no wrong answers. In this scenario, the interviewee took on the role of the expert and explained their patterns of thought, meanings, and actions to the researcher to enable to the researcher to develop a greater degree of understanding (Keuneke cited in Struppert, 2011). The researcher’s role was therefore to provide neutral feedback during the interview, ask questions, and express interest in order to maintain the ‘flow’ of the interview (Keuneke cited in Struppert, 2011). In this case, the researcher was open and flexible in order to encourage new ideas to emerge and change the interview process if required. Any recording of an interview had also already been approved by the participant and executed in an unobtrusive manner (Keuneke cited in Struppert, 2011).

Some theorists have criticised interviews for not being as objective as other methods of data collection (e.g. surveys and questionnaires) (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a). These authors have argued that if a close bond was developed between the researcher and their participants, the researcher would risk becoming a ‘spokesperson’ for the group that they were researching, or even losing the level of objectivity required to conduct the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a). While this may be a valid concern, it has also been argued that establishing a rapport with respondents – or putting oneself in the role of the respondents and attempting to see the situation from their perspective – is essential to any ‘good’ qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a). In this study, measures were put in place to overcome this potential limitation and enhance the objectivity of the research. For example, the use of multiple methods of data collection enabled the
researcher to develop a well-rounded picture of the actual processes and practices of Yahoo!7 News. Similarly, presenting representative quotes from participants has ensured that their voices, rather than the researcher’s voice, are presented.

There was also concern surrounding the capacity of researchers to describe the features of social life based on a conversation, in a situation where participants may be unwilling – or unaware of how to – describe the features of their social life (Emerson et al., 1995). While the use of interviewing on its own may not allow researchers to provide a full and comprehensive description of a social environment, it is argued here, and by other social researchers (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a), that interviewing is a powerful method through which researchers can begin to understand people: ‘Interviewing is a paramount part of sociology, because interviewing is interaction and sociology is the study of interaction’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a, p. 47). For this study, interviewing was used for the purpose of understanding the perspectives of a group of newsworkers. In this case, the use of multiple research methods has enabled the researcher to produce ‘specific, situated meanings’ that ‘go beyond the basis of the participant’s ‘talk’ (Emerson et al., p. 133). The usefulness of interviews for understanding the meanings of specific local terms and actions is essential for this study. The actual, situated use of local terms and the actions of the group as they go about their work will be observed through the abovementioned method of observation.

Semi-structured interviews have also been criticised by authors such as Deacon et al. (1999) for the demands that they place on the researcher and/or interviewer: ‘Less structured questioning makes the greatest demands on the interviewer, requiring good listening skills, self-confidence, empathy and good humour’ (Deacon et al. 1999, p. 69). Deacon et al. (1999) argued that when conducting semi-structured interviews the researcher is required to put the participants at ease and encourage them to talk freely, whilst retaining a sense of inherent purpose, since the primary outcome of the conversation is to discover and understand the social lives of the participants (Deacon et al., 1999). They contended that because people do not talk about themselves, or their beliefs and opinions, in structured ways, it is the responsibility of the researcher to ‘go with the flow’ and not be disconcerted if the respondent strays ‘off topic’ (Deacon et al., 1999). As such, to lessen the demands placed on the researcher, Deacon et al. (1999) have suggested that researchers allow participants to organise their thoughts in
their own way, whilst retaining the framework of the research (Deacon et al., 1999). In this study, the researcher employed this tactic when interviewing.

One of the great strengths of the interviewing method lies in its ability to generate a richer type of data (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 398). Semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to articulate their thoughts and opinions on their own terms, rather than in relation to preordained response structures (e.g. surveys), which meant that there was a greater chance for the researcher to explore more complex, and perhaps sensitive, ‘social and personal issues’ (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 398). As Emerson et al. (1995) reflected, ‘members’ own descriptions and “stories” of their experiences are invaluable indexes to their views and perceptions of the world’ (p. 75). Relatedly, the reflexive nature of semi-structured interviewing enabled the researcher to elaborate and rephrase questions to ensure that the respondents had properly understood them, which is not possible with other, more rigid methods of data collection (e.g. surveys or questionnaires). This research method can also allow the researcher to adjust and develop their interview schedule to accommodate and explore any new issues that arise throughout the course of an interview (Deacon et al., 1999). This kind of ‘follow-up guidance and encouragement’ on the part of the researcher has been referred to by authors such as Deacon et al. (1999) as ‘probing’ (p. 289). Deacon et al. (1999) described probing as: ‘encouraging the interviewee to develop a response, and following up a response by seeking clarification or amplification of what has been said’ (p. 289). The probing technique was used in this study, since it was useful for dispelling ambiguity and seeking further information on a particular point (Deacon et al., 1999). Probing during interviews was considered by the researcher as vital to this study, as the technique was used to determine the details of specific work tasks involving technologies and the participants’ perspectives on their work, production processes, content and audience.

The use of semi-structured interviews in this study was designed to yield information about the production processes, the newsworkers’ daily work routines, the content they produced and their perceptions of their audience. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provide, ‘a greater breadth’ of information than other kinds of qualitative interview (e.g. structured interviews) (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a). Semi-structured interviews were used as a means to better understand the complex nature and behaviours of the newsworkers within their particular social context without the
imposition of a researcher’s pre-established theories and/or categories (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a). Since semi-structured interviews stem from the desire of the researcher to understand rather than explain a particular social context (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a), the researcher determined that they were suitable to use with the newsworkers in this study as they encourage the respondents to supply information.

While semi-structured interviews do have elements of fluidity and spontaneity, the interviews conducted in this study did follow a set of basic protocols as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (1998a). To start, the researcher began each interview by asking a general question, moving gradually into more specific questions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a). Next, in accordance with more modern interviewing techniques (e.g. gendered interviewing), the interviewer engaged in ‘real’ conversation with the participants, or a conversation in which the researcher, ‘answered questions posed by the respondents and provided opinions on matters discussed’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a). This technique puts the participant on equal ground with the interviewer, allowing them to express themselves more freely whilst engendering a more, ‘honest, morally sound, and reliable’ interview (Denzin and Lincoln 1998a, p. 67). Where possible the interviewer also used the language and specific terms employed by the respondents to create a ‘sharedness of meaning’ and listened to them without taking notes to make them feel more relaxed and build rapport (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a).

This study incorporated semi-structured interviews with seven key personnel from Yahoo!7 News. The individuals interviewed included the Head of News, editors, producers, video producers and a product manager. As this study was focused on gaining insight into a digital aggregated news site, the researcher worked with a key contact at Yahoo!7 News to select individuals for interviews who had responsibilities across all phases of production. By interviewing a range of workers within the news organisation this study has created a context for a good understanding of the varying perspectives and experiences of key members of the organisation. Interviews also enabled participants to discuss, as openly as possible, their experiences, attitudes and values in an informal setting. In line with the key themes that emerged during observations, the initial interviews with the newsworkers included questions about their work, the content they produced and their perceptions of their audience.

A preliminary list of interview participants was identified by the researcher from her previous work experience at Channel Seven. This preliminary list was then cross-
checked with the researcher’s key contact at Yahoo!7 News to ensure that a representative sample of newsworkers would be interviewed for the study. Once the list had been cross-checked, the contact details of each potential participant were provided to the researcher by the key internal contact. These contact details were also accessible from a publicly available contact list. The researcher asked her key contact to provide a brief overview of the study to the potential participants prior to her making contact with them individually during observations. A few of the interview participants verbally agreed to participate in the project at this early stage. The researcher then contacted the individuals on the preliminary list via email to provide them with further details of the study, along with an outline of what they would be required to do and how the information they provided would be used. The individuals who consented to being interviewed were then asked to nominate their preferred day and time for their interview, which were scheduled during the researcher’s data collection phases. Those who consented to being interviewed were then provided with a Plain Language Statement and Consent Form (see Appendix 2) prior to their interviews. With the consent of each participant the interviews were also audiotaped. Each interview was conducted in person or over the phone and lasted for approximately one hour. In an instance where further information was required following the interview, the researcher scheduled a follow-up interview or email. These follow-up interviews were conducted over the phone.

The purpose of the interviews was to derive data that would assist in understanding Yahoo!7 News. Through the one-on-one interviews, newsworkers were provided with a forum to discuss their work. The decision to adopt this research approach had two interesting implications. First, even though a number of those interviewed were not aware of the researcher’s employment background, when answering questions posed by the researcher several participants claimed that the researcher would have ‘already known’ what they were discussing. For example, ‘… this is not new again, you probably know all this’ (William, interview, 2011). Secondly, because the interviewees were aware that the researcher was conducting interviews with other staff members, several participants did not elaborate or provide sufficient detail of their work processes. If prompted by the researcher to provide more information, some interviewees suggested that the researcher could gain ‘better’ information from another staff member. For example, ‘… [staff member] will be able to speak a lot more about
their strategy on this ...’, and, ‘... [staff member] will have to verify this’ (William, interview, 2011). In both instances, the researcher explained that she was trying to gain an understanding of what they thought they were doing at work and why. The researcher encouraged each interviewee to express their views until full processes were explained or certain perceptions uncovered.

A key concept in this form of research and analysis is the notion of ongoing analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, a key stage of the interviewing process was to revise and adapt the interview questions as the data was collected and analysed. As Miles and Huberman (1984) explained: ‘Analysis during data collection lets the field worker cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new – often better quality – data’ (p. 49). This process allowed for the data to be, ‘both the evidence and the clues’ (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, p. 73). By following this process of interpretative research, the researcher was able to analyse each interview and adapt questioning to suit staff of varying levels (e.g. head of news and freelance producer). The research questions were adapted as the researcher noted that when asked about certain processes involved in the news production routine, those with management responsibilities were generally unsure of the particular goings on (e.g. ‘Can you take me through the process of story production – from the conception of the story idea to the production of the final news item?’). Managers focused on bigger picture projects and how best to maximise the monetary capacity of the site and were not able to answer this question in great detail. Therefore, multiple versions of the guide interview questions were produced to suit the knowledge levels of each interviewee.

Similarly to the observational data, the data acquired from interviews needed to be transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach (Thomas and Harden, 2008). As previously mentioned (see Section 4.2), analysis of the data retrieved from participant observation revealed three key themes related to the newsworkers’ perceptions of their work practices, the content they produced and their audience. Thematic analysis of the interview data aligned with the emergent themes of the observational data as interviewees discussed their work in relation to production, content and their audience.
4.4 Component three: content analysis

The stated aims of this research project were related to gaining greater insights into a dominant source of contemporary digital news for audiences. And, more specifically, to document what a study of Yahoo!7 News can add to the body of research regarding online news production. This chapter has outlined how this study has used observation and interviews to investigate these areas of interest in order to answer the research question. The following section will outline how content analysis will further address the research question.

A content analysis was conducted on three key components of Yahoo!7 News. Firstly, the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepage. Secondly, the Yahoo!7 News and 7News Facebook pages and, thirdly, the Yahoo!7 News and 7News Twitter feeds. By analysing this range of content produced by Yahoo!7 News, this study enables a better understanding of the structure of this digital aggregated news site and the content produced by the newworkers. Content analysis is therefore the third and final method of data collection for this study.

Developed in the early twentieth century the term ‘content analysis’ has been used generically to describe any method that involves analysing content (Deacon et al., 1999) and was made popular by Bernard Berelson’s seminal work *Content Analysis in Communication Research* (1952). In this text, Berelson (1952) outlined a quantitative approach to the analysis of media texts that aimed to, ‘bring the rigour and authority of “natural” scientific inquiry to the study of human and social phenomena’ (cited in Deacon et al., 1999, p. 115). For Berelson (cited in Deacon et al., 1999) content analysis was, ‘a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’ (p. 115). This description was particularly useful as it highlighted the strengths of the method, that is: ‘objectivity and the ability to study that which is “manifest”, or observable’ (Berelson cited in Deacon et. al, 1999). However, soon after Berelson’s work was published, Siegfried Kracauer (1953) released a challenging piece that called for a more qualitative approach to the analysis of media texts, ‘drawing on hermeneutical, textual procedures’ (Kracauer cited in Denzin et al., 1998a, p. 43). He argued the Berelson’s technique of breaking down a text into units and counting its parts destroyed the very object of study (Denzin et al., 1998a). Instead, he suggested a way of examining the texts in their totality as a way of
drawing out the, ‘hidden meanings in the text’ (Denzin et al., 1998a, p. 43). The method remains popular amongst communications, cultural studies, media and sociology researchers seeking to understand a range of phenomena (e.g. Cottle and Ashton, 1999).

For this study, content analysis was particularly useful, since it explicitly revealed the news content of the aggregated digital news organisation. While the researcher has made certain decisions regarding the content analysis – e.g. what to count, when to count and how things were categorised – this level of subjectivity has been acknowledged and the researcher has taken measures to minimise it by explaining how the findings from the content analysis were ‘constructed’ later in this section. As mentioned previously (see Section 4.2) the researcher has also triangulated the data from the content analysis with the data from observation and interviews (Deacon et al., 1999). This combination of the quantitative monitoring of editorial output, along with the use of observation and interviews, is a useful triangulation method to use for gathering data on the production and presentation of news at Yahoo!7 News, as the researcher will be able to cross-check the findings of each method and better explain the complexity of the Yahoo!7 online news environment as a result. As such, content analysis enables a more exhaustive, detailed and objective study to be presented here.

A content analysis of an aggregated news website, such as Yahoo!7 News, has not been hitherto conducted in Australia, and as such the incorporation of this method into the study will add significant data to the existing literature in the field of online news production. It is hoped that the ways in which the researcher has chosen to analyse the website, and their social media pages, outlined below, may even be used by future researchers interested in the analysis of online news websites.

4.4.1 Yahoo!7 News website content analysis

Content analysis of the Yahoo!7 News website yielded information about the types of content that Yahoo!7 News actually produced. Since this study aimed to provide insight into a dominant source of contemporary digital news for audiences and document and discuss how the findings from Yahoo!7 News add to the body of research regarding online news, the content analysis results were crucial to determining the actual outputs of the organisation. The content analysis investigated: 1) the source of authorship (i.e. the percentage of stories produced by Yahoo!7 News); 2) content categorisation (i.e. general entertainment or hard news); 3) the placement of content;
and 4) the headline versus the actual content of the story. These four points will be explained in further detail below with the discussion of the format of the content analysis.

The Yahoo!7 Frontpage and the 7News Homepage were chosen as the pages for analysis for three reasons. Firstly, these were the two pages that were updated most regularly by the newsworth workers, creating an effective yet manageable sample size. Secondly, selecting these pages enabled a focus on a greater breadth of stories, as any genre of story could appear on either the Frontpage or 7News Homepage. Thirdly, the analysis of the Frontpage and the 7News Homepage revealed more about the news values of the organisation, as it was on these pages that obvious editorial decisions, for example about the importance of each story, were made.

The content analysis took place over two weeks in February 2014. Across this time, screenshots of the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepages were taken at 9:00am and 7:00pm, along with screenshots of the content of the top three stories on each of these pages. Fifty-six pages were analysed in total, featuring 168 stories – 84 stories on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 84 stories on the 7News National Homepage. The key details (i.e. story headline, title, date, time, source) about the six top stories on each page (three from Frontpage and three from 7News National Homepage) were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. Screenshots were also taken so that they could be referred to reflectively if required. The media (i.e. photo galleries, news video, hyperlinks) included in each of the top stories were also reviewed at the times of data collection, and details recorded in the spreadsheet, as screenshots do not capture moving content and/or content on other pages. The timings for analysis were chosen on the basis of the data from the interviews. These data revealed that it was at these times (9:00am and 7:00pm) that the pages had generally been refreshed – that is, at the start of each day and just after the 7News 6:00pm news bulletin.
Figure 4.1


At the time of analysis the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and the 7News National Homepage each contained three main stories, which appeared at the top left of the page (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The three main stories were arranged so that one was placed in a prominent place in a large format (left), and the other two stories were placed adjacent to them (right) and were smaller graphically. The analysis focused on these three main stories on each page (six total) because of this consistent structure of the site. These were also the stories that were updated most frequently by the newswriters and the place where editorial decisions and news values were most explicit. Stories underneath the three main stories (e.g. ‘Sport’ story in Figure 4.1) often varied in size and moved frequently.

The content analysis of the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepage noted the following elements:

1. **Source of Authorship.** The percentage of stories written by Yahoo!7 newswriters versus those sourced from news wires.
2. **Category.** Whether the content was hard news or soft, more general entertainment news (see p.62 for Tuchman’s, 1978, definition of hard and soft news)
3. **Placement.** The placement of hard news versus general entertainment stories on the pages.
4. **Headline vs. Story Content.** The nature of the connection between the content of the story and the headline that preceded it.
The following section will outline the method used to analyse the social media content of Yahoo!7 News.

![7News Homepage example](image)

**Figure 4.2**

7News Homepage example. Source: 7News online (2014).

### 4.4.2 Social media content analysis

Social media has become one of the most important ways for people worldwide to share and gather news and information (Matsa and Shearer, 2018). Consequently, a review of the points of interaction between the newsworkers and their audience on Twitter and Facebook could provide a better understanding of how the newsworkers perceived their audience, as these were the avenues through which the newsworkers interacted with their audience the most.

![Yahoo!7 Twitter example](image)

**Figure 4.3**

Yahoo!7 Twitter example. Source: Yahoo!7 Twitter feed (2016).
The content analysis of the Twitter and Facebook pages updated by the Yahoo!7 News newsworkers was conducted in order to determine what kinds of story the newsworkers were sharing on social media, how often they were sharing content (i.e. how much of their time was spent updating social media), how they represented their content in this medium (i.e. was there a softer/more general entertainment focus on social media?), and the level of interaction between the newsworkers and their audience in these spaces (i.e. was there more interaction here than on the website and what did this interaction look like?).

**Figure 4.4**

*Yahoo!7 Facebook page example. Source Yahoo!7 Facebook feed (2015).*

For the purposes of this study, which investigates the content on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and the 7News National Homepage, the interactions between the newsworkers and their audience on the Yahoo!7 Twitter (see Figure 4.3), Yahoo!7 Facebook (see Figure 4.4), 7News Twitter (see Figure 4.5) and 7News Facebook (see Figure 4.6) pages were considered here as these were the pages that corresponded to the analysed website content.

The Facebook and Twitter analysis took place over three days and considered the headline of each story, the accompanying text, the time the story was posted, the number of times the story had been ‘Liked’, the number of times the story had been shared, and any comments made by the audience and/or newsworkers. These details were noted down in an Excel spreadsheet for reflection and analysis. In total, 124
Facebook posts and 124 Twitter posts were analysed across the Yahoo!7 and the 7News Facebook pages.

While the first two approaches used in this study (i.e. observation and interview) were qualitative, the content analysis of the Yahoo!7 News website and social media pages took a more quantitative approach.

Figure 4.5
7News Twitter example. Source: 7News Twitter feed (2016).

The mixed-method approach was chosen for this study (see Section 4.1) because of the limitations of both qualitative and quantitative research, which will be reviewed in the following section.

Figure 4.6
7News Facebook page example. Source: 7News Facebook feed (2015.)
4.5 Qualitative and quantitative research

A study of an aggregated news site could have taken one of many different directions and each would have required the use of a different research design. For instance, if the study aimed to discover only what technologies were being used by newsworkers, then quantitative surveys could have been circulated to the Yahoo!7 newsworkers to determine this. However, the literature review (Chapter 3) revealed that in order to gain a richer understanding of the social contexts under investigation, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches were more appropriate (Domingo, 2008). The key elements of field research – observation and interviews – enabled an in-depth interrogation of intimate aspects of the lives and work of the participants. The quantitative research method used in this study, that is content analysis, produced measurable data that could be directly compared and analysed against the qualitative research findings to produce a more holistic account of what was happening at Yahoo!7 News.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to interpret and make sense of the events occurring around them, producing what Emerson et al. (1995) referred to as, ‘inscriptions of social life and social discourse’ (p. 8). Conducting only a quantitative, content analysis or taking a survey focused approach would have provided a one-dimensional view of Yahoo!7 News. For example, if only surveys were conducted, the newsworkers may not have been aware of, or able to express their feelings towards, certain aspects of their work (e.g. their workloads) if given a limited selection of responses, determined by the researcher. As well as this, the newsworkers at Yahoo!7 News were time poor, so finding the time for them to do a survey would have been difficult.

A qualitative approach – being present at the news centre, asking questions of the newsworkers and analysing the Yahoo!7 News product – was deemed to be far more relevant in the context of the aims of the study. However, the quantitative content analysis results will support and/or contest the findings from the qualitative observations and interviews, ensuring that interpretations the researcher has made are accurate and/or revised.

Using qualitative approaches, like the ones in this study, enable researchers to gather information about specific social contexts in a variety of ways (Denzin and Lincoln,
Analysing the information received from the use of these interconnected methods will produce a richer and more accurate picture of the subject matter under investigation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998b).

