UNDERSTANDING HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS USED AS A NEWS SOURCE DURING CRISIS EVENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how journalistic practice has changed since the introduction of social media, with particular reference to the way in which social media texts are used as news sources in traditional media reporting of crisis events. The fast-paced and emotive nature of crisis events when the need for information is intensified, presented against the backdrop of a 24-hour news cycle, provides the ideal setting to illustrate how the immediate information source of social media is changing the way traditional media tells the news.

The study focuses on two Australian bushfire case studies from Victoria in 2009 and Tasmania in 2013 for historical examination of the way social media was used in newspaper articles from *The Age* and *The Mercury* in their respective coverage of the crisis events. These media practices are explored through a content analysis of newspaper articles reporting on the bushfire events as well as research interviews with the editors of the two newspapers, to place in context the editorial decisions around the use of social media in each newspaper's reportage.

The idea that social media texts are an accepted news source for traditional media outlets, particularly when reporting on crisis events, is presented in this study, with additional reference to how journalistic practice will continue to evolve in the future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

"We will see social media expand again…We saw all of these things that are currently in the market emerge within almost a five-year cycle. The next five-year cycle will have surprises we're not quite dreaming about in public yet." (Paul Ramadge, former editor, The Age, 5 September 2013)

Social media has changed the way we consume information and the way we share information, but it has also changed journalistic practice. Many studies have analysed participatory journalism and how involved members of the public have become in reporting the news happening around them through sharing thoughts, opinions, photos and videos via social media. However, there is a gap in critical understandings of how media institutions then take these social media texts and use them as a news source.

The fast-paced and highly emotive nature of reporting on crises, such as natural disasters, bombings and uprisings, provides a worthy point of study for the changing nature of journalistic practice. Using Mitroff's description of a crisis as an "…extreme event that may threaten your very existence. At the very least, it causes substantial injuries, deaths, and financial costs…" (2005: 11), it is evident such an event is newsworthy. Social media platforms are not only used as a way of disseminating information during crisis events, and as community-building tools, but the texts produced by on-the-ground eyewitnesses now also function as sources of news for journalists who cannot get to the event.

The 2009 Victorian and 2013 Tasmanian bushfires are both crisis events where eyewitnesses shared information from the scene via social media. As such, these bushfire events present an opportunity to investigate how the social media texts created by those affected by the fires, and those who inadvertently reported on the events by sharing their experiences, were then used by the media as sources. The 2009 Black Saturday bushfires that spread across Victoria occurred in heatwave conditions on 7 February 2009, and resulted in the deaths of 173 people, based on Victoria Police records (2009). Almost four years later on 4 January 2013, and also in heatwave conditions, many bushfires spread across Tasmania, resulting in hundreds of people losing homes, businesses and community facilities. Unlike Black Saturday, there was no loss of life in the 2013 Tasmanian bushfires.

This study aims to assess the impact of social media on journalistic practice by analysing how social media texts were used as news sources by *The Age* and *The Mercury* newspapers during these two bushfire events. Developments in journalistic practice during this four-year period are investigated to assess whether social media features more prominently as a news source over time.

By conducting a content analysis of newspaper articles reporting on the Victorian and Tasmanian bushfire events, as well as research interviews with the editors of the two newspapers to understand the editorial decisions around the use of social media in their reportage, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between traditional journalistic news sources and social media texts as news sources in journalistic practice?

2. How has the use of social media texts as a news source evolved, particularly during the reporting of crisis events?

3. How were social media texts used as news sources during the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday and 2013 Tasmanian bushfire events?

4. What similarities and differences can be identified in the use of social media texts as news sources between the reporting of the two events?

5. What are the potential implications of these changing journalistic practices, as they relate to social media texts as news sources and for news reportage during future crisis events?

This chapter will introduce the context of this study, showing where the two bushfire case studies sit within the evolution of journalistic practice. This evolution will also be covered further in the literature review chapter of this thesis. In assessing the impact of social media on traditional journalistic practice, this study will test the hypothesis that social media texts have become an accepted news source, and are increasingly being used by traditional media outlets, particularly during crisis events when the public appetite for instant news updates is heightened.

