

# **From Paper to Screen: Mapping the Path of Online Newspapers in Australia**

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## **Abstract**

This paper lays the groundwork for a genealogy of online newspapers in Australia. Its main task is descriptive, mapping the field of study – online newspapers in Australia – and discussing the main landmarks in this media environment, such as News Limited's [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au), and Fairfax's online versions of *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. As a necessary point of departure and comparison, the development and social function of the earlier print newspaper are discussed, and a theoretical framework is signalled by discussing the need for online papers to be situated within their broader social context. While attempting to establish a history of online newspapers in Australia, this paper is also a response to concerns about the future of print media, as well as the ongoing discursive struggles and attempts to constitute this new cultural form.

In 1995 Victoria's established liberal broadsheet, *The Age*, launched its online version, making it the first Australian newspaper to go online. Initially it covered just 10 stories a day, but today the majority of what is printed in the newspaper goes online and stories are updated as they break (The Age, 2007a). Over the next two years, most major Australian newspapers followed suit and, much like *The Age*, interpreted the shift online as a chance to transport a selection of their print content to a website. In the intervening years, advances in technology and the spread of knowledge surrounding this technology – within the home, the work place, as well as on the move, thanks to devices like mobile phones, PDAs and BlackBerries – have seen the Australian online newspaper environment transform into a far more sophisticated beast. Much like the advent of print before it, the internet has been the subject of much hyperbole and speculation regarding its potential to change and enhance the ways in which we communicate – and given the social history of newspapers, also the nature of our politics. Given the relative infancy of the technology and the rapidity of change, any attempts to take stock and look backwards or forwards from the current situation are necessarily limited. This paper will begin the task of positioning Australian online newspapers within the social, technological, political, economic and historical circumstances of their emergence, development, and envisaged potential. As a necessary point of departure and comparison, accounts of the development and social operation of the print newspaper are considered, as well as debates about the status of online journalism. What follows is a brief but thorough description of the main portals of the Australian online newspaper scene: [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au), *The Sydney Morning Herald* online ([www.smh.com.au](http://www.smh.com.au)) and *The Age* online ([www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au)), with a particular focus on elements of *The Age* site. The paper will consider both the empirical object of online newspapers, but also their existence as an object of discursive strategy within media organisations, the profession of journalism, and wider groups looking to and at online newspapers as welcome or worrying responses to civic participation and potential democratic developments.

This paper can be seen as the first step in the process of producing a genealogy of online newspapers in Australia. The onus for beginning such a genealogy is drawn from two simultaneous and related thrusts within the Australian media environment: the perception of a state of “crisis” within the print media, due in part to the continuing momentum and success of online forms; and the flagged changes to Australian media ownership laws. A 2006 case study by the Australian Press Council, *'The State of News Print Media in Australia'* asks the question, “Do newspapers have a future?” By way of an answer, it speculates:

The data are threatening. Reading habits are changing. Some age groups are reading newspapers less. Circulation is threatened. Nearly half of those who read Australian metropolitan newspapers are over fifty. Successful responses to the ubiquitous Internet challenge are essential. (Australian Press Council, 2006).

Meanwhile, the latest readership data obtained by *The Age* shows that readership of the Saturday and Sunday editions of the print newspaper are increasing incrementally, the Monday to Friday edition has seen a 1.2% decrease in readers, while the online version has seen a comparatively massive 23% increase during the survey period (April 2005 to March 2006) (The Age, 2007b).

Communications Minister Helen Coonan's proposed changes to foreign and cross media ownership laws are being positioned as an “answer” to the rise of new media forms:

Traditional media services are being challenged by new digital technologies resulting in the emergence of new players, content, services and delivery platforms. For consumers, this means an ever-increasing number of new sources of information and entertainment... These developments mean that it is now necessary to consider models which move away from controlling market structures in the way successive Governments have to date and to consider a new media regulatory framework that allows for some efficiencies of scale and scope for existing industry players while encouraging new entrants, new investment and new services to contribute to diversity in a competitive environment. (Coonan 2006).

In short, Coonan is proposing less government control and greater market freedom. Yet concerns about the outcome of these reforms abound already, with fears that the “primary outcome of the government’s media reform laws will be significantly fewer and significantly bigger media companies with significantly more influence over the public debate... [This] misguided and unnecessary legislation is well on the way to creating a tiny band of unelected media monsters with more power to control the information traffic than any mere elected politician” (Crikey, 2006).