As mentioned in the Introduction (Chapter 1) the scope of this project has been limited to Yahoo!7 News as online news organisations worldwide face different complexities, and therefore it cannot be assumed that aggregated news sites work in the same way as those in Australia. Yahoo!7 News was selected because of: the researcher’s past work history there; the lack of research conducted at a digital aggregated news site in Australia to date; and for narrowing the scope of the study to a manageable size. It is expected that when other studies of online news organisations have been made, this study will be considered and compared with the new cases, with the benefit of arriving at a better understanding of digital aggregated news sites more broadly.

The research design for this study was based on a set of guidelines for qualitative research developed by Denzin and Lincoln (1998b). Following these guidelines, the researcher first asked the question: ‘What do I want to know’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1998b, p. 37)? A specific research question was then developed based on the answer to this question – how can the study of an Australian aggregated news site (Yahoo!7 News) contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production? The most appropriate methodologies (i.e. observation, interviews, content analysis) to answer this question were then selected.

Once the data had been collected, it was interpreted and analysed by the researcher, who took into account their interaction within the social contexts (Baur and Lamnek cited in Struppert, 2011). Following the analysis of the data, the importance and implications of the findings for the particular social context were identified and discussed. This enabled the development of theories and hypotheses that could be developed for use in future research studies (Baur and Lamnek, 2005).

In line with the qualitative principles of openness, flexibility, and adaptability, interview guidelines and observation techniques were revised during the research process in order to better match the particular cases and contexts (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998b). The qualitative research strategy employed in this work – ethnographic field research – and its application in this study can now be explained in more detail.
4.5.1 Ethnographic Field Research

Ethnographic field research – the study of groups of people as they go about their everyday lives – was selected as the best way to gain insight into the everyday workings of Yahoo!7 News, because it allowed the researcher to directly observe the newsworkers in their work environment (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995). By employing this approach, the researcher could gain an understanding of the organisation, its processes of production and presentation of news content and the newsworkers’ perceptions of their audience. Ethnographic field research has been described by authors such as Paul Atkinson (2015) as useful for its ability to explain the intricacies of everyday life which can be at once skilful, physical, symbolic, local and location specific, performed, time-bound and conducted through material artefacts. Moreover, ethnography enables the study people’s actions in their everyday context, ‘rather than solely under conditions created by the researcher, as is the case with experiments or highly structured interviews’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, p. 3).

Inevitably, depending on the researcher’s level of immersion within a social context – and the objectives of their research – the events occurring in the everyday lives of a group of people could be presented in a variety of ways. For Emerson et al. (1995) an awareness of this variety – or the researcher’s level of reflexivity – is an important notion for all ethnographic field researchers to come to terms with throughout the research process.

For this study, the researcher employed two techniques to highlight an awareness of the reflexive nature of the ethnographic field research. First, notations of the researcher’s own perspectives, thoughts and interactions were noted throughout the field notes. And second, the researcher’s field notes were written in a way that effectively represented the perspectives and voices of the participants (Emerson et al. 1995). That is, the researcher asked the participants to clarify any statements that were not clear and the tone in which they were said, if applicable (e.g. sarcastic). To do this successfully, the researcher had to clearly understand that they were representing the beliefs and understandings of the newsworkers (Emerson et al., 1995). By incorporating these two techniques when collecting field notes, the researcher was able to generate a greater awareness of their position within the social contexts under
investigation which, some scholars (e.g. Emerson et al., 1995) have argued, is necessary to understand the objects being studied (Emerson et al., 1995).

For this study, the researcher encourages the readers to recognise that the findings from the research are not absolute and/or invariable. Rather, the findings from this study are contingent upon the circumstances of their discovery. It was hoped that the accounts recorded here could be incorporated in future studies, used to advance sociological knowledge and validate theoretical arguments. This process of content selection – where the researcher elects to promote a certain event in their text, necessarily omitting other events – is an area of field research that has been critiqued by scholars (e.g. Mishler, 1979). The main critique has been that the presentation of findings from ethnographic field research were subjective and thereby problematic (Mishler, 1979). While field research may preclude objectivity, the understandings and insights gained from the immersion of a researcher in a social context are invaluable (Emerson et al., 1995).

The immersion of the researcher into the organisational setting of Yahoo!7 News via participant observation has allowed the collection of information similar to what Geertz (1973) termed ‘thick description’. By observing and negotiating the mundane activities of the Yahoo!7 newsroom, and coming face-to-face with the everyday complexities negotiated by the newsworkers, this researcher was able to turn fleeting happenings and actions performed by the newsworkers into accounts for analysis and consideration (Geertz, 1973).

4.6 Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methods chosen in order to collect data to answer the research question. By observing the everyday work practices of the Yahoo!7 News newworkers, interviewing the newworkers, and analysing the content that the newworkers at the digital aggregated news site produced, three dominant themes of digital aggregated news emerged: 1) the role of the newworkers and newsroom practices; 2) the production of news content; and 3) the newworkers’ perceptions of their audience. Triangulating the data sources has enabled an interrogation of the intricacies of the social settings and the perceptions of the newworkers, and will also help us to understand the implications of these findings and how they add to the body of research regarding online news production.
The next three chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) examine the themes that emerged during data analysis – that is, the practices, experiences and perceptions of online newsworkers at Yahoo!7 News – and explores them in more depth. Chapter 5 will discuss the everyday newsroom practices based on observations and data derived from interviews with the newsworkers. The second results chapter (Chapter 6) will then evaluate the news content of Yahoo!7 News using results from both the qualitative and quantitative research methods. Following this, the final results chapter (Chapter 7) will investigate the newsworkers’ perceptions of their audience based on the observational, interview and content analysis findings. The findings will reveal the intricacies of digital aggregated news site Yahoo!7 News and what they contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production more broadly.
Chapter 5: THE ROLE OF NEWWORKERS AND NEWSROOM PRACTICES

As outlined in Chapter 2 (Background), online news has increased in its popularity so much so that it has become the first major publishing alternative to print and broadcast television. The major changes in news production that have accompanied this shift have triggered much speculation and fear about the future of news (e.g. Rosen, 2008; Shirky, 2009), with particular attention given to the profession of journalists and the transformation of journalism in this digital age (e.g. Bird, 2009; Boczkowski, 2010; Brennen, 2009). While we cannot be certain about what the future holds, we can determine, through analysing the practices of newworkers at an Australian aggregated news website, and the tasks that they perform and the work that they produce, what they can contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production.

By considering the role of the newworker and the news practices at Yahoo!7 News, this chapter will focus on the data which will help us to answer the research question: How can the study of an Australian aggregated news site (Yahoo!7 News) contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production? It will begin to reveal the practices, experiences and perceptions of the newworkers at Yahoo!7 News in order to demonstrate how they add to the body of research regarding online news production.

This analysis will use the data derived from interviews with the newworkers at Yahoo!7 and observations of the newworkers while they worked. Research from within an online aggregated news organisation has been limited in Australia, so the data provided in this chapter will provide original insights into the newworkers’ everyday activities, as well as their attitudes towards the work that they perform.

The data reveals that at the digital aggregated news site investigated newworkers performed more of a content producer role, as opposed to a content creator role, and production routines were a web of processes and systems rather than investigation and analysis (Heinonen cited in Singer et. al, 2011). The role of the newworkers at Yahoo!7 News and the content that they produced were intrinsically intertwined and therefore there will be some mention in this chapter of the content that the newworkers
produced, however the specific content produced by the newworkers will be discussed in further detail in the following results chapter (Chapter 6).

5.1 Informing society: ‘we provide a public service’

Analysis of interviews with Yahoo!7 News newworkers and observations of the newworkers performing their daily tasks revealed incongruities between how the newworkers perceived the work that they performed, and the work that they actually performed. On one side of the spectrum, newworkers believed that their work provided a public service in accordance with the ideals of journalism, documented in the Australian Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance Code of Conduct as: ‘honesty, fairness, independence, respect for the rights of others’ (MEAA, 2015). Interviewees rationalised that they provided content based on the news values of the organisation, which they claimed were focused on publishing stories of ‘national importance’ (Marlowe, interview, 2012). The newworkers also suggested that they provided objective and accurate information, which enabled the public to make informed decisions in society. As one newworker commented, ‘we’ve got a responsibility, we have to tell people what’s going on so they can be educated and make their decisions when they go to vote’ (Nicholas, interview, 2012).

On the other side of the spectrum, the newworkers did not regard themselves as beholden to the ideals of traditional journalism because they did not perform the basic tasks of investigation, analysis and story writing. For instance, one newworker explained: ‘It’s not a typical newsroom, we’re not chasing stories’ (Isabella, Field Note, 24 August, 2011). Louis (interview, 2012) explained that Yahoo!7 News had employees who were ‘journalistic in nature’, in so far as they had backgrounds in journalism, but that the technical side of updating the website was a much larger part of their role. Most of the newworkers’ main tasks revolved around reassembling articles that they had copied and pasted from the websites of their news wires (e.g. Australian Associated Press) and affiliates (e.g. Pacific Magazines), as well as uploading and editing video.

This discussion of the newworkers’ main tasks points to a structural issue associated with the work of online journalists. That is, a lack of time to perform traditionally journalistic work, such as writing, investigating and researching, because of the constant demands of the 24-hour news cycle and focus on click rates and breaking
news. Waggoner (2018) stressed that online journalists were now being driven by page-views and forced to produce more work (i.e. more stories) with less resources (i.e. staff and money). Page-view concerns at one online news organisation in the US, Waggoner (2018) explained had pushed the journalists to, ‘take time from chipping away at that larger story to write smaller stories to keep you on track’ (para. 8).

At Yahoo!7 News original reporting was not part of the daily modus operandi as the newsworkers were so busy keeping on top of the flow of news that they did not have the time or the resources to pursue investigative paths. As a result, turning to fact-checked news and information from news agencies was, for them, an obvious and fast way to keep their site fresh and achieve their click-through (rates) and page-view goals.

Throughout the observation period the researcher noted only a few instances where traditional journalistic tasks were utilised. For the newsworkers who aspired to be journalists there was potential to do a little more writing – in the form of rewording stories – if you were promoted to positions such as Frontpage Editor or State Producer. Once again, this mostly involved rewording stories from other news websites and/or the 7News broadcasts. There were also opportunities to create news videos – extra video content for the site – yet this had to be pursued by the newsworkers and mostly done in their own time. As one newsworker explained, ‘we have to go out and do it [film extra video content], and we’ll spend quite a lot of our time working on it as well’ (Freya, interview, 2012). The newsworkers also explained that the extra video content was more entertainment focused: ‘So [we have] just gone to maybe press releases [to film extra content] ... one video we had a seal floating around work and we’ve made a news video out of that’ (Freya, interview, 2012). In the short term then, the structural work issues necessitated newsworkers with journalistic aspirations to focus on promotion and/or gaining enough experience at Yahoo!7 News to move to a newspaper or broadcast news organisation.

The actions of the newsworkers throughout the observational period also suggested that updating the visual components of a story to entice more people to click on their news items was more important to them than informing the public. This was most obvious on the Frontpage Switcher. The red box in Figure 5.1 highlights the Frontpage Switcher, which included three stories, selected by the newsworkers for their perceived newsworthiness and ability to generate clicks (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). The three Switcher stories were in the most prominent position on the page and included
both text and imagery. Most often, the Switcher was the first part of the site updated at the start of each shift, and the section of the site that was most closely monitored. The newsworkers were constantly checking the click through rates on the Switcher stories, updating them with new information, changing their headlines and moving them around in order to generate more clicks.

In one instance newsworker Marlowe was observed updating a story for the Frontpage Switcher. The story he had been working on had been on the site for a few hours and Marlowe was now searching for a picture of Tony Abbott, Leader of the Australian Liberal Party in 2012, ‘looking like a douche’ – or looking dumb – to replace the existing main image of Julie Bishop (Deputy Leader of the Australian Liberal Party in 2012). At the time, Marlowe was unhappy with the number of clicks that the story had received in the few hours it had been online and believed that in changing the image more people would click on the story (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). In this example, Marlowe was not seeking to update the content of the story with new information, analysis or interpretation. Rather, he was aspiring to entice more people to click on the story by changing the image.

The overarching goal of the newsworkers was to get as many people to visit the site, and keep them there for as long as possible, so that these audiences could be on-sold to advertisers. As Marlowe (interview, 2012) stated, ‘audience engagement’s everything’. In fact, ‘audience engagement’ was raised by all interviewees as the most important aspect of their role because the bulk of Yahoo!7’s revenue was derived from display

Figure 5.1

Yahoo!7 Frontpage Switcher (see stories in red box). Source: Yahoo!7 (2012).
advertising (see Figure 5.2 for an example of display advertising on Yahoo!7 Frontpage). As William (interview, 2011) explained, ‘we’ve got a large audience and we monetise that with straightforward, old-school advertising’.

![Example of display advertising on Yahoo!7 Frontpage (see red box). Source: Yahoo!7 (2014).]

Figure 5.2

Tactics for increasing audience engagement included changing the position of stories on the site, adding more content (e.g. videos, photos, photo galleries, hyperlinks, polls), adapting headlines to be more enticing to click on, changing the angle of the story. The newsworkers strived to add as much content as possible to each story in order to attract a wider audience and keep people on the Yahoo!7 network for as long as possible. As one newsworker commented, ‘as much content as we can, we want to get [it] up’ (Sophia, Field Note, 23 August, 2011).

The newsworkers perceived video as one of the best ways to increase audience engagement as their audience were ‘locked in’ for the duration of the video (Sophia, Field Note, 23 August, 2011). As Sophia explained during observations: ‘Video is where most of the money is made ... video is our bread and butter’ (Sophia, Field Note 23 August, 2011). As a result, the newsworkers were always interested in adding more video into a story if it was available. Sophia also advised during observations that Yahoo!7 were always looking for ways to maximise their video content. For instance, she mentioned that video enlarging had already been made available and spoke about their plans to add a, ‘you might also like’ tag to the end of each video which would
include links to more video content. Additionally, she suggested that tagging key words in each video could be used as a tactic to keep people on the site as it would encourage the search for more content (Sophia, Field Note, 21 August, 2011).

In line with the overarching goal to engage the audience, stories that were not receiving large audience numbers – that is, not clicking well – would most likely be removed from the site. For example, during observations, newsworker Marlowe checked the Yahoo!7 statistics tool, which calculated the popularity of each story second by second, on his desktop computer repeatedly. After one check he said, ‘this Iran one’s not doing the greatest, I’m going to get rid of it’ (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). He then proceeded to remove the story, which centred on violence in Iran, from the Frontpage Switcher, which was the most prominent position on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage.

Despite the self-conception of the newsworkers and their emphasis in interviews on their role in providing news of value to their audiences as citizens, for example, ‘there are some stories which we put up which we know aren’t going to get a lot of traffic, but we feel, to present an informed picture of what’s going on that we might need to have certain things up because that’s an important story of the day’ (Marlowe, interview, 2012), observations of their work demonstrated that the overarching priority was the monetization of the site.

If the liberal democratic ideal – that the media perform as ‘watchdogs’ for society (e.g. Economou and Tanner, 2008; Este, 2012; Schudson, 2008) – is to be upheld, then checking and updating the accuracy of the information published on the Yahoo!7 News should have been one of the main priorities of newsworkers. However, observations revealed that because the newsworkers trusted the information received from their news wires and news partners, time was not spent fact checking the information from these journalistic sources. As newsworker Thea recounted, ‘the ABC, AAP (Australian Associated Press), Reuters ... are very conscious about the quality of their content and getting out the best and the most accurate information’ (Thea, Field Note, 23 August, 2011). Consequently, the newsworkers directly copied and pasted the content received from their partners and news wires onto their site. This news production process was perceived by newsworkers as useful as it saved them time editing the copy. For example, Oscar (interview, 2011) explained that using ‘Yahoo [US] original content’ was great for Yahoo!7 because that content was ‘something that we could just lift and
republish on our site’. This demonstrates an understanding amongst the newworkers that it was an acceptable practice to lift data from these sources for republishing on their site without fact-checking it first. This will be explored further in Section 6.1 when the content produced by Yahoo!7 News is further analysed.

However, the amount of trust placed in the information the newworkers received from non-journalistic/public sources such as social media was varied. The newworkers perceived social media as a useful tool for finding out the latest, breaking news. For example, during observations Sophia (2011) mentioned that the increase in popularity of both Facebook and Twitter over the past few years had led to newworkers searching both sites regularly for news and information (Sophia, Field Note, 23 August). As one newworker indicated, social media was also one of the main ways that they disseminated their own stories, ‘most of what I tweet are our stories’, and therefore a viable avenue for increasing audience share (Field Note, 23 August, 2011). However, the newworkers interviewed also voiced concern about the quality of the information posted on social media sites by the public: ‘People say really stupid, rude and racist comments on social media. You just can’t predict what people will write’ (Thea, Field Note, 28 November, 2012). What these findings demonstrate is that the newworkers trusted information found on social media if it was posted by a journalistic source and they valued social media for its ability to increase their click rates as a source of news content. If a member of the public and/or a non-journalistic source posted the information however, the validity of the information was criticised by the newworkers.

That being said, the questionable validity of the information from public sources on social media did not stop the newworkers from publishing these stories. When speaking about the validity of news stories from Twitter and Facebook, one newworker, Bonnie, reasoned that if there were a lead from Twitter she would always reference it as ‘from Twitter’ [e.g. ‘Tweets say X, Y, Z...’] (Bonnie, Field Note, 24 August, 2011). What this shows is that while the newworkers did not necessarily trust and/or value the information posted by the public on Twitter and Facebook, they believed that by acknowledging their sources (e.g. ‘from Twitter’), they were providing their audience with information pertaining to the validity of the story. In the case of Twitter, it was assumed by the newworkers that the audience would know that if a story was sourced from Twitter that it may not be accurate. This theme of ‘trust’ will
be addressed further in the final results chapter (Chapter 7) which examines the role of social media in the shaping of the newworkers perceptions of their audience.

5.2 Production requirements: the need for speed

The newworkers at Yahoo!7 News emphasised the need to produce content quickly and efficiently for their audience. They linked audience engagement directly with the speed at which they were able to publish a story. As one newworker commented, ‘as a team we’re KPI’d [i.e. key performance indicator] on how much traffic our site generates ... that’s definitely the most important factor ... and getting it to them [the Yahoo!7 News audience] quickly’ (Louis, interview, 2012). This comment reflected the organisational value of immediacy and audience numbers (i.e. clicks) over authenticity or original reporting. As Charlotte (interview, 2011) explained: ‘We are measured on the number of users that come to our site, and the number of pages that they click, and the time that they spend on the sites. The ultimate aim is to get more people to our sites’.

All interviewees mentioned the value that the organisation placed on getting exclusives, breaking news and information out to the public quickly. For instance, ‘the race is always to get a story out first’ (Charlotte, interview, 2011). Some of the newworkers even saw themselves as gatekeepers to this speed-driven news environment that the consumers demanded and spoke about how they were there to ‘give the people what they want, when they want it, which is right now’ (William, interview, 2011). These findings are in line with Boczkowski’s (2010), who highlighted how working at such a speed-focused environment could be linked to two ‘intersecting beliefs’ held by online newworkers: 1) the immediacy required of the online medium; and 2) the expectations of their audience. For instance, newworkers held the belief that the online medium demanded speed, ‘you’ve just got to publish stuff as fast as you can, as quick as you can, as efficiently as you can, with the most content as you can’ (William, interview, 2011). Linked with this notion was the belief that their audience looked at the site repeatedly throughout the day and wanted updated information on each new visit: ‘People actually keep following [stories], throughout the day. Checking in to see developments ... there’s an appetite, people want more news, more information’ (Charlotte, interview, 2011).
As noted earlier, the Yahoo!7 newsworkers did almost no writing in their day-to-day roles. Instead, they were observed predominantly copying and editing text sourced from newswires, their partner organisations and Channel Seven. As one interviewee commented, ‘we’re just an aggregator, so we don’t send journos out on the road … we generally just rely on content coming through, so … our whole news service is put together from news streams’ (William, interview, 2011). The interviewees also stressed that the pace of the work meant that ‘people just work on their PC’s all day’ performing these reassembling tasks (William, interview, 2011). This desk-dominated role was highlighted in the following vignette, which illustrates a common content gathering and authoring practice used by newsworker Marlowe:

Marlowe opens an email from [a writer for Yahoo!7 Entertainment site ‘The Hype’]. He copies the hyperlink (to a story about Superman’s underwear) from his email to content management system (CMS) Kingfisher. He pastes the hyperlink into the ‘Article URL’, then adds an image and the headline: ‘Where did Superman’s red undies go?’. Next he writes a short ‘txt description’ (a short sentence that appears underneath the heading describing what the article is about), which is approximately 30–50 words. He then navigates back to the original story on ‘The Hype’ website (where the hyperlink in his email took him) where he copy and pastes another image (of Superman) into his story under ‘text property’. He then begins to make minor text edits to the story, which he tells me is so that the story looks good on the page. Adding a new story using CMS Kingfisher allows Marlowe to see exactly what the story will look like on the Frontpage before he commits the story, so he scrolls up and down looking at this a few times (e.g. checking for spelling errors) before committing the story to the Frontpage (Field Note, 28 November, 2012).