The rise in the importance of social media

Much has been written about the impact of social media in the evolution of participatory journalism and how the public uses social media to tell its own stories. However, there has been less scholarly study around the use of social media texts as a news source. The practice of public participation in news creation has been given many names, including "participatory journalism", "citizen journalism" and "grassroots journalism". Rosen (2008) says: "When the people formerly known as the

audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, *that's* citizen journalism," and Gillmor (2010: 137) sees "grassroots journalism" as a cooperative process where: "the grassroots are transcending the pallid consumerism that has characterized news coverage and consumption in the past half-century or more. For the first time in modern history, the user is truly in charge, as a consumer and as a producer". However, it is Safran's (2005: 24) definition of "participatory journalism" as a model "…in which a news organisation works with its audience to have that 'conversation' that is news," that reflects the practice this study seeks to explore in more detail. In other words, journalism is no longer simply broadcast by the media outlet, but has a fluid role where both journalists and audiences play an ongoing part in telling - and exchanging views on - the news.

Social media was still a relatively new tool for both the media and the public in early 2009 when the Black Saturday bushfires hit Victoria. There are a range of definitions for social media that refer to the way in which individuals share information with their networks online, as well as myriad social media platforms. However, the focus for this study is Twitter and Facebook, because those platforms were the most predominantly used by individuals during each event.

Facebook was created in September 2005 and had 150 million users worldwide by January 2009 (Zuckerberg 2009). Twitter was created in March 2006, however, it was 2009 before Twitter became a popular social media platform, with almost 75 per cent of its users joining in the first half of that year (Cheng and Evans 2009). Both platforms have gained millions of users since 2009, with Smith's DMR blog post (2013) setting the number at 1.15 billion for Facebook and 500 million for Twitter.

The Black Saturday bushfires in February 2009 coincided with the beginning of the widespread use of Facebook and Twitter by the public. In contrast, the January 2013 Tasmanian bushfires happened at a time when the use of social media was far more prevalent, opening up more opportunities for the media to research and report by using social media texts. This trend has culminated in more recent examples of crisis events; one of the most obvious being the Boston bombings.

Social media was an important tool in the aftermath of the Boston Bombings, both as a news source for journalists, but also as an information source for police and friends and relatives of those affected by the bomb blasts. Bhat wrote in *The Times* (2013: 15) that social media made the bombings an international event after a reporter's video was broadcast by media outlets around the world:

> The September 11 attacks occurred in a pre-Twitter age. While that atrocity was a live TV event, with viewers watching in horror as the second plane hit the World Trade Centre, it was social media that dominated coverage of the Boston bombings. Twitter became an invaluable source with many at the scene posting messages on Twitter and Facebook to assure loved ones that they were safe.

The relevance of social media in reporting crisis events was further explored by Devine (2013) in a piece about how the Boston bombings provided a situation that showcased the combined forces of social and traditional media. She writes: "Twitter showed itself to be useful as a research tool and broadcasting medium but only when filtered through this medium of authoritative journalism" (Devine 2013: 44). Devine explains it this way:

Social media came into its own during the hunt for the Boston bombers. The epic rolling story of the hunt for the Boston bombers has been an extraordinary exercise in 21st century media. Technology that didn't exist even five years ago proved equal parts invaluable tool and unhelpful complication, and the crucial role of traditional media was affirmed. (2013: 44)

As this study is concerned with the evolution of journalistic practice through the use of social media texts as news sources, the Boston bombings provide important context to illustrate this point. This crisis event happened after the two bushfire case studies that are the focus of this study, and so demonstrates that journalistic practice continues to change. The way in which social media texts were used after the Boston bombings will be addressed in more detail at the conclusion of this study.

While the role of a news journalist to gather and disseminate news has not changed, the medium in which the journalist publishes the news has. Social media has not only added to the tools available to news journalists who report for traditional media outlets (newspapers, magazines, radio and television), but has increased the number and range of sources available.