In order to undertake some sort of comparison of the print and online versions of the Australian newspaper, it is necessary to understand the development and social operation of the *print* newspaper. Much as the advent of the internet in the 20th and 21st century has been heralded as introducing a new era of communication, so from the 15th century was the development of print technology lauded as a “revolution in communication,” as well as a “form of liberation and the agent of far-reaching changes in social and intellectual life” (Martin 1981, pp. 128, 140). The development of print technologies and their adaptation to suit social needs meant that “the door was opened to new realms of intellectual enrichment” for those with access to this new technology (Martin 1981, p. 133). Likewise, the development of the first newspapers and periodicals emerged as a result of the public demand for timely financial and political news – a situation which could be said to be mirrored today in the online context, where financial news has flourished, along with (among other things) tech news, online commerce and gambling. There is, as part of the development of print as a new technology, consideration to be given to the role that such technologies have come to play in the constitution of various identities. The newspaper in particular is regarded as a vital tool in the constitution of national identities. Concerned with the daily and the quotidian, the newspaper is a “mannering technology,” which communicates, embodies and constitutes the “rituals, daily practices, techniques, institutions, manners and customs which enable the nation to be thinkable, inhabitable, communicable and thereby governable” (Mercer 1992, p. 27).

With the “settling in” of information and communication technologies (Thrift 2006, p. 291), certain forms have emerged and shaped the way we use and understand the nature of the technology. Just as books were developed as a way to make the print form more accessible, so certain forms have been adapted from the social application of internet technology – things like blogs, photo sharing sites such as flickr, video sharing sites like YouTube, online self-trade sites like eBay, and networking sites such as MySpace. The development of newspapers online has travelled a similar, user-responsive path. Yet despite the fact that these changes have been largely incremental – and not radical as first envisaged – concerns about the future of journalism online are still debatable and contested. According to Mark Deuze, online journalism – which he defines as journalism produced more or less exclusively for the web (2003, p. 206) – can run the gamut from mainstream news sites,

which barely differ from print or broadcast journalism in their approach to journalistic storytelling, news values and relationships with publics, to share and discussion sites, which offer the highest level of “unmoderated participatory communication” (2003, p. 205). But despite the touted potential of the online environment, Deuze (2003) has found that most online newspapers:

...tend to translate the traditional way of doing things to the web, repurposing not only their content, but also their journalistic culture (including relationships with publics). This partly explains why most newsmedia organisations opt for producing fairly straightforward news sites when going online. (p. 219)

These potentials for change – towards interactivity, hypertextuality and multimediality – could be harnessed if they were used as a “catalyst for change in the profession as a whole” (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001, p. 95). This is a change that could begin less at a technical level and more at the level of the journalistic professional culture – one that is a product of industrial society with its “centralised, hierarchical, and paternalistic characteristics” (Heinonen in Bardoel and Deuze, 2001, p. 97).

The broader media environment within which Australian online newspapers operate includes technological capabilities and restraints; government regulations and controls; audience expectations and habits; professional norms, practices and assumptions of journalists, editors and web designers; and the business models of media organisations, and their broader economic pressures. There are also elements of each site which determine the forms of social uses each site takes – whether the site allows users to participate in in-house forums or chat rooms, and whether the site offers a news and current affairs archive (and what this costs the user)<sup>i</sup> (Martin, 2004, p. 201) – as well as structural factors such as demographics, bandwidth, internet experience and location of use, (Nguyen, 2003). There are also factors to consider such as the efficacy of the telecommunications system, financial status of users, the availability of internet, and the management and operation of online newspapers (He and Zhu, 2002). A discussion about each of these specific elements would go further in the task of a comprehensive description of Australian online newspapers.

But now to the task of description: the Australian online media environment could be said to mirror the current local print situation, but at a more consolidated level. While there are websites for every major state newspaper(s), increasingly, these are accessed not through their own site, but through the parent site of that newspaper – that is, the main media portal run by the company operating the newspaper. So readers in Tasmania and Adelaide are likely to access their news through the same site. For example, there are individual websites for News Limited’s national broadsheet *The Australian*, its Sydney tabloid, *The Daily Telegraph*, Melbourne tabloid the *Herald Sun*, Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* (the only major daily paper operating in Queensland, although with the launch of Fairfax’s *brisbanetimes*, it now has competition in the online newspaper stakes), the Adelaide *Advertiser* (though this site has been re-branded ‘*Adelaide Now*’, with a smaller imprint of *The Advertiser* and *The Mail on Sunday*’s masthead at the top of the page), the Hobart *Mercury* and *The Northern Territory News*. There is also a site that links to ‘*Perth Now*’, which incorporates material from *The Sunday Times*, although West Australia is the only state in which News Limited do not operate a daily newspaper<sup>ii</sup>. But rather than access these through the newspaper’s front-pages, newsreaders are encouraged, if only by the cumbersome URLs, to check the central [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au) site (rather than, say, [www.theaustralian.news.com.au](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au) which is longer to type). At [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au), news is centralised, segmented and customised according to the

user's location – the site is able to do an instant scan of the user's IP address to establish their geographic location – in order to address the audience according to which state they are in<sup>iii</sup>. The front page of the central [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au) site looks less like the front page of an actual print newspaper, and far more like an “interactive menu”, where, at a glance, users can see the range and scope of the news, before choosing which area they would like to focus on.