The process of editing and updating stories on the Yahoo!7 News pages other than the Frontpage (i.e. the 7News National Homepage) was relatively similar, except the CMS used to update the pages did not allow the newsworkers to preview what they were adding to the site before it went live. As this vignette outlines:

Thea is working on updating a story about a man who was shot dead in the Sydney, Australia, suburb of Punchbowl. The story is called ‘Man Shot Dead in Punchbowl’. She tells me that this was last night’s story, so she’s just trying to find some new information and a few good pictures from what went to air in the 7News broadcast to add into her story. Thea opens up the rundown of the story from Channel Seven, which includes a script written by the Channel Seven reporter. She reads the script of what went to air, opens up a Word document, then copies and pastes the text from the rundown into the Word file. She tells me that sometimes what gets said on air doesn’t translate very well online, so she’s going to go through the story and update the text so that it sounds right when read. This involved changing a few words and the tense. After she’s updated the text she opens the video that accompanied the Channel Seven story. Thea looks for an image that she can take a screenshot of to add to her story. She finds an image of police standing in front of a house covered in police tape, takes a screenshot and opens this image in Photoshop. She crops the image and then navigates back to the video to find another image. Thea saves the images with their story tag names and position numbers, copies the ID number for the story (from the URL) and pastes this into
the CMS, Voodoo. This allows her to access the existing story data and information, which she then updates with her new text and images. The story has now been updated and is live with the new images and text within 20 minutes (Field Note, 28 November, 2012).

These descriptions of news production processes reveal that most of the tasks performed by the newsworthers took place at their desks, in a highly routinised, fast-moving news environment. In regard to the quality of the work produced in this fast-moving news ecosystem, the newsworthers stood by their product, claiming that their stories were checked and double-checked before they were posted online. For example, Charlotte explained that she was, ‘checking in on the editorial that appears on our websites, our news sites and our Frontpage, just to make sure that I’m happy with that. That it fits in with our strategy, that there aren’t any typos, just kind of like an extra pair of eyes really’ (Charlotte, interview, 2011). The newsworthers stressed that checking the stories was a fundamental part of the work that they did, but observations at the organisation revealed that most of the stories were only checked for spelling and grammatical errors given the time constraints placed on the newsworthers. For example:

_Thea speaks: ‘I always double-check things, even if it looks right at the time’. At this time Thea was checking the spelling and layout of the story she was about to upload. Thea cross-checks the spelling of the Hawaiian surf competition that appears in a Channel Seven video with her spelling, fixes it and then says, ‘sometimes you’re multitasking and you forget to go back and check it [the spelling]’ (Thea, Field Note, 23 August, 2011)._

As this vignette illustrates, if mistakes were made by the newsworthers, which ranged from spelling and grammatical errors, to the wrong link to news items, the speed at which the newsworthers were required to get content out was perceived to be the cause. Other newsworthers criticised the content management system (CMS), Voodoo, which did not allow them to see what was going to be posted online before they committed the story to be published: ‘I much prefer [Kingfisher CMS] because you can see [your story] before it goes live’ (Isabella, Field Note, 24 August, 2011). For news content, this difference in CMS capability meant that small mistakes (e.g. spelling and the incorrect placement of a video) were more likely to take place if the newsworthers were working on Voodoo. If accuracy were of inherent importance to the news organisation, being able to preview stories before publishing them would have been a priority and all of their content would have been put through CMS Kingfisher.

The benefit of working online was that if mistakes were noticed and picked up by the newsworthers, they could be fixed quickly or the story could be removed completely
from the site. For instance: ‘It’s not like something’s printed and there forever. You can update the story constantly throughout the day and that’s what we do, like all throughout the day you update a story’ (William, interview, 2011). This was reassuring for the newsworkers, especially those who were new to the online news medium and not fully trained in the systems and processes: ‘The Frontpage scares me! I don’t want to stuff it up, but I guess if I do it’s not the end of the world’ (Isabella, Field Note, 24 August, 2011). These comments, coupled with a CMS that did not allow the newsworkers to check content before posting further signifies a change in news values from accuracy towards speed and immediacy, which has significant implications for online news production research. This will be explored further in the Discussion and Conclusions chapter (Chapter 8).

The interviewees indicated that they mostly accepted the fast-paced and highly routinised structure of the work that they did as a normal outcome of the current news environment. The following description of one newsworker performing a number of back-to-back tasks in just over five minutes is illustrative of the typical pace at which the newsworkers performed their work:

12:35pm – Sophia edits a sports news story (clip from YouTube), compresses and commits the video, puts in 16 x 9 format, uploads the video to the FTP (the place where all video on Yahoo?7 is uploaded before being published), searches AAP (new wire) for a picture to accompany the story she’s working on about a doctor who accidentally cut off a man’s penis, updates CMS (Voodoo) with the picture she found on AAP (a doctor), checks the status of a golfing video that she’d started to compress earlier, navigates to CMS (Voodoo) to update the ‘hero-sub-title’ (sub-title) for the ‘doctor/penis’ story, writes a message on Yahoo!7 Messenger (IM) ‘type in penis switcher’, updates ‘hero-subtext’ (story subtext) in Word, checks Yahoo!7 Messenger, updates ‘secondary title’ in CMS (Voodoo), checks status of golf video (still compressing), checks the number of clicks on the ‘doctor/penis’ story, creates new story in CMS (Voodoo) about American actress Kate Winslet saving someone from a burning house, searches the web for, finds and adds a picture of a fire to the Kate Winslet story, checks email, adds a new golf story into CMS (Voodoo), updates golf story on Voodoo with picture she’s found online, moves story pins around (this changes their level of importance/placement on the site) and says to me: ‘I don’t know what I’m doing’ (joking because she’s doing so many things at once), opens Photoshop to edit a picture of one of Channel Seven’s hit television series, ‘Packed to the Rafters’, checks Yahoo!7 Messenger (IM), writes message, navigates to CMS (Voodoo) to add new story about Guantanamo Bay detainee, David Hicks, searches database for video to accompany David Hicks story, checks email, turns to chat to Freya: ‘Nothing we can do about those ugly abstracts on the new page’ (comment in response to the email she’s just received from Frontpage Editor – end 12:41pm (Field Note, 23 August, 2011)

Other newsworkers however, found the rush to get stories online stressful: ‘I was really scared when I started’ (Isabella, Field Note, 24 August, 2011). The newsworkers felt
supported by their team members, however, as the fast-paced nature of the online news cycle generated a strong sense of community and shared value system. With critical deadlines such as cutting news bulletins, the newsworkers were observed working together efficiently as a team to complete daily tasks, ‘everyone's got their thing to do and if we don’t have enough time to do it there’s always someone on hand to fix it up and help out’ (Nicholas, interview, 2012). These sentiments were echoed by Charlotte (interview, 2011), who explained that to work at Yahoo!7, ‘you have to be a team player and you have to be willing to chip in and help each other and my team are brilliant at that’. The newsworkers described events of breaking news in which it was especially important to work together as jobs were ‘divvied out’ by the Editor to make things easier (Bonnie, Field Note, 24 August, 2011). For example:

*Isabella told the researcher about the time that she and Lily were working on the weekend when three bones that were thought to be Daniel Morcombes’s (a teenage boy who was abducted in Australia) were found. Isabella received the press release with this information on her email and tells me that ‘Lily quickly got it up’ while she kept searching for more information to update the story with (Isabella, Field Note, 24 August, 2011).*

Having a sick day was perceived by the newsworkers as letting the team down. For example, during observations a Multimedia Producer advised her supervisor (via phone) that she would not be making it in for her shift. While appearing understanding on the phone, the Producer’s immediate supervisor commented to the rest of the team following the phone call that she ‘must be on her deathbed’ (Field Note, 24 August, 2011). This comment reveals an understanding amongst the newsworkers about the added pressure that would be placed on them as a result of one person calling in sick.

An important tool used by all of the Yahoo!7 newsworkers was Yahoo!7 Messenger, an instant messaging (IM) service. Along with face-to-face interaction and email, IM was the most common form of communication between colleagues. Newsworkers used IM constantly to share information about stories, as a way to alert colleagues to potentially newsworthy items, as well as a way to quickly communicate required story edits and share new information and/or media that had to be added into a story (e.g. hyperlinks, images). It was also used between colleagues as a social tool. The popularity of IM’s usage at Yahoo!7 News can be linked to the immediacy in which it was able to relay messages and information, which the newsworkers perceived as essential to the work that they performed. As noted during observation:
When using IM the newsworkers hardly had to wait five seconds for a response. They could tell exactly who was online and where they were. There was no crafting of well-worded emails, questions were asked bluntly and tasks were delegated without ‘please’ or ‘thank you’, unless acknowledging receipt of material (Field Note, 23 August, 2011).

As this outtake from the researcher’s notes indicates, the tone of IM messages was, in most instances, quite short and to the point. One newworker also commented on this, ‘there’s no “hi, how are you, can you do this?” There’s no time for that stuff. It’s just kind of, “do this now”’ (Sophia, Field Note, 23 August, 2011). Once again, the lack of time and need to get information out explains the abruptness of the IM messages between colleagues. Some of the newsworkers acknowledged that this was different from how they were used to communicating at work, while others accepted this way of communication as part of the fast-paced news environment and were not offended by any lack of civility.

5.3 Skills of the newworker: ‘writing’s the main thing’

As outlined above, the speed at which audiences now require their news, that is 24 hours a day, seven days a week, has necessitated the development of aggregated news content online. As a result, the newsworkers at Yahoo!7 News did not have the time and/or resources to produce original content, yet, when they were asked about the skill that they perceived to be the most important to their role, most raised ‘writing skills’ first and foremost. For instance: ‘I think writing’s the main thing’ (Oscar, interview, 2011); ‘writing skills are pretty important’ (Freya, interview, 2012); ‘writing up stories and things like that’ (Louis, interview, 2012). They also raised other traditionally journalistic skills such as a ‘passion for finding news’ (Charlotte, interview, 2011) and the ability to ‘assemble, understand and communicate facts’ (Marlowe, interview, 2012) as key to working at Yahoo!7 News. These responses indicate that, to some extent, the newsworkers perceived their work as journalistic in nature.

Observations, however, revealed that, in practice, the ability to write was not the most essential skill required at Yahoo!7 News, nor the skill required most often. Rather, the ability to multitask, that is to work on compiling a number of different stories at one time; communication skills (e.g. keeping your team across your current and future tasks); as well as technical skills related to the content management systems used by the organisation (i.e. Kingfisher and Voodoo); photo and video editing; and a proficiency in technologies such as tablets (e.g. iPad and Android) were noted by the
researcher as some of the key skills used by the newworkers during visits at the organisation (Field Note, 28 November, 2012).

In regard to the news production process, the speed and proficiency at which the newworkers were able to produce news by utilising their multitasking skills was undoubtedly specialised and highly skilful, in so far as the newworkers needed to have a strong working knowledge of the technical systems of the organisation in order to achieve their daily audience targets. However, the processes for story production did not appear to vary too much and as such the newworkers were able to develop a process for producing the news that became second nature. Across the periods of observation, story production mostly followed the process outlined in the researcher’s field notes:

1) Find a story (via web, email, competitor site or television broadcast); 2) alert supervisor to story and ask if okay to proceed; 3) if okay to proceed, copy story URL to relevant CMS (Voodoo for News sites, Kingfisher for Frontpage); 3) update headline, byline and any other text as required; 4) add images, video and extra links into story (if available); 5) post on site; 6) share link to story on social media; 7) update as new media (e.g. video, photos) become available (Field Note, 24 August, 2011).

Exceptions to this process were made during breaking news events, in which the newworkers were delegated different parts of the process (e.g. add images and extra content to the story) in an attempt to streamline the information coming in and going out (Field Note, 23 August, 2011). Throughout the normal process of news production, however, the newworkers did not spend time on fact-checking news content or contacting key sources. Once again, the newworkers reasoned that this was because they did not have the time or the resources to support these more journalistic processes. For instance, when speaking about sending staff out to follow up information and get stories, William (interview, 2011) commented that, ‘we don’t send journos (journalists) out on the road ... we generally just rely on content coming through ... that’s when it becomes super expensive ... and it’s just not worth it for us’. This data reveals that technical skills and possessing a variety of skills were more important to the role of the newworker than traditional journalistic skills of writing, investigating and analysing.

5.4 Perception vs. reality

When talking about their roles, some of the newworkers with backgrounds in journalism spoke about how they had had a different idea of what working online would
be like and were surprised by how technical it was in reality. For instance, one newsworker commented: ‘I didn’t realise I’d have to do all the technical stuff’ (Isabella, Field Note, 24 August, 2011). These newsworkers had aspirations to take on more editorial-focused positions, either within the organisation as State Producers or at other news organisations, and were using their role at Yahoo!7 News as a way to springboard into a career in the more traditional and competitive print, broadcast and radio journalism job market. For instance, Nicholas (interview, 2012) revealed that he, ‘saw working at Yahoo!7 as a good pathway, a good opportunity to make some connections in news’.

Others valued the extra responsibilities they were given working at an online aggregated news site. When talking about their ability to edit and curate content for the Frontpage of the Yahoo!7 News website, one newsworker remarked with astonishment during observations that: ‘There’s no way I’d be in the same position if I worked at SMH (The Sydney Morning Herald newspaper). It’d take me years!’ (Isabella, Field Note, 24 August, 2011). Amongst these newsworkers, there was also a perception that, in the current digital news market, traditional news outlets (e.g. 7News) valued individuals with digital skills, which the newsworkers believed were becoming more and more essential to working in a modern newsroom, ‘the multiskilled worker is really the preferred worker in this market’ (William, interview, 2011). The responses of these newsworkers demonstrates that while the newsworkers did not perform the work of traditional journalists or necessarily want a career in online news, the skills gained and the experience of working in an online news environment were still valued and they could see how the skills would benefit their future careers at other news organisations.

Other employees with multimedia, business and IT backgrounds were more digitally capable than those with journalism degrees and appeared to enjoy their roles more, viewing the online news environment as exciting, as opposed to stressful. For instance, ‘I just see online as really exciting and something different for the user and for me’ (Charlotte, interview, 2011). These employees were happy gaining experience at a well-established company such as Yahoo!7 News and were responsible for video, social media, apps, technology and website development. They saw opportunity for career advancement at Yahoo!7, yet did not necessarily aspire to doing more editorial type work. For instance, ‘... working for a traditional newspaper, going out and being a
reporter and, I don’t know I guess getting sent to an event to get the who, what, when, why, how, umm ... I don’t know if I’d really enjoy that’ (Marlowe, interview, 2012). These findings indicate that at least some of the newworkers at Yahoo!7 News enjoyed the newwork, seeking to make a career out of it.

5.5 Yahoo!7 News/Channel Seven relationship: not regarded as equals

In regard to the Yahoo!7 newworkers’ status within their parent company, the traditional news broadcaster the Seven Network, the newworkers noted a sense of inequality. While most of the 7News content would appear on Yahoo!7 News, the 7News staff – who were employed as traditional broadcast reporters and/or journalists – rarely willingly gave newworkers access to news items before they were broadcast and, according to the Yahoo!7 News newworkers, still perceived online as something that they had to accommodate as audience demand for online news grew. As one newworker commented: ‘To be honest getting Seven to do what I thought was required, was like banging your head up against a brick wall, it was a really frustrating situation, they just really viewed us as their competition more than their partner’ (William, interview, 2011). As such, inferiority was a key theme echoed by the Yahoo!7 News team with regard to their position within the 7News organisation and the content that they produced. This was evidenced in the way that the Yahoo!7 News team were delegated tasks by 7News, such as finding footage, which had to be prioritised and managed by the newworkers on top of their workloads (Field Note, 28 November, 2012).

Apart from engaging the Yahoo!7 newworkers to do tasks for them and participating in the twice-daily 7News production meetings, during observations, the 7News employees did not communicate with the Yahoo!7 newworkers, with the exception of a few emails that were used to advise Yahoo!7News about what stories would be appearing on the 7News broadcasts. In terms of cooperation with their broadcast colleagues, it appeared that the two organisations worked together mostly when the interests of 7News demanded it. The newworkers otherwise portrayed their relationship to Channel Seven as one that was necessitated in order to remain competitive in the market, but not entirely welcome. One newworker commented that, ‘a lot of the time they [Channel Seven] embrace it [online] so they’re not playing catch up with the competition ... [if] they don’t want to do certain things they’ll still do it
because if they don’t Nine [Channel Seven’s competitor] will’ (Oscar, interview, 2011). Other newsworkers perceived the relationship as forced by management, with content and information sharing appearing as something, ‘they’re probably being told that they have to [embrace]’ (Charlotte, interview, 2011).

The creation of the shared office space in Martin Place, Sydney, did not appear to have improved the integration of the two companies at the time of investigation. Consequently, the findings from this project support those of Bechmann (2011) who found through his empirical investigation of a converged news organisation that shared space did not necessarily equate to greater collaboration or stronger cross-media integration. Likewise, even though the Yahoo!7 newsworkers and 7News reporters shared an office space, the two news organisations continued to work as separate entities, with differing organisational goals in a shared space. The merger had also created tension between the Yahoo!7 newsworkers and 7News reporters who were unsure of when and how to utilise the strengths of the other and what the new priorities of the organisations were.

This seemingly forced relationship resulted in some of the newsworkers identifying their role as unequal to those in the broadcast newsroom, ‘in time, we will be on equal footing with them, but we’re not there yet’ (William, interview, 2011). This notion of inequality was also linked to the large audience figures, and therefore revenue making capacity of television (7News) versus online (Yahoo!7 News). As one newsworker noted, ‘while there’s such a massive [amount of] people watching free-to-air TV you’re always going to be relegated a little bit’ (William, interview, 2011).

Overall, the relationship between Yahoo!7 and Channel Seven was depicted by the newsworkers as one full of misunderstanding and minor conflicts. Regarding their everyday work, interviewees described situations in which 7News had banned them from uploading certain content – breaking news and exclusives – without their approval: ‘There was a time when they would hold stuff back from telling us. If they found out stories they would not tell us intentionally because they didn’t want us to put it online, in the hope that no one else, no other news organisation would [run it]’ (William, interview, 2011). This was a directive from Channel Seven’s senior management who were, according to the newsworkers, worried that Yahoo!7 News would steal audience numbers from the network if they published the material first. As William (interview, 2011) commented:
Seven were, well still are, winning [the ratings] consistently every night. All that matters, all that matters to [the 7News Director] is winning the TV ratings. So if there is any chance at all that they [Yahoo!]7 News] are going to hurt their TV ratings, by for example, giving us some video of a story before it airs, then they will not do it ... even though sometimes ... it’s not a story which is exclusive to them, which our competitors are going to have vision for, but they will still hold it back.

This data illustrates how the Seven Media organisation prioritised TV ratings over the content demands of the audience and online audience figures. The newsworkers expressed frustration with these occurrences, since they valued timeliness in their output to news consumers. As such, ‘holding back’ on a story so that 7News could get the exclusive seemed ‘crazy’ to the newsworkers (Oscar, interview, 2011).

While this was the case, a few of the newsworkers did perceive the relationship between 7News and Yahoo!7 News as becoming closer, with more ‘interaction between the two sides’ happening as time went by (Marlowe, interview, 2012). The newsworkers however felt that this increased interaction was due, at least in part, to Channel Seven’s own audience and/or revenue goals. As Nicholas (interview, 2012) outlined:

They [Channel Seven] will do for their TV network what we do for Yahoo. They’ve got to provide an audience in order to get revenue, in order to keep providing an audience, in order to get revenue. It’s just an ever-going circle of two ... mutually beneficial organisations trying to create a relationship that works.

Attempts by reporters to provide Yahoo!7 News with extra content to use online were perceived as more beneficial for Channel Seven than Yahoo!7. Nicholas (interview, 2012) explained a scenario in which Channel Seven reporters provided Yahoo!7 News with additional content, which they were pleased to use online, but that he later explained was to the benefit of, ‘the TV show ... to satisfy their own needs’:

We had [Channel Seven] reporters a couple of weeks back during the Victoria bush fires who were ... using their own iPhones to record themselves, kind of like selfie but video, and they’d given a one-minute update and they would email that straight to us and we’d post that online and say ‘look this is, so and so from the front line’ they’re standing in front of the fires or under helicopters as they’re going, and that kind of stuff.

Observations revealed that Yahoo!7 newsworkers did try to build a more integrated relationship to Channel Seven. For instance, Yahoo!7 backed up and stored all of the 7News content, provided them with videos upon request, and pointed to their News bulletin content on the site. They also sent 7News details of the stories that would be online and advised reporters of any potential for online extensions to their stories (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). At the same time, 7News was not as forthcoming. During
the second round of observations, \textit{7News} had only just introduced a ‘web throw’ to the Yahoo!7 News site during their 6:00pm news broadcast, in which the news anchor would mention that ‘all of tonight’s news can be found at Yahoo!7\textit{News}.com.au’, or similar (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). However, this web throw was at the discretion of the \textit{7News} Director, so it was sometimes cut if time did not permit, or if he simply chose not to include it (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). Hence, while all interviewees mentioned the inevitability of moving towards a more integrated newsroom with \textit{7News}, observations revealed that this might be a very slow process.