Thesis structure

A study of reporting during the Victorian and Tasmanian bushfires shows traditional media and social media can both break and tell the news, but the journalistic skills in checking for accuracy and verifying details are still vital when reporting crisis events. An analysis of how social media texts were used by news journalists who reported on the bushfires will shed further light on how social media has contributed to a change in journalistic practice, but also how the overarching commitment to journalistic

standards is as important now as ever, despite the increased availability in the number of sources and publishing platforms.

These elements will be addressed within this study, with a review of the literature available on changing journalistic practice and how crisis events are reported following next. The research methods used to analyse the data from the newspapers studied will be covered in the methodology chapter and this data will be discussed in depth in the data analysis chapter. In the final chapter of the thesis, the findings will be summarised and recommendations for further research outlined.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter addresses the current studies pertaining to the changing practices within news journalism, and elaborates on the contribution of this study to the literature in its analysis of the relationship between traditional news sources and social media as a news source. As this background chapter will demonstrate, there is a significant body of work by Lasica (2003), Blanchett Neheli (2011), Dahlgren (2009) and Bruns (2011), which addresses the evolution of journalistic practice and the role of participatory journalism. The ways in which news media report crisis events have also been discussed by Singer (2012) and Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle (2012), with Muller and Gawenda (2011) studying the media coverage during the Black Saturday bushfires. However, the crucial area of interest for this study is the way in which social media texts have been used as news sources to report on a crisis. This literature includes newspaper and journal articles and online reports relating to a number of crisis events in Australia and internationally, and which illustrate the evolution of social media as a news source.

It is the way in which social media is used as a news source in the fast-paced reporting of two critical Australian bushfire events that forms the focus of this study. To understand this practice, the development of social media use in reporting on live events and during additional crisis situations was studied. Crawford (2011) investigated how Twitter was used to augment live event reporting, while Karlsson (2010) and Laad and Lewis (2012) studied early social media use by participatory journalists during three crisis events: Swine Flu, California Wildfires and the Haiti earthquake. Yet, it was the media's coverage of the 2005 London bombings and 2013

Boston bombings that most conclusively showed the way in which social media texts were used as news sources. Studies by Allan (2007) and Lorenzo-Dus and Bryan (2011) on the London media's reporting of the 2005 bombings, and investigations into the role social media played in the Boston bombings by Wenberg (2013), Knoblich (2013), Little (2013) and Mnookin and Hong (2013), is useful as they illustrate the relationship between traditional news sources and social media texts as news sources more definitively.

The changing practice of news journalism

The current media landscape, where news can be gained from a variety of online and offline sources 24 hours a day, feeds the desire for instant knowledge. Social media adds an extra dimension by slotting into this scenario as a news-gathering and information broadcasting tool. In this way, social media can be perceived as a threat to journalists, because it can be used by participatory journalists to 'scoop' the media on developing news stories. However, it also provides an opportunity to enhance news reporting – not through interviewing those involved (as remains one tool within traditional news reporting practice) but through sharing the lived experiences of those who are on the ground via the social media texts they produce themselves. It is the media's use of these social media texts as news sources that this study seeks to investigate.

Lasica (2003) claims that "journalism is undergoing a quiet revolution, whether it knows it or not". Online technologies, such as the internet, social media and blogs, have made it easier for consumers to be part of the news production process. The practice of news journalism has changed with the introduction of additional tools

made available through online technologies (for use by both journalists and participatory journalists), but also through the number of people who contribute to the media mix. As Lasica (2003) explains:

> …to practice random acts of journalism, you don't need a big-league publication with a slick Web site behind you. All you need is a computer, an Internet connection, and an ability to perform some of the tricks of the trade: Report what you observe, analyze events in a meaningful way but, most of all, just be fair and tell the truth as you and your sources see it.

In other words, if a journalist is "someone who keeps an account of day-to-day events" (Lasica 2003), the evolution of news production means anyone who can report on an event, can join the conversation that was earlier outlined in Safran's (2005) model of 'participatory journalism'.