*The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, the *Australian Financial Review*, as well as the regional and local papers grouped together as ‘Fairfax Community Newspapers’ comprise the Fairfax newspaper stable. They are grouped together to form part of the Fairfax Digital Network, along with the online commercial interests of the Fairfax group, such as the car sales site [www.drive.com.au](http://www.drive.com.au), housing classifieds site [www.domain.com.au](http://www.domain.com.au), employment advertising site [www.mycareer.com.au](http://www.mycareer.com.au), and dating site [www.rsvp.com.au](http://www.rsvp.com.au). Stylistically, the Fairfax Digital home page ([www.fairfax.com.au](http://www.fairfax.com.au)) is not as user-friendly as the “interactive menu” design found at [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au); in fact, the emphasis is not on the Fairfax Digital site at all. Instead, each individual newspaper's homepage acts more as an independent media portal, each linking off to the other features of the network. These (links to my career, domain, drive and so on) are displayed along the top of every site and the design of this page header is common to all sites in the Network. Users can also reach the various elements of the Network by visiting the Fairfax Digital homepage, or through news categories (such as entertainment, travel, finance, etc.) and stories that include options to link off towards the commercial sections of the Network. For instance, when looking at the travel heading on the Fairfax Digital homepage, users can click on options that include “SMH travel”, that is, travel articles from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, or “walkabout” which takes them to a travel portal where users can find flight prices, book a hotel room and then seek out travel tips and maps. Alternatively, a reader of a travel article at *The Age* online could begin by reading a story about a destination, follow the advertising links to accommodation and flight booking websites, and return to the paper to check the latest news. All of these options are part of the navigational design of the Fairfax sites.

The *Australian Financial Review* offers an entirely different model for analysis, being, as Australia's oft-forgotten fourth major national daily newspaper, unique even in its print form. While forming part of the Fairfax Digital Network, the *Financial Review's* website bares very little resemblance to those of its stable-mates *The Age* or *The SMH*. Until recently its website offered little more than the major headlines for free, meaning online readers had to subscribe – to the print version – to gain access to online news stories. The latest incarnation of the paper, *afr access* ([www.afraccess.com](http://www.afraccess.com)) again offers few stories for free. However, after registering – which *is* free – users can access a basic package of limited stories, or sign up (and pay up) to access all of the content. Existing subscribers of the print version are automatically registered to access the site. Aside from offering news content, the new *access* site also allows users to keep track of their share portfolios, as well as trade through ASX accounts, maintain records of transactions, list company data, and receive price alerts – which are also available through SMS. *Afr access* clearly operates on a completely different tier and model to the Fairfax Digital site, allowing the company to launch another, separate business website, housing the content from the business sections of the print and online editions of *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* – at *Business Day* ([www.businessday.com.au](http://www.businessday.com.au)). At the same time, Fairfax Media announced its plans to launch a new sports site based around rugby league, [www.leaguehq.com.au](http://www.leaguehq.com.au). These moves, along with the launch of the *brisbanetimes* – “the first major mainstream online-only news website in Australia” (Ricketson, 2007a) launched as an overt measure to take on News Corporation's media dominance in Queensland (where the News-owned *Courier-Mail* is the only major daily) – all signal the

company's clearly planned and articulated "conversion from a newspaper publisher to a multimedia company" (Ricketson, 2007b).

It is possible to identify some of the elements that contribute to the design and operation of *The Age* online. Looking at the "front page" – that is, the part of the page that in the print version would be called "above the fold" but here refers to the part of the page that is seen without the viewer having to scroll down – there are a number of elements available for analysis. These include: the Fairfax Digital bar (mentioned above) common to all sites in the network; a number of different types of online advertisements (such as banner ads, flash ads, and links to sponsored sites); a column of "breaking news" stories where stories are listed in chronological order and the timestamp is prominent; links to stories from the news wires (here too, the timeliness of the stories is emphasised, with stories listed in time-order to the minute); one feature story with a large visual and/or video component (this story is often part of a larger media "package" themed around a news topic or event); links to "video news"; a segment called "time out", which features a selection of lighter stories drawn from various parts of the paper; a segment called "what's on", that collates movie, restaurant, bar, television and various other entertainment reviews; a rotating selection of top stories that viewers can flick through, drawn from segments as diverse as blogs, entertainment, breaking news and opinion; and a weather box, listing Melbourne's current temperature and forecasted maximum. Together, these could be categorised as comprising the economic, professional, audience and technological considerations that contribute to the shaping of the website.