While on the one hand the Yahoo!7 News Homepage and local pages more or less mimicked the content broadcast on \textit{7News}, ‘the News sites are more seen as an online extension of \textit{7News} ... so covering the same stories you see on \textit{7News} every night’ (Oscar, interview, 2011). On the other hand, the newsworkers suggested that they asserted a distinctively ‘online’ take on the news each day based on the understanding that they were publishing in a different news medium, to an audience with different content expectations. The Yahoo!7 Frontpage was where the newsworkers asserted this distinctiveness. As one newsworker commented: ‘We’ll pull content in from everywhere so that if someone’s not necessarily interested in news, but is signing out from [Yahoo!7] Mail [on the Frontpage] we’ll be able to engage them’ (William, interview, 2011). What this shows is that while the newsworkers were interested in maintaining their content sharing relationship to \textit{7News} – who were the main source of original content for the site – their partnership was primarily for strategic purposes. As William (interview, 2011) noted,

\begin{quote}
teaming up with Seven has given us high-quality content, which is why Yahoo!7 is in a way successful. And our technology enables that content to be viewed across this other range of devices, so together it’s a really good match strategically.
\end{quote}

This tension to reflect the content of Channel Seven and at the same time provide content that was going to get clicked as much as possible, is manifest throughout the day. The following discussion of the newsworkers’ typical day reveals not only how their roles differ to those of traditional journalists but also how this tension manifests itself.

During the week, the last newsworker to leave the newsroom was usually a contractor at 10:00pm. The last tasks this newsworker would perform would be as follows:

- refresh the News pages as necessary
- update the Frontpage Switchers if story angles need updating
- update the app collection manager to change the expiry date to 3:00am (Yahoo!7 Shift Descriptions, 2012).

The next person to arrive in the newsroom would be the Multimedia Producer on the 5:00am to 1:00pm shift, the ‘early shift’ (Field Note, 23 August, 2011). After checking their email for any issues from the previous day, this person was tasked with refreshing the Frontpage Switcher with the top stories from overnight. These would most commonly be stories found from the news wires or by the newsworker on the web on the way to work (Field Note, 23 August, 2011). Following this update, the newsworker would then cut the content from the 7News bulletin at 5:30am. At 6:30am, the newsworker was required to refresh the 7News National Homepage with the 7News content that had just been cut from the 5:30am bulletin, the suite of apps and all of the local 7News pages.

The Frontpage Editor arrived at 6:00am to update and edit the stories on the Switcher that the newsworker had set up at 5:30am. They would then take over the priority of keeping the Frontpage fresh with new information and stories from this time. This would include sourcing and delegating new stories to other newsworkers who started work at 7:00am (Yahoo!7 Shift Description, 2012).

Newsworkers were required to manage all of the video on the site, which had to be cut and edited during all of the 7News broadcasts (i.e. 5:30am, 11:30am, 4:00pm and 6:00pm). They also sourced and cut additional video from Channel Seven’s programs: Sunrise Extra (aired at 5:00am), Sunrise (aired from 6:00am to 9:00am) and The Morning Show (aired from 9:00am to 11:30am), and for their commercial partners PumpTV – a platform that broadcasts clips from Channel Seven shows on television screens at petrol and/or gas stations – and Telstra, the Seven Network’s telecommunications partner. Other responsibilities included, but were not limited to, coordinating story updates (with video and extra media such as photo galleries), updating stories on the apps, posting stories on social media and searching for stories on the internet. What this discussion shows is that while keeping the site fresh with new content was a priority, the newsworkers also spent a lot of time cutting, uploading and editing 7News stories, as well as maintaining other elements of the site.
During the week, the time period from mid-morning to mid-afternoon was the most intense as most newsworkers were online in both of the Yahoo!7 offices, the 7News broadcasts had begun, information from the news wires and other sources would be flowing in, and more people would be accessing the site, more often. It was at this time that the newsroom was buzzing with life – the site, apps and social media were being updated; video was being cut; and conversations about which stories needed moving, more information, new headlines or images, were taking place. Things slowed down somewhat in the afternoon, until the next peak period – the 6:00pm 7News bulletin. This was considered the most important News bulletin for 7News as it was the highest rating and, as such, the Yahoo!7 News newsworkers worked each day towards making sure their site reflected and supported the broadcasts. This was one of the only times of the day when Channel Seven and Yahoo!7 collaborated as they tried to align their content and, as mentioned earlier, this was also the time that the Yahoo!7 News newsworkers might ask the 7News reporters for extra information to share on the site. The 7News reporters did not generally approach Yahoo!7 News with this extra detail however, instead it was the job of the producers to seek out the extra web opportunities and approach the reporters filing the stories. This process was even outlined in the shift description of the NSW Producer doing the 11am–6pm shift as follows, ‘look for web extra opportunities in 7News rundown, talk to appropriate 7News producers and journalists’ (Yahoo!7 Shift Descriptions, 2012).

5.6 Summary

The findings presented in this chapter have explained the role of the newsworkers and the news production techniques that they used at the digital aggregated news site. This discussion has provided information pertaining to the production of news at an aggregated digital news site and revealed that for Yahoo!7 News success was perceived through a prism of the ‘race to be first’, which caused newsworkers to prioritise and value speed and immediacy.

The findings indicated a shift towards immediacy as a dominant news value for aggregated news, which caused complications for the newsworkers in the form of a contradiction between how the newsworkers perceived themselves and what they actually did. The newsworkers perceived their role as being journalistic in nature, in so far as they compiled the news each day, but observations, as well as their comments
in interviews, showed that their processes of story creation revolved around getting high click rates, as opposed to maintaining an informed citizenry. This incongruence can be explained in part by the high-speed news values of the aggregated news environment, which caused newsworkers to prioritise getting the news out to the public over fact-checking and analysis. Even the newsworkers’ use of social media was for the purpose of increasing audience share and disseminating news quickly as opposed to keeping their audience informed. Overall, the data revealed that the skill set required to perform newswork at Yahoo!7 News was markedly different to the skills of traditional journalists. For instance, newsworkers were required to work on a number of different stories at one time, while updating the apps, social media and navigating advanced technical systems. This came as a shock to some newsworkers who had initially perceived that the role would be relatively similar to that of a journalist at a traditional news organisation.

The newsworkers also felt that their roles as news producers were not highly valued by the traditional 7News reporters. This proved to be a point of contention amongst the newsworkers who, on the one hand, valued the exclusive content they received from 7News yet, on the other hand, had to work hard to maintain this relationship and convince the reporters to work with them. The following chapter (Chapter 6) will analyse the content of Yahoo!7 News in more detail through a discussion of the findings from the content analysis of the site, along with supporting data from participant observation and interviews.
Chapter 6:  THE PRODUCTION OF NEWS CONTENT

The previous chapter outlined the role of the newworkers and newsroom practices at Yahoo!7 News. This chapter will focus on the news content produced by Yahoo!7 News by analysing the findings from the content analysis (outlined in Chapter 3), along with data from interviews and observations. Analysing the content created by Yahoo!7 News will reveal not only the kinds of news produced by the newworkers, but also information pertaining to the presentation of news at a digital aggregated news site. It is hoped that this analysis of the content will encourage further content investigations that may be compared and/or contrasted with the findings from this study.

The data analysis revealed three major themes about the content: 1) Yahoo!7 News was reliant on news agencies and news partners; 2) editorial decisions were based on strengthening audience engagement; and 3) immediate delivery was perceived as crucial. These themes will now be analysed in turn.

6.1 Reliance on news agencies and news partners

As the Literature Review (Chapter 3) revealed, it has been suggested by scholars (e.g. Curran, 2010; Franklin, 1997; Manning, 2008) that news and public relations (PR) agencies play an increasingly influential role in the news-gathering and reporting processes of the modern news organisations. This, it is argued, is a result of the pressure placed on journalists to produce more news, across a variety of formats, with relatively the same amount of resources, or in some cases less resources (MEAA, 2010). Taken together, these factors lie at the heart of debates about the quality and independence of journalism, worldwide.

In regard to the content produced by Yahoo!7 News, an initial analysis of the results from the content analysis suggested that their news was not entirely driven by news agencies. Yahoo!7 and/or Yahoo!7 News were recorded by the researcher as producing a significant proportion of their own content. For example, 27 per cent of the stories recorded by the researcher included either Yahoo!7 and/or Yahoo!7 News in the author byline (see Table 6.1). However, upon further analysis, it emerged that most of the stories classified by the researcher as written by Yahoo!7 and/or Yahoo!7 News were actually produced by Yahoo!7’s news agencies or news partners, with minor edits from Yahoo!7. The author byline in these cases read, for example, ‘AAP with Yahoo!7’ or
‘Yahoo!7 News and Agencies’. In fact, only 9 per cent of the stories published across the period of content analysis were produced solely by Yahoo!7 or Yahoo!7 News. The rest of the stories were sourced from news agencies, 7News, or other Yahoo!7 partners (e.g. The West Australian newspaper) (see Table 6.1). This signals that Yahoo!7 News was in fact more highly dependent on copy from its news agencies and partners than conveyed by the initial impression (see Table 6.1). Moreover, the content analysis also revealed that nearly half of all stories (40 per cent) published on the Yahoo!7 News Homepage and Frontpage came from one agency service – Australian Associated Press (AAP), which also points to a heavy reliance on this particular news agency for information.

**TABLE 6.1**

**Article sources (n=126)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Relationship to Yahoo!7</th>
<th>Total Stories (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAP (Australian Associated Press)</td>
<td>News Agency</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo!7</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation)</td>
<td>News Partner</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFP (Agence France-Presse)</td>
<td>News Agency</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP (Associated Press)</td>
<td>News Agency</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7News</td>
<td>News Partner</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Australian (Newspaper)</td>
<td>News Partner</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reuters</td>
<td>News Agency</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practical Parenting (Magazine)</strong></td>
<td>News Partner</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Night (Channel Seven TV program)</td>
<td>News Partner</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Source Listed</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lack of author bylines and this shared approach to news production somewhat depersonalised the work of the Yahoo!7 newsworkers. This depersonalisation, coupled with the nature of aggregated news – that is, the compilation of stories – also had the
effect of making the newsworkers themselves more replaceable. As audiences could not track or follow a newworker’s stories because of the lack of clarity surrounding the bylines, they were unable to develop an allegiance to a certain newworker and therefore the person behind the news became less significant in this digital aggregated news environment.

It is difficult to know exactly how many stories were directly replicated from their original sources as this would require access to the news agency stories themselves, yet findings from the interviews and observations showed that the majority of the content on Yahoo!7 News was either directly or partially replicated from its original source. As mentioned in the previous Results chapter (Chapter 5), the newworkers found the content from their partners, such as Yahoo! International, helpful because they perceived that these stories could be directly copied and pasted onto their site. As one newworker, Oscar, explained, ‘the Yahoo original content ... that’s something that we can just lift and republish on our site’ (Oscar, interview, 2011).

During observations the newworkers were open with the researcher about searching for, and using content from, multiple locations on the internet. One newworker, Lily, listed her daily news sources as, ‘partner channels (e.g. Pacific Magazines), other magazines (e.g. Women’s Health magazine), emails, AAP, Reuters, and other news wires’ (Lily, Field Note, 23 August, 2011). Lily also mentioned that she checked competitor websites, such as The Sydney Morning Herald and ninemsn throughout the day for stories (Lily, Field Note, 23 August, 2011). At the same time, however, the interviewees also spoke about writing their own news for the site. For example, when asked about how often Yahoo!7 used content from sources other than their partners (i.e. news agencies), Oscar (interview, 2011) responded that they did ‘every day’ and that these were the stories ‘that we’d write ourselves’. However, as we have seen, the findings from the content analysis indicate that the newworkers were not responsible for writing most of the news content on their site.

One situation in which the newworkers were more likely to write at least some news content was during breaking news events. In these circumstances, the newworkers emphasised their change in focus from news aggregation to ‘writing up’ (Nicholas, interview, 2012). As Nicholas (interview, 2012) explained, ‘if a story breaks I’m writing up [sic]’.
This self-conception held by the newworkers of themselves as ‘writers’ appears to have stemmed from confusion surrounding what constitutes ‘writing’ news. For the newworkers ‘writing’ appeared to comprise of the rewriting and/or the rewording of text that had already been published and/or aired. For example, newworker Thea was observed reading the 7News program rundown, which had details of each story that went to air during the 7News broadcast. After reading the reporter’s script (i.e. the piece to camera), which was attached to every 7News story, Thea copied the text and pasted it into a Word document. She then removed some text, for example directions to the newsreader, and reworded other text by changing the tense before publishing the story on the Yahoo!7 New South Wales Homepage (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). Thea advised the researcher at this time that she was updating the text because sometimes what was said during the 7News broadcast did not make sense online (Field Note, 28 November, 2012).

Consequently, the newworkers may have inflated their writing tasks to appear more journalistic to the researcher, to increase their value within the organisation as writing skills were mentioned by most interviewees as an important skill for aggregated online newwork, or because they actually perceived the act of working on existing text as parallel to writing new text. Journalism was considered by the newworkers as a professional role that required investigative and analytical skills and therefore held at high regard. For the newworkers pursuing careers in journalism, aggregated online newwork was not what they ultimately aimed to do. Instead, they looked for careers in broadcast or print journalism that would offer them the opportunity to write or report on their own stories and/or use their journalism studies training. For these newworkers, working on existing text did not entail the skills of critical analysis or investigation inherent to traditional journalism and therefore they were pursuing paths that would enable more journalistic-type work.

In most of the stories published on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepage a newworker and/or journalist was not listed as the author (see Table 6.2). Rather, the majority of stories (63 per cent) were attributed to only the news agency (e.g. Reuters) or Yahoo!7 partner (e.g. Sunday Night [Channel Seven television show and Yahoo!7 news partner] or Yahoo!7 Sport). Of the total named journalists (36 per cent), most (16 per cent) were journalists from AAP. For example, ‘AAP – Miranda Forester’ and ‘AAP – Stephen Johnson’. Only 2 per cent (three stories) were attributed
to Yahoo!7 writers – ‘Cameron Baud Yahoo!7’, ‘Caroline Moss, Business Insider, Yahoo7’ and ‘The Hype – Jeremy Blacklow, editing by Yahoo!7 staff’ and none of these writers were Yahoo!7 News staff. In fact, further investigation revealed that ‘Cameron Baud Yahoo!7’ was actually a reporter for 7News and not a Yahoo!7 employee at all. As such, this data supports the findings from the observations that Yahoo!7 News was reliant on its news agencies and partners for news content.

TABLE 6.2
Source of story (n=126)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of story</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Named Journalist</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Agency or Yahoo!7 Partner</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Source Listed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By not individually naming the creator of each news item, ownership of the story was removed from the newsworkers. Multiple newsworkers could contribute new information to a story without having to update the byline. The interviewees did not raise ownership of stories, in the form of a byline, as important to them or the work that they did. Instead, the interviewees perceived working with other newsworkers to assemble a news story as an inevitable part of the fast-paced digital news system and a way to create a better product. Nicholas (interview, 2012), felt supported working in this way when he commented that, ‘everyone’s got their thing to do and it’s actually really well managed in what we get to do ... we’ve always got enough time to do it, and if we don’t there’s always someone on hand to fix it up and help out’.

This sense of shared story ownership – to keep up with the constant demands of the fast-paced news system – also enabled changes to be made to stories quickly without approval from an original author or even editor. As one newsworker explained,

it’s not an environment where you have to tiptoe around them [other newsworkers] thinking: “Oooo should I ask them to change that headline or not?” because there just isn’t time. And I know that sounds like that would only take 30 seconds but you know, that could be 30 seconds Sophia could be writing another headline, or writing a story … we foster it so that it doesn’t come out like an order (Charlotte, interview, 2011).

In this comment, Charlotte (interview, 2011) also highlights the need for newsworkers to work quickly to update and publish content. For Charlotte (interview, 2011), taking 30 seconds to contact a colleague to advise them of a planned change to a story was 30
seconds away from doing another task. This exemplifies the priority of Yahoo!7 News to have content that was immediately responsive to their audiences’ needs. The value Yahoo!7 News placed on audience engagement and immediate content delivery will now be examined in turn.

6.2 Focus on audience engagement

Before analysing the most popular content featured on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepage it is important to understand the content gaps, or the areas covered least by the newsworkers, as this will reveal their priorities in terms of news delivery.

The content analysis of the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepage, conducted over two weeks, included the investigation of 126 stories. These stories covered a wide range of topics, which were grouped under nine headings (see Table 6.3). The data from the content analysis showed that the least common editorial focus for Yahoo!7 News was stories focused on Health/Natural World issues (2 per cent of total stories). This category included only one story, which was featured on both the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepage, about the discovery of a way to stunt melanoma cells. The headline read: ‘Scientists in bid to starve melanoma cells’ (Yahoo!7 Content Analysis, 2013). Following closely, however were stories dedicated to politics (3 per cent of total stories) and domestic issues (3 per cent of total stories) (see Table 6.3). Stories classified as ‘politics’ included: two stories about the pressure placed on the government to support the drought victims in New South Wales, Australia (headlines: ‘PM visits drought areas’, ‘Fears of longer drought’); and details about a slump in Bill Shorten’s (candidate for the leader of the opposition) approval rating (headline: ‘Shorten’s approval rating slumps in poll’). Similarly, content focused on domestic issues included: a story about a smoke stack in Port Kembla (New South Wales) that was to be demolished (headline: ‘Port Kembla smoke stack to be torn down’); as well as coverage of abuse in a Papua New Guinea (PNG) detention centre (headline: ‘More trouble at PNG detention centre’). The relative absence of stories focused on these three areas over the period of analysis, demonstrates that politics, domestic and health/natural world issues were not perceived by the newsworkers as valuable content for the site. These findings also support the argument that content on
Yahoo!7 News was about engaging audiences with stories focused on, for example, crime, entertainment/sport and accidents/disasters (see Table 6.3).

**TABLE 6.3**

*News items by subject focus (n=126)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/click bait</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/sport</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidents/disasters</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/consumer news</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence/foreign policy/foreign issues</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic issues (e.g. immigration)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/natural world</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common editorial focus for Yahoo!7 News was on crime stories (33 per cent of total stories). The majority of these crime stories reflected the coverage of particular crimes or updates on active cases, rather than trends in crime or related issues. Moreover, none of the crime stories published on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepage across the period of investigation included an extended analysis of a case or original content produced by Yahoo!7. In fact, the only crime story featuring unique content for Yahoo!7 News was an interview with the new girlfriend of a man, (Simon Gittany) who had killed his former girlfriend (Lisa Harnum), following his sentencing. This interview was exclusive to *Sunday Night*, an Australian current affairs program on Channel Seven, and therefore partner of Yahoo!7, with whom they shared content.

Other crime stories included: updates on the trial of Schapelle Corby, an Australian woman who smuggled drugs into Indonesia, and her release from jail; a mother convicted of murder for giving her child cancer drugs; the selection of jurors for a trial about a young boy, Daniel Morcombe, who was abducted from a bus stop in Queensland, Australia; and a story about the trial of a man who sent a mail bomb to his in-laws.
Even though the majority of stories published were focused on crime, none of the newsworkers interviewed mentioned crime as a popular topic on the site when interviewed. Rather, the interviewees spoke about ‘general news’, ‘silly’ and ‘lighter news’ stories as the most popular with their audience (Field Note, 23 August, 2011). These have been classified for the purposes of this research as ‘Other/click bait’ stories and, following crime, were the next main category of stories covered by Yahoo!7 News (31 per cent of total stories) (see Table 6.3).

There are many definitions of what can and/or cannot be classified as click bait. For the purposes of this thesis however, the stories considered as ‘Other/click bait’ were those with ‘tempting, vacuous, “curiosity gap” headlines’ that encouraged people to click on them to find out more (Smith cited in Hamblin, 2014, para. 4). They were the stories that did not fit into one of the prescribed nine headings (see Table 6.3) and were often given a headline that elicited a humorous response from their audience and/or purposefully generated intrigue and a reason to click on the story.

Click bait stories have received a substantial amount of negative press from academics (e.g. Lock, 2013) and journalists alike (e.g. Hamblin, 2014) as they were often thought to be misdirecting people for the specific purpose of getting clicks. On Yahoo!7 News, stories classified as ‘Other/click bait’ came with headlines, for example ‘Girlfriend “for sale” on eBay’; ‘Snake eats dog, but not for long – WARNING – graphic images’; ‘The $100 note worth $1500’; ‘Hilarious: GoPro falls from the sky’ (see Figure 6.1); ‘Earthquake created Jesus’ face’.

Figure 6.1

*Other/click bait story ‘Hilarious: GoPro falls from the sky’. Source: Yahoo!7 Frontpage (2014).*
Rather than being shy or embarrassed about publishing stories that were placed for the purposes of titillation and entertainment, the newworkers interviewed were open about the click bait content that they produced and even found it amusing. For example, when asked about the kinds of content that work best for Yahoo!7 News, in terms of generating clicks, one newworker responded quite graphically that, ‘tits get the clicks’ (William, interview, 2011). Another newworker commented that, ‘we have a lot of news that we pick up that’s kind of quirky news that ... we can joke around [with]... anything that makes our users smile or want to interact with us is what I guess we really want to achieve’ (Nicholas, interview, 2012). As such, the newworkers justified their content choices as, ‘what they [their audience] want’, rather than what the audience might need in order to function in a democratic society (Oscar, interview, 2011). These comments, combined with the dominance of crime and ‘Other/click bait’ stories, reveals the priority of Yahoo!7 to publish stories that engage the audience – that is, get clicks – rather than inform.