Looking at the broader picture of the institution in which journalism sits, defining the media as a leader and facilitator of conversations, rather than simply a broadcaster, introduces the idea of "journalism as a process" (Arrington 2009 and Jarvis 2009 in Robinson 2011). Robinson explains this concept (2011: 140) as one of collaboration: "…when a reporter (or blogger or commentator) writes an article or blogs a news tip, at which point the news story comprises not only the reporter's work, but also all the comments, blogs and follow-up content sparked as a result of that original tidbit". Building on this idea of journalism as a developing collaboration, Jarvis' "new news model" (2009) positions the news story at the centre of the process, surrounded by ideas, discussion, questions, answers, interviews, comments, corrections and follow up. All of these components are included within the process of creating the news story

that is part of the aforementioned conversation between news media and its audiences, with each party having an individual part to play in the creation of the whole story.

Increasing the number of sources and the voices telling the story expands the practice of journalism from a two-dimensional account of an event to an unfolding news story that builds over time. In her thesis Blanchett Neheli explains that sourcing material from untrained participatory journalists means media outlets work with people who do not necessarily adhere to the "prescribed formats and procedures" (2011: 49) of professional journalists. However, Blanchett Neheli (2011) found the additional content provided by members of the public improved the depth and breadth of news coverage. She writes:

> Journalism is not a matter of "us versus them," citizens versus professionals. It is a symbiotic relationship between counterparts who achieve the best end result when they feed off of each other's strengths, thereby balancing each other's weaknesses… Participatory journalism does not hinge on allowing viewers to comment or upload pictures on a website; it requires a genuinely respectful relationship with the audience. (Blanchett Neheli 2011)

It is this symbiotic relationship between the media and its audiences – and audiences and the media – in the creation of news, that contributes to changing journalistic practice.

If journalism is the conversation between a news organisation and its audience, then that conversation must be rooted in the circumstances surrounding the events being discussed in the news story. In Dahlgren's (2009: 146) words: "[Journalism's] traditions are not just predicated on professional practices, but also on the institutional

and material circumstances that frame them". Further building on this idea, Dahlgren (2009: 152) states: "The historical story-telling role of journalism is being complemented by large flows of socially relevant electronic information between people and organizations outside of mainstream journalism". In other words, more people, whether they identify themselves as participatory journalists or not, are contributing to the stories being told by the media, simply by engaging with or participating in the story itself – but also by sharing those experiences via social media platforms.

It is this fusion of professional journalism and participatory journalism that makes up the current media landscape – and it seems neither option will vanish in deference to the other. As Bruns (2011: 132) explains: "…it is likely that the best opportunities for sustainable journalistic models lie in an effort to combine the best of both worlds – in the development of hybrid, 'pro-am' journalism organizations, which may substantially transform journalistic practices while maintaining continuity with a long history of (professional *and* citizen) journalistic efforts". Bruns' term "produser" (2011: 138), where audiences are consumers and active media content producers concurrently, offers a model for participatory journalists and illustrates how news can be told from more than one angle by using more than one source.

Journalism practice during a crisis

Crisis events, such as bushfires, floods, tsunamis and bombings, provide interesting case studies when looking into changing journalistic practice and the way in which social media texts are used, because they represent times when news audiences often have a greater need and demand for information. Social media provides an ideal news

platform for the dissemination of information about the event, because of the fast-moving nature of a crisis and the ability for these platforms to be used to broadcast information and curate footage quickly. Crawford (2011: 128) found Twitter updates were used in news stories about live events because: "Twitter is well suited to augmenting live events, through 'live tweeting' and discussions occurring in real time during sporting events, elections or television shows". Taking this point a step further to explain how social media can be relied on during a major event, like a crisis, Crawford (2011: 127) says: "With the great velocity and on a large scale, major news events are processed in public: the textures and inflections shift between individuals and communities".