By studying each of these elements, it is possible to begin to understand the way in which the specific circumstances of the production of the website shape its form and use. Take for example, a banner ad, a flash ad and the Fairfax Digital banner – all could be categorised as demonstrating some of the "economic considerations" and thus used as a means to understand the sorts of economic concerns that shape the paper. Of course, newspapers require advertisements to survive, and newspapers have owners, but there is more to it than that. To use print as a parallel comparison, Benedict Anderson wrote that "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (1991, p. 46). The relevance here for this study lies in Anderson's foregrounding of capitalism as playing a part in the shaping of print technology. Similarly, Elizabeth Eisenstein argues that, "The use of early presses by Western Europeans was determined by many different forces which had been incubating in the age of scribes. In a different context, the same technology might have been used for different ends (as was the case in Asia) or it might have been unwelcome and not used at all (as was the case in many regions outside Europe where Western missionary presses were first installed). Such comparisons are useful because they underscore the importance of context when discussing technological innovation" (Eisenstein, p. 56). Thus new questions arise when studying the presence, positioning and mode of advertising on the site.

The omnipresence of the Fairfax Digital banner reminds us that *The Age* online is not just a newspaper operating online, it is part of a wider media corporation within a changing media climate – a media corporation that includes not only print newspapers that have moved online, such as *The Age* and *The SMH*, but also commercial media sites such as RSVP and Domain, as well as an online newspaper that has never and will never have a print counterpart. Similarly, the presence of commercial advertising of all kinds – and they are numerous, from moving, interactive flash ads, to "sponsored links" that can take a reader from a news story to an online retailer's website at the click of a mouse – reminds us that the

environment that *The Age* online exists in is a largely commercial one. As has been documented, during the dot-com boom of 1995 – 2000, “almost everyone in the news business went online, and almost no one made any money” (Scott, 2005, p. 96). In the aftermath of this battle for online dominance, the sorts of traits and tactics that have survived can be used to inform our history of online newspapers in Australia.

This economic example is but one of the ways to read into the actual practices that inform the operation of online newspapers in Australia, as well as the discursive struggles surrounding their development and definition. That is, in analysing the forms of advertising and corporate branding on the site, we are able to understand the part that these elements play in the actual functioning of the site, as well as the ways in which the representative interests would seek to have the online newspaper defined and developed. Such an investigation into the professional considerations would produce very different results – both on the way in which the site looks and functions, as well as on the sorts of struggles that occur around the contested site of the online newspaper. For instance, rather than ads, banners and links, we could discuss news hierarchies, story structures and relationships with publics. In the same way, if we were to foreground the role of the audience in the development of an online newspaper, a very different set of questions would arise around the same topic – questions that might take into account such things as the design and social function and operation of that newspaper. What this means for our genealogy, is that all of these things must be taken into account. The task is large, but by beginning the work of description and cataloguing, we are able to begin the process of creating an account of the development of online newspapers in Australia.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The archive services of the sites concerning this paper are as follows. *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* both archive stories for 12 months. Stories published within the past 8 days can be accessed free of charge. Stories can be purchased from the archive for \$2.20 each, or by Fairfax Digital subscribers, whose paid account allows access to both *The Age* and *SMH* archives, as well as access to [www.rugbyheaven.com](http://www.rugbyheaven.com) and [www.realfooty.com.au](http://www.realfooty.com.au) as well as choosing whether to receive a selection of subscriber emails, some of which are news related, but many of which feed off the network's classified sites. The Fairfax owned *Australian Financial Review*, as well as *BRW*, are not available to members of the Fairfax Digital Network, but require users to become a member as well as subscribe to the print edition in order to gain access. All of the News Limited archives are operated through the newstext site.

<sup>ii</sup> *The West Australian* is something of an anomaly in the Australian mediascape, given that it is the only major state-wide daily that isn't owned by either of the two major media companies: Fairfax or News Limited.

<sup>iii</sup> News also provides access to its network of regional papers, but its central site is only customised to users at the wider state level.

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