This recurrent theme – that the newworkers were unable to publish more serious and/or harder news items because of the constant demands for entertainment by the 24-hour news audience – was mentioned frequently by those interviewed. As one newworker commented, ‘people come for different reasons, and you’ll find that more often than not people come for bullshitty soft news ... I’d love to think that people would come to see ... Bob Katter’s Australia Party is up the creek in terms of politics, they just don’t’ (Nicholas, interview, 2012). Others justified publishing click bait by blatantly putting the onus back on the content choices of their audience: ‘It’s not our fault they click on boobs’! (Oscar, interview, 2011). Newworker Thea told the researchers that: ‘If you want us to write more about Libya, click on Libya’ (Thea, Field Note, 28 November, 2012).

Debates about what constituted soft news and how we should define and/or understand it have been a subject of debate amongst authors (e.g. Boczkowski, 2009; Graber, 2003; Otto, Glogger and Boukes, 2016). However, the comments made by the newworkers suggested that these debates – for example whether or not soft news was useful and/or damaging to audiences – were not a problem that plagued them or influenced their day-to-day news production processes. Their use of language such as ‘bullshitty’ to describe their content highlighted the nonchalant attitudes of the newworkers towards the quality of their work and signalled resentment towards the
audience about clicking on, and demanding, these kinds of news story (William, interview, 2011).

Extending this idea that the audience determined what was published through clicks, Thea commented that she would, ‘love to see people interested in Federal politics … but in reality no one wants to click on it, no one gives a shit about it, and it’s a waste of resources if you over commit too much stuff to that to make it good when no one wants to see it’ (Thea, Field Note, 23 August, 2011). This comment reveals the perceived powerlessness of these newsworkers to do anything other than just give the audience what they wanted. During observations and interviews the newsworkers did not seem to recognise that they were in fact shaping news choices by limiting their offerings just as much as they were responding to audience tastes.

Thea’s comment also supports the idea that the production of news was only worthy if it generated an audience, and therefore revenue for the company. As such, Lewis (2010) claims that the growth of news as a business changed the, ‘style, content and expectations’ of what we thought of as news were supported by the findings from Yahoo!7 News, since the news content of the organisation was tailored specifically to the desires of their audience (p. 84). The aggregated content produced by the newsworkers was not designed with building common knowledge in mind. Rather, the newsworkers aimed to get news out as quickly as possible, update it constantly and get as many eyeballs on it as they could to drive their commercial success.

In order to determine how ‘Other/click bait’ stories differ to stories that inform audiences, this thesis will now consider a few examples analysed under this category. One click bait story that featured on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage was titled ‘Paddleboater’s close call with orca’. When the researcher clicked on this story, the first piece of information provided was a video of a paddleboater coming into close contact with an orca (see Figure 6.2). The appearance of a video or image at the start of each story was not uncommon for stories that appeared on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage or 7News National Homepage. In fact, all of the 126 stories analysed included either a video or an image at the top of each story. The orca story, however, is a good example of click bait because of its headline, which generated a sense of intrigue to find out more about the paddleboater and the whale, and because of the story content, which contained only one line of text (see Figure 6.2). This one line of text provided slightly more information than the headline (i.e. that the whale tried to bite a chunk out of the paddleboater’s
board), but still encouraged the audience to click on the video to find out more and/or physically see the whale attempting to bite the paddleboater’s board. Intriguing headlines and subtext titles that lured clicks were techniques used by the newsworkers to keep people on their website, in their network, for the longest time possible. While it could be argued that this story was informing people about the dangers of paddleboating in areas inhabited by orcas, it is clear from the lack of explanation about the video, and the use of a curiosity-driving headline that this news story was posted for the purposes of engaging and attracting an audience, rather than informing them. Clicking on ‘More’ printed underneath the text did not actually reveal any ‘more’ information.

Figure 6.2

This story, which featured on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage, one of the most prominent parts of the Yahoo!7 News website, also signalled a shift in editorial agendas. For example, traditionally the frontpage of a newspaper was always reserved for the most newsworthy stories – that is, breaking news, important foreign and domestic issues or current political debates. However, the dominance of click bait stories on the Frontpage of Yahoo!7 News was further indication of Yahoo!7’s editorial priority to publish stories that would receive the most clicks. While newspapers have used catchy headlines to try to entice consumers to read news content (e.g. Lewis, 2010), the online
platform has allowed newworkers to measure, minute by minute, the impact of headlines on audience news consumption. One newworker explained how they used headlines to increase audience engagement:

It’s giving them [the audience] a little bit of a taste of what the story is but … and you’ll see it on our Frontpage in particular is, we’re not really telling you the whole thing, so like this morning might have been ‘Amy Winehouse’s shock drug autopsy result’ or something, but there were no drugs, so ... it’s a shock that there were no drugs! So, it’s getting people in and then when they’re in there trying to circle them around your site as much as you can really (Oscar, interview, 2011).

Oscar’s comment provides further evidence of the organisational priority to lure the public into clicking on their stories and also explains the prevalence of ‘Other/click bait’ stories on the Frontpage.

![Figure 6.3](image)

*Figure 6.3*


Another example of an ‘Other/click bait’ news story that featured on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage was titled: ‘Friend films cruel prank on mate’ (see Figure 6.3). While the headline explained to the reader that the story was about a friend who pranked their friend and/or ‘mate’, the Yahoo!7 News audience was encouraged to click on the story to find out further details of the prank. Upon opening the article, the audience was prompted to watch the video that appeared at the top of the story. Although text was
used alongside the video to provide further detail about the prank, it was an additional component of the media mix, not a privileged one, and the audience still needed to watch the video for the full details about what had happened.

Finding additional images and video to add to stories was prioritised by the newsworkers and the researcher noted during observations that the newsworkers spent most of their time searching for, cutting and adding, new video, galleries and hyperlinks to their stories. This was prioritised over editing the text of the actual story, with the exception of the short 20-50 word abstract they were required to write for each story (Field Note, November 23, 2011). It is important to note here that the content analysis revealed that the vast majority of stories on Yahoo!7 News contained video (124 out of 126 stories) as it was considered by the newsworkers as a great way to engage their audience and bolster advertising dollars. Sophia’s comment, mentioned earlier, about video being the ‘bread and butter’ for Yahoo!7 News is also relevant here as it highlights how important video was to generating money for the site (Sophia, Field Note 23 August, 2011). Video kept people on the page for longer periods of time and each video contained pre-roll advertisements, that is, an advertisement that played before the news content, extending the places for advertisers to purchase. Therefore, adding video to a news story was one of the main ways in which the newsworkers could drive revenue to the site.

After watching the video of the prank, the audience was made aware that the story was about a teenager, Connor, who had invited his friend, Brad, to play video games at his house. However, instead of giving his friend his home address, Connor had given Brad the address of the house opposite to his house. The story therefore centred on the video of Brad being chased out of the neighbour’s house when he entered unexpectedly. Apart from the video, the story had no substance or analysis to offer the audience and therefore could be considered a low-value news item.

The publication of this story, and others like it, demonstrates the motivation of the newsworkers to publish stories for their ability to ‘go viral’, that is, to be shared quickly with a large audience. A newsworker speaking about the best content for the site explained that click bait was, ‘that kind of viral stuff [that] goes really well, if it’s shocking, or if it’s quirky or funny enough to be shared on Facebook or Twitter, or via email, that stuff always goes well’ (Nicholas, interview, 2012). Other newsworkers
also spoke about the priority to publish stories with the specific aim of increasing traffic to the site. As this vignette from observations details:

Isabella tells me that she found the ‘iPad bride story’ (a story about a woman who married her partner L) on Sunrise (a Channel Seven morning news television show) while she was cutting it up (i.e. editing it) that morning. Isabella then mentioned that she just suggests stories she sees on Sunrise that she thinks will click well, ‘There was this one the other day about a hedgehog’ (Isabella, Field Note, 24 August, 2011).

Further, Charlotte (interview, 2011) confirmed that, ‘we are measured on the number of users that come to our site, and the number of the pages that they click, and the time that they spend on the sites. So yes, the ultimate aim is to get more people to our sites’. While Marlowe (interview, 2012) commented that his overarching aim was to, ‘always increase traffic ... it’s like any media organisation or product; you live and die by circulation’.

Other tactics employed by the newsworkers to keep their audience engaged with the Yahoo!7 network included adding visual hooks into the stories. For the purposes of content analysis, visual hooks have been classified into five groups: videos, photo galleries, hyperlinks, images and other (see Table 6.4). As opposed to traditional newspaper articles, which could only have a few images, and broadcast news stories, which had to be a certain length of time, online news stories had an infinite amount of space and could be added to up to an indefinite point. When interviewed, Oscar (interview, 2011) highlighted the organisations’ reliance on visual hooks, stating that it was, ‘rare that we’d promote a story that doesn’t have video’. The findings from the content analysis support this comment with 199 videos appearing across the 126 stories analysed (see Table 6.4). However, the dominant visual hooks used by newsmen were images, with 235 images appearing across the 126 stories analysed.

**TABLE 6.4**

**Visual hooks in news Stories (n=251)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual Hook</th>
<th>Total No#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo galleries</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperlinks</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>251</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other newsworkers emphasised the importance of utilising an array of visual hooks. For example: ‘Most things have video and if they don’t we’ll make photos, galleries for them and things like that’ (Freya, interview, 2012). For the newsworkers, it was the new information, the new visual hooks that kept their audience coming back to their site for more information. For instance, when speaking about the overthrow of Kevin Rudd (then Australian Prime Minister) by Julia Gillard (Labor senator) one newsworker described the event as a mad rush to get as much content as possible:

You had to get as much information as you possibly could – you’re getting videos, galleries, whatever and you’re looking at all your different news sources and trying to aggregate all in one place so you can keep that audience engaged in it, so it was big, big news (William, interview, 2011).

The audience was perceived by the newsworkers as having an insatiable appetite for news and therefore, part of the newsworkers role was to provide them with new and fresh story elements, in the form of these visual hooks, in order to keep them engaged. As Nicholas (interview, 2012) explained:

The reason that we try to get video out there and we like to get images out there, and ... all kind [s] of different content, not just text is because ... if you have an article that you tweet and you want people to click on it, and it contains the exact same text on the inside as it does in the tweet then people aren’t going to want to read the article, they just want to read the tweet because there’s nothing else to go in there for.

Hence, the stories presented on the site were often heavily visually based. The content analysis supported these findings. For example, breaking news stories, or stories that generated a significant amount of public interest, such as the case of Luke Batty, a young Australian boy who was brutally killed by his estranged father on a cricket oval in front of parents and children, were found to contain more visual hooks than regular, stand-alone news items (see Table 6.4). By building the mix of media in these popular stories, the newsworkers could keep people on the page and within the Yahoo!7 network for a longer period of time, thus inflating their audience figures. For example, the story about Luke Batty contained a larger mix of visual media than any other story during the period of analysis, with seven videos from 7News broadcasts, along with eight images of Luke, his mother, father and the scene of the crime, and two hyperlinks to related stories on the Yahoo!7 network (e.g. Remember him as he was ‘Luke Batty’s mum’) (see Figure 6.4). Conversely, a story about a teenager charged over the gang rape of a 14-year-old girl in a Sydney park that occurred on the same day, but was not
considered breaking news or a top story, included only one video and one image (see Figure 6.5).

**Figure 6.4**

The prevalence of visual hooks signals the importance of the visual in news reporting for online aggregated news sites, but also digital news sites more broadly. Traditionally, visuals have also been used by journalists to provide further context and explanation for stories, so the prevalence and popularity of visuals on Yahoo!7 News followed this traditional trend.

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis related to the immediate delivery of news content to the Yahoo!7 News audience. The findings related to this theme will be discussed in the following section.

6.3 Delivering content immediately

The value placed on the immediate delivery and consumption of news content, which has developed as a by-product of the digital 24-hour news world has already been
mentioned (see Chapter 5). When writing about this phenomenon Lewis (2010) highlighted the cultural economy that has been created by this environment centred on, ‘the thirst to be first’ (p. 90). ‘Newness’ he wrote, was all that a news organisation had in a space where news dates by the second, and as such there exists a battle between news organisations to be the first to break news (Lewis, 2010, p. 90). At Yahoo!7 News, the priority to publish a story first was driven by the same motivation as publishing click bait – that is, to generate a larger audience for the site. By publishing before their competitors, Yahoo!7 News would be placed higher in the search rankings and therefore more people would see their story. As William (interview, 2011) commented: ‘If you break a story first, generally ... if we break a story before Nine or news.com or the Fairfax papers [Yahoo!7 News competitors], we will generally rank better in Google than they will. So there’s a real race to get something out there’. In this race to get something resembling news ‘out there’, Yahoo!7 News was often made to publish stories with little or no information. As Oscar (2012) explained, ‘if there’s a breaking news event we’ll write something up, even if it’s only sentence [we’ll] write “more to come”. It’s good for Search and stuff as well, but mainly we’ll get that out there as quick as we can’. Marlowe (interview, 2012) also mentioned the priority to get news out ‘straight away’, even if there was no information available yet, which was perceived as particularly crucial during breaking news events:

The process is to ... tell the news straight away so, you’re going to look at creating an article as fast as you can ... even that might just be one line saying ‘four people have died in a crash on the Hume Highway’. Full stop, new paragraph, ‘more to come dot dot dot’, push that up straight away. And then as the story develops you’ll flesh out that article, so ... then it’s a matter of getting that onto the Frontpage. Once you’ve got that on the Frontpage you look at adding quality to the content with whoever you’re working with. So I might go to the News team and say, ‘hey we’ve got this Hume Highway crash story up can you put some pictures in there, can you get a video in there straight away and can you keep adding to the article as it develops’? Then as they do that obviously more comes out of the story that gives us more latitude to promote the story in different ways. As that information goes in we’ll look at different ways we can promote the story.

While Marlowe (interview, 2012) spoke about adding ‘quality’ to the content, he was referring to ‘quality’ in the form of more media (e.g. videos and pictures) as opposed to extended analysis or interpretation of events. As such, editorial efforts at Yahoo!7 were particularly focused on delivering news quickly, while trying to make the news as engaging as possible, as highlighted earlier in this chapter. As Nicholas (interview, 2012) mentioned: ‘The struggle ... with News ... it's the world’s biggest dilemma is
trying to deliver facts straight away ... putting the most important facts first without boring the shit out of people, to be honest’.

6.4 Summary

The previous chapter (Chapter 5) highlighted that the newsworkers operated within a work environment characterised by speed. An environment in which production routines consisted of ‘finding’ news stories online and reposting them on their site, while constantly trying to update them with images and video. The fast-paced 24-hour news cycle has created and intensified the news production requirements at Yahoo!7, leading to the production of an endless stream of news stories, across a range of topics.

This chapter has revealed that the kinds of information published in this online aggregated news environment prioritise crime, click bait and entertainment focused stories over politics and domestic issues. As a result, the content at Yahoo!7 News was: 1) predominately sourced from news agencies and/or news partners; 2) focused on engaging audiences, as opposed to informing them; and 3) responsive to the immediate requirements of its audience.

The following chapter (Chapter 7) will analyse the newsworkers’ perceptions of their audience using results from participant observation, interviews and content analysis in order to gain a better understanding of the audience’s role in news production and how the newsworkers’ opinions of their audience impacted on the work that they did.
Chapter 7: NEWWORKERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR AUDIENCE

The findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 have demonstrated: 1) the role of newworkers and their production routines (Chapter 5); and 2) the content of the digital aggregated news site (Chapter 6). This chapter will consider the newworkers’ perceptions of their audience, which impacted both on how they worked and the content that they produced. The results discussed in this chapter have been drawn from the content analysis of the site and social media, interviews and observational data. The implications of these perceptions will be analysed in the following Discussion and Conclusions chapter (Chapter 8) where they will be linked with the research literature synthesised in Chapter 3 (Literature Review). This will demonstrate how the findings from this study add to the body of research regarding online news production.

The data from this study indicates that, at Yahoo!7 News, opportunities for audiences to contribute to news content and options for audience feedback were limited. The presence of ‘Comment’ sections on Yahoo!7’s social media have made their production of news more democratic, in so far as the Yahoo!7 audience was able to use the spaces to criticise the news organisation, yet the newworkers did not often use social media to interact with their audience. Social media has also enabled audiences to choose what content they share, which has caused newworkers to rethink future story items in relation to how ‘shareable’ they were rather than how newsworthy. This chapter will demonstrate that the newworkers were not concerned with the opinions of their audience beyond their ability to click and share the Yahoo!7 News content. Rather, their audience was perceived by the newworkers as a group whose behaviour required control and management.

This third area of interest – how newworkers perceived their audience – has received little attention from academics, due to the overarching interest of scholars in the impact of online news on journalists and news content. In fact, with the exception of Singer et al. (2011) in the UK, who investigated journalists’ perceptions of their audience throughout the various stages of news production, this area remains largely uninvestigated. And yet, it was crucial to gauge newworkers’ perceptions of their audience, as it was these perceptions of what their audience ‘needed’ that shaped how they aggregated the news and the types of news content that were ultimately published.
7.1 The audience as an entity to be located, enticed and monetised

As the previous results chapters (Chapters 5 and 6) have shown, one of the most crucial objectives of the newworkers at Yahoo!7 News was to increase their audience share. The newworkers hoped that by increasing audience share the company would build its knowledge about its audience and on-sell this audience data to advertisers. This generated the perception of online news audiences as an entity that could be located, enticed and monetised. As such, the newworkers were responsible for developing strategies to increase audience share in order to achieve these goals. These strategies will now be discussed in turn in relation to how they impact on the newworkers perceptions of their audience.

7.1.1 Know the audience, find the audience = larger audience

One of the main strategies for increasing audience share was tracking the movement of their audience around the network to learn more about their interests and habits. As William (interview, 2011) highlighted, ‘we know a pretty scary amount about our audiences. We leave tags and beacons on a user’s [profiles] and every partner in the network’. Access to information about the movements, likes, dislikes and interests of their audience then enabled Yahoo!7 News to target advertising towards each person. As William (interview, 2011) explained further:

If someone is coming onto Total Travel [Australian travel website] for example, we know that they’re probably looking to book a holiday soon, so then we can sell that audience no matter where they go on our network to advertisers who want to target people who are booking a holiday.

Targeting advertisements towards particular people at strategic times in their purchasing cycles was perceived as important in a news ecosystem where the traditional revenue models had disappeared, since traffic and targeting figures could always be sold to advertisers.

The Yahoo!7 newworkers promoted the intricate knowledge they had about their audience to advertisers in a series of promotional videos on their website. In one video about the science of data collection – housed on the Yahoo!7 advertising website for advertisers to view – Yahoo!7 endorsed their use of ‘verified data’ as superior to that of their competitors and detailed how they tracked and targeted their audience with advertising specific to their needs. As this excerpt details:
Using verified data we know our audience, and how they match your [the advertisers’] audience, through data, not assumptions. We have more verification points than anyone else ... 1200 points where we track information like ads clicked on, commercial emails received and searches done. We know a person’s propensity to purchase by combining this verified data with their online activity, determining where in the purchase cycle they are ... We’ve also been successfully combining online and offline data for some time now. Partnering with market leaders in offline data to know a lot more than just a person’s postcode. Let’s look at a couple of examples. Meet Dan – three years ago he bought a new car. The brand that sold him the car know that he’s ready for an upgrade and by combining their data with Yahoo!7’s data we can find out exactly when he’s considering his next purchase and offer vehicles that suit him. We can find people who are similar to Dan, who are also in the market for a new car, and suddenly you can target at scale. We also know, with our offline verified data, that Dan is now married and has started a family, so his vehicle needs have changed. How does this all come together? We combine our database and our advertisers’ databases in a secure third-party data vault and encrypt them to create unique, individual, matchable IDs. We then match things like email address, phone number and street level address, to confirm it’s the same person, all in the safety of the data vault. It means our targeting products deliver the smartest audience connections (Yahoo!7, 2014a).

Combining Yahoo!7 data with third-party data to create a more holistic picture of a person reveals a level of sophisticated data collection that people may not be aware of and also raises concern about how Yahoo!7 used and managed this personal information.

This concern regarding privacy is supported by research, which reveals that many people do not read privacy policies or understand how their information is used by organisations. For example, the Pew Research Center found that half of Americans online did not even know what a privacy policy was (Smith, 2014). In fact, when asked if the following statement was true or false, 52 per cent of internet users in the US believed it was true: ‘When a company posts a privacy policy, it ensures that the company keeps confidential all the information it collects on users’ (Smith, 2014). In 2003, a survey by Professor Joseph Turow revealed that 57 per cent of respondents believed that when a website had a privacy policy it meant that the organisation would not share their personal information with other websites or companies (Smith, 2014).