Both the speed of sharing the news and the need to report on the event for an information-hungry audience are factors at play during crises, with news organisations looking for eyewitnesses to help report on and substantiate the information gathered from the scene. In other words, social media makes sources more accessible. Broersma and Graham (2013) explain this idea further. They write: "Social media offer easy access to a large range of interesting and otherwise hard to approach sources. Reporters can get in touch with relevant people, pose questions or simply take a statement from Twitter and include it in a news article" (Broersma and Graham 2013: 447). Members of the public who are at the location while the crisis event is in progress can provide critical information and visual representations of what is happening and who is affected via social media in a way that the journalist working out of a newsroom cannot. It is this idea that drives the media to consider such material as important news sources.

In her study of social journalism, Singer (2012) found there was value in getting information out quickly in certain reporting situations. Crisis events, such as a bushfire, flood or bombing, call for instant news reporting as the event unfolds, with the audience accepting the full facts will be shared as they come to hand. She claims:

> In a major natural disaster or other breaking news story, the number of victims inevitably will change, damage estimates will change, the political situation on the ground will change. In the meantime, we want to know what's happening right now, and so we tolerate the mutability of the information as part of the story itself. We understand that fresh information emerges over time, and that what seems to be true now may not hold up. (Singer 2012)

Social media works as a broadcasting platform in this instance, with the analysis and in-depth reporting of the event happening afterwards when journalists have a deeper understanding of the situation once expert sources have been interviewed. However, social media can also act as an aggregation tool when media outlets curate the texts published by participatory journalists, and as an information resource when quoting these texts as sources in news reports. Lasica (2003) states the reporting of events has changed as a result of the inclusion of social media, citing examples of bloggers sharing eyewitness accounts from peace demonstrations, conferences and concerts to support his findings. These blogs contributed to the telling of the story as a whole. He explains: "On almost any major story, the Weblog community adds depth, analysis, alternative perspectives, foreign views, and occasionally first-person accounts that contravene reports in the mainstream press" (Lasica 2003). While Lasica uses bloggers as his examples, participatory journalists can use any number of tools, such as social media, video or photos, to add a level of insight to a news story.

In further investigating the role the media plays in documenting crisis events, Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle (2012) examined how crises were reported across different media platforms. Their study covered local event reporting through to situations of international significance, such as natural environmental disasters, terrorism and war. The study illustrated the important role traditional media still plays in disseminating news, especially during crisis events. "Disasters and crises today are principally defined, dramatized and constituted in and through media and communications," writes Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle (2012: 33). The media's role as information broadcaster or explanation provider was also evident when Muller and Gawenda (2011) assessed media practices during the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires by interviewing journalists who covered the event. They argue: "The media's great power is the power to portray: the public gets its impressions of people, events and organisations from the media" (Muller and Gawenda 2011: 114). Despite the availability of information from other sources, the literature suggests that the public still turns to traditional media outlets to help make sense of a situation and explain the story in depth.

Evolution of social media as a news source in crises

Crises such as the 2007 California Wildfires and 2010 Haiti earthquake (Laad and Lewis 2012), and the Swedish swine flu outbreak (Karlsson 2010), offer early examples of how social media texts were incorporated into news reporting. Karlsson (2010) studied how early adopters of social media technology participated in news production during the 2009 Swine flu outbreak in Sweden. The media published eyewitness accounts, comments and 'chatlogs' as news, Karlsson found. In addition, some media outlets asked the public to contact them to correct any mistakes they

found in news items. While Karlsson's study clearly shows the involvement of the Swedish public in news creation during the swine flu outbreak, the focus was on how these participatory journalists engaged with Sweden's four national newspapers, rather than how the media used the public's social media texts as news sources. In contrast, Laad and Lewis' thesis (2012) examined how social media has changed the way society communicates, particularly during a crisis. Their thesis studied the various social media platforms used, and by whom, during the Californian wildfires and Haiti earthquake and compared this use to traditional media communications methods, but did not investigate how the texts were used by the media. This is despite the fact that the London bombings, in 2005, had already presented a major crisis event where such social media texts were used as news sources.