During interviews, the newsworkers expressed unease about the amount of information they collected about their audience. As we have seen, one newsworker labelled the amount of information they managed as ‘scary’, signaling anxiousness about the privacy of their audience’s data. As the following explanation from William (interview, 2011) revealed:

... a lot of those people that [sic] shop at Coles [Australian supermarket] also come onto our network, so what we’re trying to do now is partner with organisations like that ... so
that we can then target users who are in Coles where they learn lots of information about them there, and then we can target them on our network. So increasingly you're going to see this data play out, whereby we collect as much information about users as we can, third parties collect it, we aggregate that together and learn even more about users, both online and offline behaviour – it’s a bit scary.

What is ‘scary’ is that audience metrics have been used by news organisations to make editorial decisions (Vu, 2013; Welbers, van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok and Schaper, 2015). And, in certain circumstances, these content decisions have been made in order to ‘harmonize with sponsors’ desires to sell their products’ (Turow, 2005, p. 104). This research supports these claims, as observations and interviews revealed that Yahoo!7 News was tailoring content to draw in advertisers and allowing these goals to drive editorial decisions.

These comments also reveal that the newsworkers were aware that audience tracking was important to increasing audience share. The newsworkers were cognisant that their audience may not fully understand what happened to their personal information and internet habits, hence William’s depiction of the data gathered on audiences’ as ‘scary’ (interview, 2011). Moreover, none of the newsworkers mentioned being responsible for informing audiences about how their information was used, stored and deleted by their news organisation. For their part, Yahoo!7 did have a privacy policy that outlined the details of personal information usage, including how and in what circumstances audience information would be shared with third parties. However, the length and legal jargon within this document made it inaccessible and unappealing to read and therefore it was questionable how aware their audience was of the details. With the increase in the extent of audience metrics online comes greater responsibilities on digital news organisations such as Yahoo!7 News to protect and use their audience data responsibly. Further investigation into the usage of personal information for monetary gain by news organisations could be an interesting and critical area for future studies. This discussion raises ethical issues about audience tracking for monetary gain, which will be explored further in the following Discussion and Conclusions Chapter (Chapter 8).

7.1.2 Content everywhere

Another strategy for increasing audience share was to have a wide breadth of content available in as many locations as possible. This was perceived by the newsworkers as being crucial to ongoing traffic growth and gaining a more detailed picture of their
audience’s habits across multiple devices. As one newworker commented, ‘increasingly we want to have our content available no matter where our audience is’ (William, interview, 2011). Newworker Louis (interview, 2012) echoed this sentiment:

Our strategy is content everywhere. So we want to make sure that our content is successful on whatever devices people are using ... at the moment our key one is the website, iOS app, Android app, but we’ve also got other platforms that we publish things to ... things like PumpTV, airport videos.

At the time this study was undertaken, Yahoo!7 content was available on most forms of communication including: online (desktop/laptop), iPhones, iPads, Android phones and tablets. Multiple points of data collection improved the capacity of Yahoo!7 News to provide factual data to their advertisers. It also enabled them to reach more people. As a result, from the perspective of the newworkers, their audience was a perpetually moving entity that could be tracked, found and followed if they could place their content in the right locations.

Newworker Charlotte (interview, 2011) emphasised how having content where there was an audience, any audience, enabled the company to access new audiences, ‘you also want to try and find new audience ... so there would be a group of people on Facebook who aren’t Yahoo!7 users, but if we can reach them we might bring some audience back to our sites’.

While having content everywhere was a good strategy for increasing audience share, this placed extra stress on newworkers who felt stretched trying to create, edit and upload content for all of the different platforms. When speaking about new platforms starting up and who would manage the content for these, the newworkers joked about how difficult it would be to add another platform into their workload, ‘a year ago we didn’t have the Android app so that was something that I didn’t have to look after whereas I have to look after that now so?’ (Louis, interview, 2012). These findings support arguments in the literature about newworkers feeling stressed about multitasking in a digital environment and managing their workloads (e.g. Bromley and O’Malley, 1997; Parker, 1995).

7.1.3 Better usability and the value of audience commentaries

While the newworkers sought to spread their content everywhere to find new audiences, they were also concerned with improving the existing site and systems to
keep their audience coming back to the network. The newsworkers perceived their audience as transient and disloyal in a digital news environment riddled with choice and new opportunities. As Charlotte (interview, 2011) highlighted, ‘you make it [the site] better for the people that are already there and the hope is that, if you’re making a really excellent, top market site then you’ll get new people in as well’. Oscar (interview, 2011) also envisaged the site becoming a ‘one-stop-shop’ for people, a ‘sort of destination for everything’, with ‘everything you need to know on that site’. The goal in this scenario was to keep the audience they already had on the network for the longest time possible and therefore to maximise the amount of traffic on the network at any one time. The newsworkers hoped that by improving the usability of the site they could encourage more audience engagement and become a more useful destination for information as opposed to a one-off click. Charlotte (interview, 2011) demonstrated the importance of always improving the site for their audience with the following statement:

> It’s about engagement and about making it useful to them [the audience], and making our sites useful. So if our News site was useful because a user can go on there and read a story they like and then send it to their friends, or write a comment about why they like it, that becomes more useful to them – and they’re likely to use it more and more often.

While this comment highlights improving the usability of the site as essential for driving traffic, it also points to the newsworkers’ perception of their audience as ‘sharers’ and ‘numbers’ rather than creators or contributors to news content. At Yahoo!7 News their audience was presented with opportunities to provide feedback and comments on the news content via social media, however these contributions were not perceived by the newssworkers as being particularly valuable in terms of their ability to generate a more in-depth discussion and analysis about news events. This lack of trust in their audience resulted in the newssworkers limiting audience interaction to social media and ‘Comment’ sections. This was a recurring theme noted in the researcher’s field notes during observations.

### 7.2 Audience not valued

Participant observation and interviews revealed that the newssworkers did not regard their audience as capable of making valuable contributions to their news content. Some newssworkers mentioned the success that other news organisations had found with user-generated content:

However, the newsworkers did not perceive content produced by their audience as useful for the future of Yahoo!7 News. One newsworker spoke about this in relation to previous attempts to include user-generated content on the site:

So we’ve trialled that [publishing user-generated content] a little bit … we’ve got a thing on there now … saying: ‘submit your stories here’ or ‘I’ve got a story here’ or bla bla bla. It gets a tiny amount [of traffic]. Our users don’t care, you know they’re not really engaged with news, they just want to read about entertainment (William, interview, 2011).

This comment is demonstrative of the perceptions that the newsworkers had of their audience. That is, firstly as people who were unable to produce content of value, and secondly as people who valued entertainment instead of hard news. These perceptions challenge the idealistic assumptions of authors such as Curran (2010) and Domingo (2008) who had envisaged a more active and democratic news system in the digital age – a news system in which audiences would challenge the status quo and take action to ‘support independent news production’ (Domingo, 2008, p. 472). Instead, the results from Yahoo!7 News signify the increasing focus on soft news, entertainment formats and celebrity news that Franklin (2010) predicted.

William’s sentiments also highlight that audience commentary was not valued at Yahoo!7. Therefore, Yahoo!7 News provided very limited, tightly controlled opportunities for people to interact with and contribute to their news stories. The few areas in which their audience was invited to provide feedback, comments or share a news story were via: 1) Facebook; 2) Twitter; 3) an email link at the top of each story; 4) the ‘Give Feedback’ link on the Yahoo!7 Frontpage and 7News National Homepage; and 5) polls. The newsworkers managed the Facebook and Twitter accounts for Yahoo!7 and 7News, while the other points of interaction (emails, feedback and polls) were managed by other administration employees at the organisation.

A review of the points of interaction between the newsworkers and their audience on Facebook and Twitter provides a better understanding of how the newsworkers perceived their audience, as these were the avenues through which the newsworkers interacted with them most directly. Firstly however, it is important to understand the
newsworkers’ perceptions of social media more broadly, since social media was the main avenue through which the newsworkers received feedback and information from their audience: about who they were; what they liked; and did not like.

When social media is referred to in this thesis, it is specifically referring to Facebook and Twitter, the social media sites used by Yahoo!7 News during data collection.

7.3 Newsworkers’ perceptions of social media

Overall, the newsworkers perceived Yahoo!7’s presence on social media as a necessary part of being a digital news provider in the 21st century. In 2016, the Pew Research Center found that the majority of US adults (62 per cent) got their news from social media, up from 42 per cent in 2012 (PRC, 2016). As one newsworker commented: ‘A lot of people just get it [their news] from Facebook now – from people who are linking through to different things. So, you just have to embrace it in my view’ (William, interview, 2011).

The newsworkers spoke about how they had increased their social media presence in the past few years in response to the movement of news audiences online and to the trend of people accessing news via social media. For example, Charlotte (interview, 2011) noted that, ‘we did have “Email a story” and I think we did have “Comment” but we certainly didn’t have the level of Facebook and Twitter that we’ve got now’. Louis (interview, 2012) also predicted that the trend towards accessing news from social media would continue, ‘social is still fairly small for us [in terms of traffic], although Facebook is now taking up quite a chunk ... we forecast that that trend upwards will probably continue’.

As highlighted in the Literature Review (Chapter 3), internet technologies, including social media, have been described as facilitators of a more democratic news system – a news system in which audiences are more involved in the creation, filtration, distribution and interpretation of news (Hermida et al., 2012). Social media in particular has been heralded as, ‘a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content’ (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).
Interviews revealed that Yahoo!7 News used social media for two overarching reasons. Firstly, as a way to find and distribute their content to new audiences. As William (interview, 2011) commented:

Facebook, Twitter ... they’re the only two that really matter ... We have a link, which enables a user to “like” a story immediately, so it appears automatically on their Facebook page, which is another distribution channel for us – whether they’ve linked to it or “liked” it, they might click on it – that’s key.

Secondly, social media was used to distribute news faster in order to take audience share from their competitors. Moreover, Charlotte (interview, 2011) explained: ‘It’s [Twitter’s] great for a journalist because you can write one line on Twitter and you’ve got a story up there and the race is always to get a story out first’. As already noted in Section 6.3, the newsworkers advised that if they were the first to publish a story on social media, it would cause their content to be pushed higher up in searches (e.g. Google) and to be shared more often.

Secondly, Yahoo!7 News used social media as a result of marketplace pressure to stay competitive. Authors such as Rosen (1999) have argued that social media has been an avenue for news organisations to grow their connections with their audience through increased and direct interaction. Facebook and Twitter enabled comments to be left on stories, content sharing and clicking to ‘Like’. In reality, social media was used by Yahoo!7 News as a way to track the consumption habits and usage of their audience, as well as being another measure of success. For example, the newsworkers checked social media audience figures when updating the site and these numbers were factored into their decisions about story placement (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). A story would be promoted to a better location on the site if it was popular – that is, shared – frequently and removed if it did not receive clicks or shares. To this extent, the Yahoo!7 News audience played a role in the distribution (i.e. sharing) of news content and, as we shall see, used the ‘Comments’ section to criticise and challenge their news. Yet, they did not take their interaction any further by, for example, conducting their own research regarding a topic with the intention of sharing this knowledge back with the community. Nor did they ‘challenge and provide alternative media discourses by putting forward competing idea and sources’ in the ‘Comments’ section as authors such as Graham and Wright (2015) had experienced at The Guardian (p. 333). At the time of investigation, these actions were not openly encouraged by the newsworkers since the overriding reason the newsworkers participated in social media was to increase
audience share, and because they felt that they had to in order to stay current (William, interview, 2011). As Graham and Wright (2015) have suggested, there is still more work to be done before the online news system can be described as wholly democratic.

The following section will review the newworkers’ perceptions of their audience and enable a discussion about how much they valued their audience, both as an audience and as potential content contributors, in the following Discussion and Conclusions chapter (Chapter 8).

7.4 Perceptions of their audience on Facebook and Twitter

For news organisations such as Yahoo!7 News, Facebook enabled newworkers to connect with, and find, people who might not necessarily already visit their site, and as this chapter has already shown, finding new readers for their content was an important aspect of the newworkers’ role. By posting news stories to Facebook, Yahoo!7 News was able to increase their chances of people viewing them by utilising the established features of the social network, including the ‘Like’, ‘Comment’ and ‘Share’ options. So if, for example, a Yahoo!7 audience member read a story that Yahoo!7 News had posted on Facebook, they could click to ‘Like’ this story. As a result, the friends of that person would be alerted to this action on their Facebook news feed. This action on behalf of their audience member would therefore provide Yahoo!7 with the opportunity to expose their content to a new audience member who could, in turn, share the content with their friends.

Facebook also enabled newworkers to connect with their audience via the ‘Comments’ boxes, which appeared underneath each story (see Figure 7.1). The Comments boxes could be used as an avenue for the newworkers to talk to their audience about news content, engage in debate and receive feedback. The newworkers acknowledged this strength,

social media ... it’s no longer a one-way communication ... from media companies communicating to audiences, it’s more of a two-way communication. So ...we get a lot of feedback, we get a lot of comments ... it gives people the opportunity to sort of vent or to just comment (Louis, interview, 2012).

However, an analysis of the comments on the Yahoo!7 News and 7News Facebook pages revealed that the newworkers did not use the Comments boxes to engage their audience in debate about significant social issues and/or start a conversation between
audiences. This was in part due to the time it would take the newsworkers to create and maintain meaningful interactions with their audience in their already busy work schedules. Instead, as Louis (interview, 2012) suggested, the Comments boxes were used by the Yahoo!7 News audience as a way to ‘vent’ with minimal intervention from the newsworkers. Observations revealed that this lack of interaction might have been a direct result of the newsworkers being time poor and/or the perception of the newsworkers that interacting with their audience at these points of contact would not result in more clicks.

Online comments were the most widely used medium for audience participation and public engagement with Yahoo!7 News, yet they also posed a complex challenge. The Yahoo!7 newsworkers raised concern about the poor quality of audience comments online, yet this concern was unmatched by the resources available to manage participation. Whilst the newsworkers did not like the content of the comments, which were generally characterised as rude, they had neither the time nor the resources to properly moderate them. This issue experienced by the newsworkers when moderating comments is discussed later in this section when the content of the comments is analysed.

The newsworkers allowed their audience to comment on the stories posted in this space and enter into dialogue with each other, however, during the period of analysis the
newsworkers themselves did not contribute to, or steer, discussion. In fact, the content analysis of the Yahoo!7 and 7News Facebook pages revealed only one instance in which the newsworkers responded to a comment made by an audience member on either page. In this case, Yahoo!7 had posted a story about one of their morning news presenters, Samantha Armytage, who had been labelled one of the sexiest women in Australia by magazine *Maxim* (see Figure 7.2). One person commented ‘She is very stunning’, to which Yahoo!7 replied ‘We agree’ (see Figure 7.2).

There is also an error in the story text of Figure 7.2, which perhaps exemplifies the time pressure placed on the newsworkers. It states, ‘P.S: We might be bias’. It should, of course, be ‘biased’. These small errors of syntax and grammar were most likely the result of the prioritisation of ‘immediacy’ and the lack of time to edit-check before publication.

![Figure 7.2](image)

*Response by Yahoo!7 to comment. Source: Yahoo!7 Facebook feed (2015).*

These findings suggest that the Yahoo!7 audience had very little to do with determining, or contributing to, the actual news content published on Yahoo!7. At Yahoo!7 News the newsworkers remained, what Schudson (2003) has called, the ‘dominant force in the public construction of common experience and a popular sense of what is real and important’ (p. 13). The newsworkers made all of the decisions about what content was posted to their social networking pages and how it was represented. At no point during the news production or publishing process did the newsworkers ask their audience to
contribute content, thoughts or ideas on a story. In fact, the lack of collaboration with their audience reveals that the newsworkers perceived themselves as news distributors. The traditional gatekeeping model of news production, hypothesised by White (1950), is therefore still relevant to digital aggregated news sites such as Yahoo!7 News. However, this research also shows that content decisions at Yahoo!7 were based on what Vu (2013) has termed the ‘audience factor’, or what their audience click on.

During interviews, the newsworkers acknowledged that their social media offering could be improved, expressing interest in increasing their social media presence. As one newsworker commented: ‘I think that’s definitely a growing area that we’re looking to sort of improve our social media presence and how we can utilise that audience’ (Louis, interview, 2012). This demonstrates that the newsworkers had an understanding about news as what Hermida, Fletcher, Korell and Logan (2012) described as an ‘emerging form of cultural currency on social networks’ (p. 817). Interestingly, however, the newsworkers did not mention improving their social media offering in order to, for example, nurture a new ‘networked public sphere’ as hypothesized by Hermida et al. (2012) or support the formation of stronger ‘social ties’ between members of the public (Donath and Boyd, 2004). Rather, the newsworkers were interested in utilising the social media audience to leverage their content, which again exemplifies the overarching perception the newsworkers have of their audience, as an entity to be found and monetised.

In regard to the content of the comments that the Yahoo!7 audience left on the Yahoo!7 News and 7News Facebook pages, these ranged from: criticism about story content, for example, ‘Cutting edge journalism ... not’; to brief feelings about a topic, for example, ‘Freaky!’; to criticism and support of each other’s thoughts and opinions, for example, ‘You idiot it was staged’, and, ‘Person One: local sewer works would be better; Person Two: I was just going to write the same thing’ (Facebook Content Analysis, 2015). The Facebook content analysis also unveiled racism and criticism targeted at the intellectual level of other people. The following excerpt of comments from a story about Deputy Mayor of Auburn (a region of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia) Salim Mehajer, who had been arrested by police for offences, displays both forms of criticism – intellectual and racial. In this example, Person Two was bullied for having an Arabic name, while Person One was critiqued for his incorrect use of grammar, and by inference their intellect:
COMMENT:

**Person One** [English name]: If it was a Aussie they would of been forced to resign by now

REPLIES:

**Person Two** [Arabic name]: If it was a white Australian, he would have been forced to resign, or, he would have resigned by now.

**Person One** [English name]: Exactly this is a joke

**Person Two** [Arabic name]: Pls [Please] write proper english.

**Person Two** [Arabic name]: You are not the first one i am seeing who writes "would of"

**Person Three** [English name]: But in essence i agree with you, he needs to resign now;

**Person Four** [English name]: Person Two you spelt your name wrong

**Person Three** [English name]: Lol [laughing out loud]

**Person Two** [Arabic name]: Wow so many of you trying to defend his bad english lolzz [laughing out loud lots]

**Person Two** [Arabic name]: There is a difference between typo errors when using phone to write and grammar mistakes. But carry on keep defending

**Person One** [English name]: Who cares the way things are going we will be learning Arabic

**Person Three** [English name]: I am on a mobile. I wasn’t defending his grammar, I was offended by your picking up on it when your own writing is comparatively worse

**Person Four** [English name]: Durka durka, muhammad Jihad, bukala

**Person One** [English name]: ^ amen aloha snack bar

**Person Five** [English name]: (crying with laughter emoji)

**Person Six** [English name]: If it was a Aussie guy if it were an Arab guy or maybe even a Chinese guy? Get over it lol [laughing out loud];

**Person Seven** [Arabic name]: Regardless of his origin, he should have been sacked long ago. That sort of behaviour is appalling.

**Person One** [English name]: ^my point

Defamatory and negative comments such as these caused the newworkers to develop negative feelings about their audience and their ability to make valuable contributions
to their news content. For example, during observations, newsworker Thea told the researcher that she had learnt to post only ‘happy stories’ on Facebook following a barrage of racist comments from their audience on a story she had posted about a man of Asian descent who had choked on a biscuit. Following this incident, she advised the researcher that she had done her best ‘to post a positive story’ to avoid such unpleasant commentary and potentially legal issues for Yahoo!7 (Thea, Field Note, 28 November, 2012).

On another occasion during observations, Thea also spoke about a woman who had ‘named and blamed’ a man for sexually assaulting her in the comments section of a story about a rapist that she had posted on Facebook (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). The newsworker responded by removing the comment from Facebook, yet this had the effect of the woman filling the Yahoo!7 Facebook page with abusive comments regarding the removal of the comment. In the end, Thea resolved the situation by asking the woman for her phone number. Thea then told the researcher that she called the woman and explained that she had to remove the comment because if someone had seen the comment, which contained the address details of the man, and ‘gone over to his house and shot him in the face’ Yahoo!7 would have been liable (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). After recounting this story, Thea told the researcher that she was frustrated that the public did not know about the laws that they were breaching when they were writing these kinds of defamatory comments (Field Note, 28 November, 2012). This sense of frustration with their audience surrounding the negative, defamatory and abusive comments posted on Facebook was a recurrent theme raised by the newsworkers during interviews and while being observed.

In a document that outlined the roles and responsibilities of each newsworker, broken down by shift (i.e. Yahoo!7 News Shift Descriptions, 2012), the newsworkers acknowledged that part of their role involved monitoring their audience’s comments on the Facebook pages and removing any of these negative or defamatory remarks. One newsworker explained that, ‘when someone launches a story, their job is to drive engagement. So that means galleries, video, all that sort of thing, then also to monitor the comments ... they’ve got to keep monitoring them, go back every 10 minutes to make sure they get rid of all the crap ones’ (Louis, interview, 2012). However, the Facebook content analysis revealed that negative and/or defamatory commentaries were left on both Facebook pages days after the stories and comments had been posted.
Following is an excerpt of some comments that were left by their audience on a story posted about a young woman who was frozen alive in an ice chamber. These comments would have been very hurtful to the family and friends of the young woman who passed away in the incident and should have been removed by the newsworkers in their process of checking social media comments:

**COMMENT:**

**Person One:** Person One: That's pretty cold blooded. Sends chills up my spine ... That's not the traditional way of having eggs frozen ... And to think Walt Disney payed [sic] millions for the same treatment ... I'll see myself out (walking away emoji)

**REPLIES:**

**Person Two:** Poor taste ... but funny (winking face, tongue out emoji) three Likes)

**Person Three:** I think the fact it's in such poor taste is why the giggle slips (monkey face covering eyes emoji and crying with laughter emoji (five Likes)

**Person Four:** Her favourite movie was frozen (seven Likes)

**Person Five:** You're all so cold hearted (eight Likes)

**Person One:** Unfortunately [Person Five] no matter how hard I try my heart will never be 10 hours frozen cold (six Likes)

**Person Two:** (crying with laughter emoji)

**Person Six:** I've got frost bites all over (one Like)

**Person Seven:** Very poor (one Like)

Another brief excerpt of negative comments left on a story by the newsworkers described the increased risk of depression for men over the height of 5 foot 8 inches:

**COMMENT:**

**Person One:** From a statistical perspective there are a lot of men under 5'9 so therefore capturing a large percentage of men who are generally at risk anyway. What a load of statistical B _ _ _ S _ _ T.

**COMMENT:**

**Person Two:** Who writes this fucking crap

**COMMENT:**

**Person Three:** Fucken [sic] idiots
This example of negative comments left by the Yahoo!7 audience on Facebook was demonstrative of how the audience criticised the newswokers and their selection and presentation of news. However, as a result of the derogatory tone used, these comments were not taken seriously by the newswokers, nor did they cause the newswokers to reflect on and question the stories they published.

As already noted on p. 149, negative comments such as those above, which remained on the Yahoo!7 News and 7News Facebook pages days after being posted, could also be in part explained by the demanding work schedules of the newswokers, which did not allow much time for comment moderation in between their other daily tasks. When asked about how frequently they updated social media, the newswokers responded with vague timeframes that eluded to the time pressures they were placed under. For example, Thea commented that she updated the site and moderated comments ‘as much as I can’ (Thea, Field Note, 28 November, 2012), while another noted that she updated ‘when I get the chance’ (Freya, interview, 2012). These comments demonstrate that other tasks such as publishing news content were prioritised by the newswokers ahead of comment moderation or interacting with their audience on social media. This has created an online news environment in which the chances of democratic exchange between newswoker and their audience were limited. Perhaps, however, if the newswokers took more time to interact with their audience, encouraging them to share perspectives and research, audiences would begin to develop relationships and foster a more inclusive and open online environment.

Unlike Facebook, Twitter updates required comparably less work for the newswokers because there were no comments to moderate. Twitter enabled the newswokers to see how much the audience was engaging with the content, in terms of how many times their ‘tweets’ (updates), had been ‘retweeted’ (shared), as well as how many times a story had been ‘Liked’. However, while the functioning of Twitter enabled audiences to ‘reply’ to tweets from the newswokers, at the time of writing these replies were not displayed on the Yahoo!7 or 7News Twitter pages. In this regard, the newswokers commented on how they liked Twitter because it enabled them to see how much traction their story was getting, without having to manage and moderate comments from the public. As Sophia commented during observations, ‘Twitter is a good way [to receive] direct feedback and it’s pretty easy to do’ (Field Note, 23 August, 2011).
The newworkers described the use of Twitter as crucial to boosting audience numbers in an era when the audience was not necessarily home for the 6pm broadcast of the news. As Nicholas (interview, 2012) explained, ‘we send out links ... on Twitter ... [so] that we know that if they couldn’t make it on TV they would [still be able to] catch it all with us’. This comment demonstrates that the newworkers perceived their audience as transient which, as this thesis has already shown, has led Yahoo!7 to prioritise the publication of news stories in as many locations as possible, as frequently as possible, to reach this on-the-go audience. The comment also alludes to the priority of the newworkers to keep the audience on the Yahoo!7 network. Sharing their content via social media was perceived as one way in which the newworkers could achieve this, as it gave their audience more ways to access and share their content.

The data from the observations revealed that it had been only recently that newworkers had become interested in Twitter because, as Sophia highlighted, ‘[it only generated] a very small number of clicks’ (Sophia, Field Note, 23 August, 2011). More recently, their news content was receiving more engagement on Twitter – as measured via the number of retweets and click-throughs on the links posted in the tweets – and as a result Yahoo!7 News had started to prioritise the use of the social media. Newworker Marlowe supported this finding when he commented during observations that they tried to push their best stories through Twitter. The aim, he explained, was to promote the content from the news website, engage the audience and get new people to their sites. He claimed that they updated the Twitter content regularly to achieve this (Field Note, 28 November, 2012).

Interestingly, however, an analysis of the Yahoo!7 Twitter accounts revealed that the news stories posted on both the 7News (@Y7News) and the Yahoo!7 News pages (@Yahoo!7) received minimal ‘Shares’ and ‘Likes’. With regard to the 7News account, most of the posts were not shared and the story that received the most shares was shared only 21 times and liked 20 times (see Figure 7.3). This is a very small amount of shares considering the newworkers’ perceived importance of Twitter to increasing audience share.

The figure was even less for the stories that appeared on the Yahoo!7 Twitter page. Most stories posted received no shares or likes, with a story about an adult film performer being the 11th woman to come forward to accuse Donald Trump, President
of the United States of America, of inappropriate conduct, receiving the most shares (two) and likes (one) (see Figure 7.4).

**Figure 7.3**

*Most shared story on 7News National Twitter page @7News. Source: 7News Twitter feed (2016).*

**Figure 7.4**

*Most shared story on Yahoo!7 Twitter page @Yahoo!7. Source: Yahoo!7 Twitter feed (2016).*

### 7.5 Summary

Social media has opened up new spaces for audiences to interact which, if used in particular ways, could disrupt traditional ‘authorial structures’ and established flows of
communication, as suggested in the literature (e.g. Hermida et al., 2012; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). However, this discussion about the newworker/audience interaction on Facebook and Twitter has shown that while social media has the ability to enable audiences to create and exchange content and challenge traditional news flows, the newworkers at Yahoo!7 News still controlled the information that was posted: they chose what to publish; where to publish; in what way; and were also ultimately in control of the comments left by their audience on social media.

Overall, the newworkers’ perceptions of their audience – formulated through these interactions on social media – indicated that they did not value their contributions. In fact, the newworkers frequently said that they regarded the comments from their audience on social media as ignorant and uninformed. As opposed to being generative of democratic debate, the newworkers perceived interaction between audience members with their stories as more work for them as they did not trust their audience to create content of high quality. Consequently, the audience was given limited, tightly controlled areas of interaction on the site and social media (e.g. Facebook comments). These findings appear counterintuitive to the persistence of the newworkers to find a larger audience for their news stories, since greater interaction would undoubtedly foster a better and more trusted connection between the newworkers and their audience, generate brand loyalty, and encourage sharing. The time-poor newworkers, however, could not commit to, or steadily maintain responses to their audience, because of the nature of their work and the constant demands for new content, which was characteristic of the digital news cycle. The newworkers’ key performance indicators were based on audience numbers as opposed to audience interaction and, therefore, they prioritised the stories on their site, how they were presented and refreshed. The following Discussion and Conclusions chapter (Chapter 8) will discuss the implications of these perceptions.
Chapter 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented and analysed in the previous three Results chapters (i.e. Chapters 5, 6 and 7) outlined the role of the newsworthiness and newsroom practices, the production of news content and the newsworthiness’ perceptions of their audience at Yahoo!7 News. The analysis provided information pertaining to the production and presentation of news at an aggregated digital news site. Three dominant issues emerged:

1. The newsworthiness acted as gatekeepers, tightly controlling the outflow of news by limiting the involvement of the Yahoo!7 News audience with the content they generated;

2. Success was perceived through a prism of the ‘race to be first’, which caused newsworthiness to prioritise and value speed and immediacy;

3. The newsworthiness felt that their roles as news producers were not highly valued by the traditional 7News journalists.

This chapter will discuss the implications of these findings by linking them with the research literature synthesised in Chapter 3 (Literature Review), in order to demonstrate how they add to the body of research regarding online news production. As such, at the conclusion of this chapter we move to answer the research question: How can the study of an Australian aggregated news site (Yahoo!7 News) contribute to our understanding of digital aggregated news production? The discussion in this chapter will thus focus on and extend the three issues through consideration of how:

1. Newsworthiness as ‘gatekeepers’ perpetuate a traditional top-down approach of news production, which limited the ideal of interactivity and created a perception of Yahoo!7 News audiences as unreliable and in need of management;

2. The high value placed on speed and immediacy has impacted the democratising potential of Yahoo!7 News and also perpetuated a reliance on news agency and partner sources and soft/entertainment focused news;

3. The newsworthiness’ perceptions of their role as inferior to their 7News counterparts had caused professional identity issues and a perceived devaluing of aggregated newwork.
8.1 Newsworkers as gatekeepers

The data from the observations and interviews in this study indicated that gatekeeping was a central process in the creation of aggregated newwork as the newsworkers were tasked with making all of the decisions about content, from story selection and placement, to the wording of headings, subtitles and tweets. Contemporary literature regarding the structure, function and role of online news sites also suggested a trend towards gatekeeping at online news sites more broadly (see Anderson, 2013) even though scholars such as Malmelin and Villi (2015) had suggested that gatekeeping was no longer relevant in the increasingly democratic digital news system.

The continuation of gatekeeping by the newsworkers challenges the democratising potential of the internet and therefore supports the arguments of second- and third-wave online news researchers (e.g. Deuze et al., 2004; Kenny et al., 2000; Van der Wurff and Lauf, 2005), who claimed that online news has yet to live up to the ‘digital golden era’ predictions made by first-wave authors (e.g. Boczkowski, 2004; Pavlik, 2001). Yahoo!7, for example, has not utilised the capacity of digital technologies and the internet to improve their critical and in-depth reporting of major news events, or to increase the levels of interactivity with their audience outside of the tightly controlled areas of communication set up and managed by the newsworkers themselves, such as the ‘Comments’ section at the end of each news story.

The data from this study indicated that the newsworkers did not have the time or the resources to undertake traditional journalistic work in the fast-paced and demanding online news environment. This points to a structural work issue that has been noted by ethnographers at many online newsrooms (see Anderson, 2013a; Paterson and Domingo, 2011). The finding that newsworkers act as gatekeepers also contradicts Bruns’ (2005) ‘gatewatching’ newsgathering and publishing model, which suggested that in the digital era, the role of the traditional gatekeeper was not relevant. It was Bruns’ (2005) contention that in a more open and collaborative model of news production, ‘gatewatching’ enabled digital news organisations to ‘watch’ the flow of information, allowing people to add their own information to the content they curated, turning the whole process into a shared, fluid project. The findings from this study show, however, that although the newsworkers at Yahoo!7 did paste together information from a number of different sources, at no point during the production
process did the newsworkers create space for their audience to contribute to their stories. They selected the stories for publication; they were the only ones to add and update their content; they decided whether or not a story would go on social media; and they chose to keep or delete a comment on their site or social media. The audience was encouraged by newsworkers to share and comment on the stories on their website and via social media, however, their comments had little impact on decisions about any future news content. Reading the comments made by their audience was a routinised activity done by newsworkers each shift with the specific aim to delete inappropriate or offensive comments and manage their audience.

There were a few reasons attributed by the newsworkers as to why they needed to maintain their role as gatekeepers. Firstly, the newsworkers claimed that the quality and credibility of their product would be threatened if they allowed their audience to contribute to their content. The perception amongst the newsworkers was that contributions from their audience would not add value and would require a disproportionate amount of time to check, edit and manage. That the newsworkers had such a low regard for their audience’s ability to create content of value indicates a basic distrust of their audience. These feelings of distrust, however, were in stark contrast to their feelings towards their audience as consumers of their content. As consumers or ‘numbers’, the newsworkers highly valued their audience, and every effort was made to connect with them on multiple devices and entice them to click, share and access their news each day (e.g. William, interview, 2011). The newsworkers were therefore happy to interact with their audience on their terms, to achieve the outcomes that they wanted. Outside of these parameters, where the newsworkers could not predict what the audience’s responses and reactions would be, the newsworkers were cynical about their audience, and their ability to provide useful and valuable input. The newsworkers perceived a strong viewer and client focus as essential to the success of Yahoo!7 News, however, improvements to their product were driven first by the monetary gain.

The findings from Yahoo!7 News thus concur with those of Heinonen (2011) and challenge the assumption that the internet has been an enabler of a more active audience. At Yahoo!7 News the newsworkers still very much perceived their readers as traditional audiences, rather than as contributors, collaborators, co-workers or reflectors (Heinonen, 2011). As outlined earlier (see Section 5.1), the nature of their work was prohibitive in this way as there were structural issues around time and
resources that did not allow the newsworkers opportunity to cultivate their audience. Future research, including in-depth observation of management, would enable more discussion around the role and interests of this powerful group with regard to audience interaction, and provide insight into how the motivations of management shape the activities and perceptions of the newsworkers, or the ‘underdogs’ (Gouldner, 1973).

The same trend of distrust existed across Yahoo!7 News’ social media accounts. The newsworkers did not trust their audience to respond appropriately to stories posted on social media and/or generate interesting debate about their news topics on either Twitter or Facebook. Their audience’s unreliability on these forums was used by the newsworkers as a reason for not allowing them to contribute to the site.

In this regard, the newsworkers at this digital aggregated news site classified their news audience in a different way to traditional news organisations such as The Guardian newspaper whose audiences, the newsworkers believed, were ‘engaged’ with the news, had informed opinions about public happenings, and thus could create and add content of value (William, interview, 2011). William described these traditional news audiences as ‘quality’ and ‘more engaged’ (William, interview, 2011).

When interviewed, William (interview, 2011) also alluded to the second reason that the newsworkers maintained their role as gatekeepers, which was the newsworkers’ perception that user-generated content would be unpopular and not generate money for the site. He claimed that:

I don’t think you’ll ever see it [user-generated content] really being a hit on general news ... like Yahoo!7 News or ninemsn’. During the interviews, the newsworkers mentioned that they had tried different forms of user-generated content in the past – in the form of submissions from the audience via email and the use of blogs – yet none of these had ‘worked’ for the site in terms of generating an increased audience (William, interview, 2011).

This, once again, signals the newsworkers’ lack of interest and investment in projects that were not guaranteed to generate a monetary benefit.

Consequently, there was a tension between providing their audience with opportunities for interactivity and the desires of the newsworkers to increase audience share. Overall, however, the newsworkers did not seem to be conflicted by this tension as they chose to limit their interaction with their audience because of the additional time required to attend to audience contributions. For the newsworkers, the production of aggregated news necessitated their role as gatekeepers to make quick decisions, curate
content, and to ensure that this information was kept up to date. They indicated that allowing audience participation in this process would disrupt their news production flow and slow the process down. Consequently, immediacy was prioritised over other news values, such as interactivity. This concept will be explored further in the next section regarding speed and immediacy as a feature of digital aggregated news production at Yahoo!7 News.

The limitation of interactivity was the newworkers’ way of maintaining control over the production process and ensuring completion of their other daily tasks. The newworkers had, at the time of data collection, found a balance between interactivity and making optimal clicks which monetised their production routines. Therefore, as a way to maintain their professional status, and to avoid a costly practice in terms of time and resources, of vetting their audience’s content, gatekeeping was a practical reality of their news production system.

Not investing in this kind of interactivity appears counterintuitive to recent trends in audience online research, which have suggested that Australians are increasingly seeking interaction with their online news content (Digital News Report, 2018). Subsequently, by remaining as gatekeepers, the newworkers kept their audience at a distance, controlling the content and flow at which their news was produced and published. This could also be viewed as the newworkers acting to marginalise those parts of their audience that perhaps wanted to contribute yet did not have a means to do so. If finding larger audiences was their main priority, not prioritising more interactivity through methods such as user-generated content did not align with this goal. Instead, they prioritised controlling the content of the site to keep their workflow at a manageable level.

This discussion about the gatekeeping strategy of Yahoo!7 News thus reveals that at this digital aggregated news site the top-down, one-to-many, traditional news media approach to news production was perpetuated. As other ethnographic studies have found (e.g. Møller Hartley, 2011), with the exception of the speed at which online news is delivered, the strategies for news production remain relatively similar to that of traditional commercial newsrooms. Consequently, despite the potential of a more open and democratic space, there was hesitancy about introducing user-generated content because of the perceived uninterest of their audience in making contributions, distrust regarding how audiences would receive it, and the perception that audience content
would not be popular enough to generate additional ‘Clicks’. In addition, tight production schedules and time pressures contributed to reluctance surrounding the quest for more interactivity, as further work was already received regretfully by newsworkers. Thus, if the Yahoo!7 News audience wanted to contribute to news they would have to seek out other news sites that enabled this, or publish their own content online.

8.2 The race to be first

The findings from this research reveal that at this digital aggregated news organisation the newsworkers were mostly concerned with publishing news to gain audience share. This constant race to be first to publish meant that the newsworkers did not concern themselves with how this impacted on the quality of their news product.

The findings from this study have therefore more aligned with the arguments of authors such as Domingo (2008) and Møller Hartley (2011) who claimed that at online commercial news sites, speed and immediacy were prioritised over other news values such as interactivity and in-depth quality news reporting. The prioritisation of immediacy led to the prevalence of certain kinds of news. That is, news that was heavily sourced from news agencies and partners and soft/general entertainment news. This section will analyse each of these characteristics at Yahoo!7 News in order to develop a better understanding of how the findings from Yahoo!7 relate to broader debates about online news production.

8.2.1 Agency and partner content

As the Literature Review (Chapter 3) revealed, the reliance of commercial news organisations on agency content has been a trend that scholars (e.g. Curran, 2010; Franklin, 1997; Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008; Manning, 2008) have noticed happening across news more broadly for decades. However, it appears as though digital news has exacerbated the use, with the content analysis of Yahoo!7 News revealing that 91 per cent of stories across the Yahoo!7 News websites analysed were from news agency and partner websites. This increase in reliance on agencies can be attributed to the increase in content demands on news organisations and the need for fast, fresh content 24 hours a day.
One of the main concerns amongst researchers, commentators, authors, and industry bodies such as the MEAA, regarding the escalation in use of agency content, was that it could be directly linked to increased pressure on journalists to produce more news, more frequently, sometimes across a variety of formats (MEAA, 2010). Other concerns focused on the loss of jobs for journalists resulting from an increase in reliance on news agency copy (MEAA, 2010). The findings from this project confirm similar trends in news content and professional pressure at Yahoo!7 News, with relative complacency on behalf of the organisation and the newsworkers. During data collection, the use of agency and partner content had become part of the Yahoo!7 News production routine and the pressure to find and update content was a normalised side effect of working at a digital aggregated news site. These side effects were described to the researcher by newsworkers as part of their job and not raised by the newsworkers as something that needed fixing or attention from management.

The speed of news delivery online and the resultant use of agency content had implications for the morale of some of the newsworkers, who had aspirations for more traditional journalistic-type roles in the future, and felt that they were being undervalued by the organisation. These newsworkers did not feel supported by their organisation to produce original content as a result of the prioritisation of the organisation to be first to publish and increase their audience share. This particular aspect of concern has not been the focus of investigations about news agencies to date and, therefore, the impact of the news agency reliance on newsworkers perceptions of their work could be an interesting area of future research.

Even though the newsworkers would have liked to create and write more content, overall, they did not appear concerned about not having ownership of the stories that they worked on. Their team was made aware of who had found the stories that had been clicking particularly well, for example via emails from managers, and this internal recognition seemed to create a shared sense of contribution to the site. This general feeling of working as a team was important to the daily operation of Yahoo!7 News. For example, if one newsworker was busy and could not work on a story, then another could take over and publish it with relative ease. Individuals were not singled out for their writing skills, rather there was a sense that the team worked together and did what was needed to produce the content for the site.
Existing research regarding news agencies has, however, raised concern about the impact of excessive use of agency content on news diversity (e.g. Boumans, Trilling, Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden, 2018; Johnston and Forde, 2011). One of the major news agencies, AAP, was owned by the three leading Australian news organisations – Fairfax (47 per cent), News Corporation (45 per cent) and Seven West Media (8 per cent), which had effectively led to a substantial percentage of Australia’s commercial online news organisations sharing the same material. So, while the breadth of information on the internet may seem limitless, the news available has been relatively homogeneous, at least on commercial news websites. In support of the findings from other online news contexts (e.g. Quandt, 2008), this study has therefore shown that the dominance of news agencies has narrowed the scope of content available to audiences, creating a more homogeneous news product while reducing the presence of diverse opinions. In this context news agencies have become empowered and positioned as the first gatekeepers of daily news at Yahoo!7.

While debate continues surrounding the impact of a more homogeneous news product on the public’s ability to carry out their watchdog function (see Boczkowski and deSantos, 2007), some authors have argued that digital news more broadly has destroyed the public’s ability to carry out these democratic duties (e.g. Schudson, 1998). This research project did not specifically note any instances of recirculating inaccurate reporting, however there has been some indication by the research of other authors such as Johnston and Forde (2011) that privileging news agency content could lead to trends in the publication of poor-quality content. The findings from this study support this claim, as the newworkers observed and interviewed did not fact-check the information coming to them from news agencies with any regularity. The content was assumed by the newworkers to have already gone through a process of verification by the agencies, which has implications for the validity of news.

Interviews with the newworkers suggested that there was an expectation that information from the social media accounts of their audience members and unverified news organisations should be fact-checked. As discussed in Chapter 6, the newworkers voiced concern about content from the web and the audience as unreliable or amateur. However, they indicated that copying and pasting content from their news agency and partner contacts was in fact a standard and accepted practice at Yahoo!7 News. Not checking agency and partner content suggests that the newworkers
perceived information published by these sources as more reliable than information from outside their network or unverified social media accounts. For the newworkers, the ability to republish content from their agency and partner contacts enabled faster, more efficient content publication and higher results on search engines. This legitimacy given to the filtering processes of Yahoo!7’s agencies and partners was confirmed by the interview with Oscar (interview, 2011) who spoke of then parent company, Yahoo!, as being the most influential and/or trustworthy of Yahoo!7’s partners because their content was ‘just something that we can just lift and republish on our site’. It was time saving and convenient for the newworkers to publish information without checking it because it sped up the process of publication, which was critical for the time-poor newworkers who had masses of content to search through and other tasks to complete, for example photo and video editing.

There was also a perception amongst the newworkers that what they posted online could be easily removed and, therefore, the publication of inaccurate information was not considered to be an overwhelming problem. In fact, the newworkers were not concerned with how the use of agency and partner content impacted upon the democratic functioning of their news product. These perceptions signal a change in news values as immediacy has taken priority over accuracy and high-quality reporting in the online news world.

The high level of credibility attributed to news agencies as sources of information and the ability to take down content with ease has enabled potentially inaccurate information to be disseminated to a wide and content-hungry audience. Coupled with the dominant focus of the organisation on immediacy, it is argued here that news quality and diversity on digital aggregated news sites such as Yahoo!7 News may be under threat, or at the very least in need of closer monitoring.

For contemporary news audiences, concern has been mounting regarding the production and mass dissemination of fake news online (PRC, 2016). The credibility given to news agencies by Yahoo!7 is worrying in this regard as it diminishes the newworkers’ ability to distinguish between real and fake news. The high level of public concern about fake news that has been raised in recent news media research (e.g. PRC, 2016) was not considered in the newworkers’ daily production routines. This, however, is an area that could be investigated more directly in future research projects and would enable a better gauge of the level of concern that newworkers have
regarding fake news and their processes, if any, to prevent the publication of it. This could be beneficial for alleviating any concerns of the public.

Complications of legitimacy also arise if the source of the story is not attributed correctly by the news organisation, for example in a byline. News content can be easily plagiarised if news organisations are not transparent about where they received their information. For their part, Yahoo!7 News attributed their stories to the sources of the information. Bylines read (e.g.) ‘AAP’ or ‘AAP and Yahoo!7’, which showed their audience that content was either from AAP or copied from AAP and edited and/or added to by Yahoo!7. However, the name of the reporter from AAP was not often included. As outlined in Chapter 6, the content analysis revealed that only 36 per cent of the stories published could be attributed to an individual author. In publishing only the name of the company who provided the information, the Yahoo!7 audience did not know who their news was coming from, for example the credentials of the reporter and/or journalist, or who may have contributed to it, which could cause confusion amongst their audience.

8.2.2 Soft/entertainment news

As the Literature Review (Chapter 2) outlined, a longstanding debate amongst scholars has surrounded the quality of news and its deterioration to a ‘lesser’ form of entertainment or tabloid style (e.g. Bromley, 1997; Costera Meijer, 2012; Otto, Glogger, and Boukes, 2016). One of the fears of these authors has been that online news has worsened the state of affairs – creating a news environment in which click bait – ‘soft’ or ‘entertainment’ focused news – is much more prevalent than ‘hard’ or ‘politically’ focused news (e.g. Bromley, 1997; Ursell, 2001). Other authors such as Baum and Jamison (2006) have maintained, however, that reading some ‘soft’ news was better than reading no news at all.

The data from this study goes some way to supporting the arguments of Bromley (1997) as it too shows that the majority of the content produced on this digital aggregated news site was soft/entertainment-focused news, or click bait. There were a few reasons for this. Most notably, as we have seen, the value of the work of the newsworkers was seen through this prism of the race to be first which, to a large extent, determined whether their site was considered successful or not. Everything that the newsworkers did was focused on achieving greater audience share. They strove to find
and publish stories before their competitors. They engaged their audience with video and images to keep them on their network for longer periods of time. They shared their stories on social media to get more views and content shares. They moved stories around the site to try to attract more people to it. They changed headlines and images to make them catchier and to entice people to click on them.

The prevalence of this kind of content has been explained by authors such as Bird (2009) as the result of a news media system that has undergone major technological change while facing increased fragmentation and competition. Entertainment-style news was, by its nature, cheaper to produce and, for some, more engaging than political news. For Yahoo!7 News, soft/entertaining news was a way for them to reach a larger audience, increase their click-throughs and gain more display advertising dollars. Yahoo!7’s continued reliance on display advertising, despite the breakdown of these traditional economic models at offline news organisations more broadly, was exemplary of an online news organisation that was fighting to maintain audience share, stay current and in business. In addition, the newsworkers received internal status based on their ability to generate audience share. As soft news achieved these critical short-term goals, the news produced at Yahoo!7 would remain focused on entertainment news, as this was what generated clicks and audience share.

From the perspective of the newsworkers, it was their audience who demanded soft news content. So, even though the newsworkers were the gatekeepers of the content, they were somewhat bound by their audience’s demands. As a result, the newsworkers rationalised their heavy focus on soft news by claiming that they were merely giving the audience what they wanted which was ‘bullshitty soft news’ (William, interview, 2011). With the exception of a few newsworkers who mentioned that they found it difficult to find a balance between the soft news that received clicks and the hard news that people needed to know, observations showed that the newsworkers prioritised speed over informing their audience.

Some newsworkers did, however, struggle with the entertainment-style content of Yahoo!7 News and commented on how constantly working to improve ratings made them feel trapped in an entertainment news cycle. As such, this general feeling of powerlessness surrounding content decisions was still evident. The newsworkers did not recognise that they, by posting soft news stories, were thereby encouraging their audience to continue clicking on these kinds of story. They had low expectations of
their audience in terms of their consumption of hard news content, and therefore the newsworkers were playing their part in keeping their audience’s tastes in line with these sorts of soft news stories. Most newsworkers therefore accepted click bait stories as a feature of their everyday digital aggregated newswork. This point was exemplified in the stories that they published, which showed that overall the newsworkers did not publish a lot of hard news stories. Consequently, their audience was not given the chance to click on more serious news topics and the cycle of soft news continued.

Of course, one of the major concerns regarding the prevalence of soft news, on commercial news websites as popular as Yahoo!7 News, was that citizens who get most of their information in this form cannot enact their democratic ‘duties of citizenship’ (Zaller, 2003, p. 110). For Schudson (1998), soft news was in opposition to the ‘Full News’ standard, which, he explained, included comprehensive news coverage of public affairs with the aim of producing ‘Informed Citizens‘. These citizens would be able to make educated democratic decisions armed with the knowledge of major political issues (Schudson, 1998). While this study did not investigate the impact of Yahoo!7’s content on their audience, it has provided data to show that the majority of the information coming out of Yahoo!7 was of this nature. Consequently, if a ‘Full News’ standard was the acceptable standard for news, in terms of assisting audiences with their democratic roles, then the content produced by Yahoo!7 News did not align with this principle. Yahoo!7 News did not educate, nor did the newsworkers claim to try to educate, their audience for democratic purposes. What Yahoo!7 News was interested in being was an information source for everyone. While this may be different at other online news sites, aggregated news at Yahoo!7 was produced without concern for its democratic impact. As such, the arguments made by Graber (2003) and Zaller (2003), who claimed that the ‘Full News’ standard was too rigorous may be more representative of the news content in this case study of Yahoo!7 News.

This study shows therefore that immediacy as a news priority has caused the creation of a soft news environment at Yahoo!7 News. While third-wave authors (e.g. Domingo, 2008) held out hope that soft news cycles could be broken and the golden era potential of the internet could be reached, the findings from Yahoo!7 suggested that arguments made by Zaller (2003), who accepted soft news as part of the new digital news ecosystem, were more relevant to the aggregated news production style of Yahoo!7 News.
8.3 The value of newwork

Observations and interviews revealed that the newworkers felt subordinate, and they did not consider themselves as highly regarded as the traditional journalists at 7News. This finding is in line with other studies (e.g. Meier, 2007; Tameling and Broersma, 2013), which have also suggested that traditional journalists tend to be reluctant to consider their online team as their equal peers. Overall, the newworkers mostly felt that the 7News reporters were only interested in Yahoo!7 News if they could help to drive viewers to the 7News broadcasts by cross-promoting their stories.

Some of the newworkers’ feelings of inferiority stemmed from the work that they did from day to day. Their digital newwork was contested by the 7News reporters – and sometimes even by themselves – as the work practices of the newworkers were very technical and different to those of the traditional broadcast journalists. In the case of Yahoo!7 News, the newworkers were heavily reliant on 7News for content and spent more time rewriting and repurposing their content than doing any actual reporting.

Despite the encouragement of 7News and Yahoo!7 management to join newsrooms and work together, these two commercial news organisations still operated quite independently day to day. This continued independence, combined with the prioritisation of the 7News ratings and the apparent uninterest of the 7News staff in the work of the newworkers, contributed to the Yahoo!7 newworkers’ perceptions of their role as lower in status than that of the 7News team. This sometimes caused conflict for the newworkers who believed that the 7News team did not understand the work that they did, nor how Yahoo!7 could support the 7News broadcast online. Deuze (2008) drew attention to this point with his comparison of experiences of online journalists at other converged news organisations as similar to that of migrants – as no longer part of their ‘home country’, nor fully welcome in their ‘host country’ (Deuze 2008, p. 206). The general feeling towards 7News amongst the newworkers was frustration and disappointment. Frustration about having to constantly seek out the 7News reporters to work with and help. Disappointment at opportunities missed online because of the 7News reporters’ perceptions of online as an add-on, instead of a news source in its own right.

Ethnographic studies such as those conducted by Cawley (2008), Colson and Heinderyckx (2008), Garcia (2008) and Singer, Tharp and Haruta (1999) also remarked
on the second-class status of online newsworkers and/or online journalists, which was most notable at converged news organisations. Like Garcia (2008), this study found that the newsworkers were aware that their work was not like that of traditional journalists and that they were not producing news using traditionally accepted methods, such as investigation and analysis.

During the research period, Yahoo!7 staff had only just moved into the Channel Seven studios and started sitting in on 7News production meetings. Even still, the newsworkers reported that the 7News team would often not tell them about stories that they were working on because of this concern that Yahoo!7 News would break the story before 7News and steal their audience. As a result, it was up to the newsworkers to encourage the 7News reporters to work with Yahoo!7. Mostly, the newsworkers tried to show the 7News reporters how the website could be a way for them to provide extra information to audiences that they might not have had time to show during the broadcast. For the reporters, there was hesitancy around this as including online was a new part of their production routine and they were still concerned about losing audience share. Television news was still the dominant organisation, in terms of revenue generation, at this point and the newsworkers considered that it was for this reason that the 7News audience ratings results mattered more than Yahoo!7’s.

For the purposes of this study, it is concerning that the newsworkers felt subordinate to the 7News reporters, since it impacted on their professional identity, their sense of self-worth, career path plans and the type of content they produced. The newsworkers valued their own work less, and most were using their current positions as a way to move into a role as a traditional journalist and/or pick up extra digital, technical skills that would make them more employable to news organisations. A few newsworkers spoke about rising up the ranks at Yahoo!7 News, but this was mainly to gain more skills and knowledge to help them onto another career path. This uninterest in a long-term digital career may go part way to explaining the high staff turnover of the organisation – none of the Yahoo!7 newsworkers interviewed were still at the organisation upon completion of this dissertation – and could also explain the newsworkers’ lack of care for the kinds of content published on the site. If the newsworkers did not value the work that they did, and did not perceive others to value it too, then providing a quality product would not be a priority of Yahoo!7.
8.4 Conclusions

This chapter has outlined three facets of aggregated digital news production at Yahoo!7 News that impacted on the newsworkers’ role and their production routines, the content that they produced, and their perceptions of their audience. It has highlighted:

1. Newsworkers as ‘gatekeepers’ perpetuate a traditional top-down approach of news production, which limited the ideal of interactivity and created a perception of Yahoo!7 News audiences as unreliable and in need of management;

2. The high value placed on speed and immediacy had impacted on the democratising potential of Yahoo!7 News and also perpetuated a reliance on news agency and partner sources and soft/entertainment focused news;

3. The newsworkers’ perceptions of their role as inferior to their 7News counterparts had caused professional identity issues and a perceived devaluing of aggregated newswork.

Findings from this empirical study of Yahoo!7 News are similar to those of other online journalism studies in nations as varied as Germany (e.g. Quandt, 2008) and Argentina (e.g. Garcia, 2008). However, this study also found that digital aggregated online news production clearly differs from the initial utopian predictions for online journalism made by first-wave authors in the early 2000s. The investigation showed that there are some qualities of traditional journalistic work that Yahoo!7 News have held on to in order to maintain control of their content and their workflow (i.e. gatekeeping), but that there are also some new distinctly digital qualities – such as news aggregation itself – layered within the traditional model. What distinctly characterised the actions of the observed newsworkers was the speed of their work, their dependency on news agency and partner content, and their relationship to 7News.

The present study supports the findings from Domingo’s third wave of research by providing empirical data from a digital aggregated news website, which is one of the many new online news contexts that have developed in the digital news system. The findings reveal the routines and priorities of the newsworkers and support the argument that the ‘ideal’ models for making online news are not applicable to all online news outlets. As such, there is a need to understand digital aggregated news sites and establish what they reveal about online news and the future of journalism.
The findings from the data collected at Yahoo!7 News reveal that the democratising potential of the internet has not yet been realised at this digital aggregated news site. Newsworkers still controlled the content and their level and quality of interactions with the audience. They did not encourage or provide ways for their audience to contribute to content production at any stage in the cycle, other than to make cursory comments that were either ignored or deleted if deemed by the newsworkers to be too rude. This study has shown that even though digital technologies have, technologically speaking, enabled a greater connection between newsworkers and their audience – by allowing them to know more about their audience and assess their preferences for news and information – the newsworkers did not value the contributions of their audience on social media or on their site, nor did they give them opportunities to create their own content. This was indicative of the newsworkers’ overall perception of their audience as untrustworthy, a belief that had implications for the quality and types of news that the newsworkers produced.

Speed and immediacy were characteristic of the news production process at Yahoo!7 News, where success was perceived through a prism of the ‘race to be first’. The speed at which the newsworkers worked and produced content created a barrier to higher levels of interactivity with their audience, and contributed to a high reliance on news agency and partner content, as well as to the use of soft/entertainment-focused news to draw in and keep audiences on their site.

This study has revealed the intricacies and facets of digital aggregated news production at Yahoo!7 News. In Australia there are many ways of producing aggregated digital news. However, the findings from this study have shown that it is necessary to observe the social context of news organisations in order to better understand the variety of forms that digital news production can take. For the Australian context, it is hoped that the present study will provide a framework for other studies of aggregated news sites similar to Yahoo!7 News, such as ninemsn or news.com.au, to follow and help to form the basis of a more coherent sociology of newswork and digital aggregated news production. In a digital news ecosystem that is quickly changing, adapting and appearing in different formats on a variety of devices, keeping track of how news is made – the differences and consistencies – is critical to developing clearer understandings about how news production and distribution work in contemporary times.
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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background

1. Tell me about how you came to be in your current position at Yahoo!7 News and how long you’ve been working for the company.

Role

2. Can you explain your role to me? (i.e. what you do on a daily basis, your responsibilities, who you work with internally and externally etc.).
3. Is it a full-time, part-time, freelance or casual role?
4. If you wanted to, could you do your job from home?
5. Since you’ve been working at Yahoo!7 has your role evolved/changed? (e.g. requirements and responsibilities, the job has gotten bigger, working with new people, working on new platforms, producing new forms of content).
6. Have you received any training to manage the new aspects of your role (e.g. iPad app, viewer feedback, social media)?
7. Have any positions been introduced/redesigned since you’ve been at Yahoo!7?

Yahoo!7/Channel Seven

8. How do you think the Yahoo!7 news team is similar to /different from the Channel Seven news team?
9. What kind of contact do you have with Channel Seven on a day-to-day basis?
10. Do you think the relationship between Yahoo!7 and Channel Seven will evolve in the future (e.g. fully integrated multimedia news organisation)?
11. What will the Yahoo!7 newsroom look like in the future?

Production Process/Impact On

12. Can you take me through the process of story production – from the conception of the story idea to getting the final copy up online?
13. Would you say that this process is understood and followed by the majority of the news team?
14. Has this process changed since you started in your role? If so, how and when?
15. Under what circumstances would this production process not be followed? (i.e. breaking news events, deadline pressures).
16. How many news stories would you work on per day/ per week? Has this increased since you started working at Yahoo!??
17. Has the structure/layout of your office changed since you started working at Yahoo!?? If so, why?
18. Have these changes (if any) made news production easier/ more difficult?

New Technologies

19. What new technologies (including tools for recording, producing and transmitting digital news and information; production tools; links to social media; data transfer/storage; content management systems; instant messaging; audience targeting software) do you use on a day-to-day basis?
20. Do you think Yahoo!7 is regarded as a leader in technology?
21. Apart from traditional methods of contact (i.e. phone/ email), how do you get information/ production material for stories (e.g. blogs, social media)?
22. Have the places you get information/ stories from changed since you started working at Yahoo!??
23. What social media sites do Yahoo!7 News have, and how long (approx.) have these been active?
24. Why? do you think it’s important for Yahoo!7 to have a social media presence? (e.g. another avenue to talk to audiences, enables dialogue with users, promotes the product, increases traffic).
25. Do you have your own social media accounts as well?

Impact on Newworkers

26. Do you consider yourself to have a strong knowledge of new technologies and how to use them?
27. Have your skills and knowledge of new technologies grown since you started working at Yahoo!??
28. Can you tell me about how new technologies have made your role easier/more difficult (i.e. spend more time in the office, quicker production, increased resources available, more content expectations, stress, higher expectations, less pay).
29. What do you think are the ‘essential skills’ that someone doing your job would need to have (e.g. digital editing, writing, information gathering)?
30. Have these ‘essential skills’ changed since you took up the role?
31. What skills would you like to develop to prepare for the future?
32. Do you like being able to work across a number of different digital mediums or would you prefer to specialise in one area?
33. How does new technology make you feel (e.g. excited, scared)?
34. Have new technologies (e.g. social media) increased your workload?

**Impact on Content**

35. How has the content on Yahoo!7 News changed in the past five to 10 years (e.g. blog links, more localised, more video, hyperlinks, more viewer feedback/contribution options, higher level of interactivity, content compatible with handheld devices)?
36. What new forms of content is Yahoo!7 now providing (e.g. iPad and mobile apps, more video content)?
37. How important for Yahoo!7 is it to break news stories? Why?

**The Future**

38. What do you think the future of news will look like? (e.g. hyperlocal content, program journalism, paywalls, death of newspapers, citizen journalism).
39. How will audiences consume news in the future?
40. How will audiences consume Yahoo!7 News?
41. One article from *The Washington Post* hypothesised that the key to news production in the 21st century was going to be who has the most knowledge of audience behaviour; what content they view, what products they buy, their location etc. NOT who has the ‘best’ content. What do you think about that?
42. What do you think your job will look like in five to 10 years time? (i.e. your daily tasks).
APPENDIX 2: CONSENT FORM

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES

Project Title: Digitally altered: Making News in the 21st Century

Name of participant: __________________________

Name of investigator(s): Caja Gilbert (PhD Student) and Sally Young (Supervisor)

1. I consent to participation in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement that I can keep.

2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form the researcher will retain it.

3. I understand that my participation will involve an interview and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

4. I acknowledge that:
   (a) The possible effects of participating in the interview have been explained to my satisfaction;
   (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
   (c) The project is for the purpose of research;
   (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
   (e) I have been informed that with my consent the interview will be audio-taped and I understand that data will be stored at University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after five years;
   (f) Upon my request, my name will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;
   (g) Some of my colleagues may also be asked to participate in the study, and that none of the participants, or anyone else, will be informed as to who has participated, or about the nature and content of my responses
   (h) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this.

I consent to this interview being audio-taped □ yes □ no (please circle one)

Participant signature: __________________________ Date: __________________________
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Gilbert, Caja Louise

Title:
Digitally altered: making news in the 21st century

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2019

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