The development of research into the use of social media as a news source is most prominent in studies covering this event (see, for example, Allan 2007; Lorenzo-Dus and Bryan 2011). Allan's study (2007), for example, examined how journalists engaged with eyewitnesses and victims who were at the scene of the 2005 bombings, and how the personal blogs and online diaries these people wrote about the event were subsequently shared by news organisations. As the bombings happened on a weekday when many Londoners were either on their way to or had already arrived at work, Allan (2007) found the internet was the key news source for those hungry for information about the blasts. The Guardian Unlimited's news blog quoted underground train passenger, Matina Zoulia, while the BBC's Reporter's Log included posts from reporters who were on the trains and buses affected by the bombs, to add personal and emotive accounts to their reports (Allan 2007). Building on this, Lorenzo-Dus and Bryan's (2011) research outlined the types of images and video

taken by the passengers on their mobile phones and the value of these texts in reporting the event; examining how content created by the public was incorporated into news and first anniversary coverage of the bombings. They found the media used the dark anonymous eyewitness mobile texts from passengers involved in the blast, and these texts were broadcast around the world (Lorenzo-Dus and Bryan 2011).

This evolution in traditional news media's use of social media texts can be tracked more closely (and recently) through an analysis of the Boston bombings coverage (Wenberg 2013; Knoblich 2013; Little 2013; Mnookin 2013). A search by the researcher of international media coverage in the week after the Boston bombings found extensive use of social media texts as news sources. This media coverage included an article about the students who were wrongly targeted as suspects after their photographs were circulated on social media (for example, Levy (2013) wrote, "A high school student whose photograph appeared on the front page of a major US newspaper as a person investigators were trying to identify in connection with the Boston Marathon bombings said he was shocked to find himself singled out"); how the Boston Police used the public's social media texts to gather information about the event and the bombers (for example, Bhat (2013) wrote, "…authorities are hoping that media saturation will help catch the perpetrators"); and how Boston residents turned to social media to tell their friends and families they had survived the attack. Other media reports also mentioned the picture that was tweeted of one of the suspects (for example, McGeough (2013) wrote, "The new picture of Suspect Two walking past Martin Richard near a crowd-control barrier at the marathon finish was tweeted by Farhad Manjoo of Slate"); another quoted competitors discussing how they turned to social media to find out what had happened (for example Rigney and

Levy (2013) quoted wheelchair athlete Kurt Fearnley saying, "We watched the news and got on social media which confirmed the blast and the explosion"); and journalists also shared personal accounts of how they had seen the bombings mentioned on Twitter or Facebook.

Syracuse University Professor, Joye Gordon (in Wenberg 2013), studied the public's use of social media during the crisis and found news of the bombing at the Boston Marathon finish line broke on social media up to an hour before a traditional media outlet officially covered the event. Explaining the symbiotic relationship between social media and traditional news media, Gordon states: "When there is late breaking news and events, what we'll do is go to websites for people who have immediate needs for information" (cited in Wenberg 2013). Gordon found social media had impacted crisis communication dramatically because many online platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and online forums, were available when phone lines had stopped working, but also online news outlets gave those looking for information quicker access (Wenberg 2013). In situations like the Boston bombings, social media offers speedy information updates and the opportunity to share feelings, but traditional media is still preferred for in-depth news reporting on a crisis because it is seen as accurate and credible, which is discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter.

Knoblich (2013) also studied the Boston bombings, looking at how traditional media outlets sought the public's input to help tell the news about the event. He found the "unpredictability of a crisis, combined with the ubiquity of mobile phones able to captures photos and videos, mean the average person is far more likely than newsroom staff to be in a position to report information about a crisis as it unfolds"

(Knoblich 2013). Similarly, Little (2013) studied eyewitness reporting on social media in the aftermath of the Boston bombings. He collated tweets from Twitter users to illustrate the evolution of journalistic practice, explaining that social media was both a journalistic tool and a threat to 'true journalism' as it afforded participatory journalists at the scene of a crisis the ability to 'scoop' the media (Little 2013). While participatory journalists may have broken much of the news around the Boston bombings on social media, they still relied on traditional media to spread the story and share their texts with a wider international audience.

It was journalist Mnookin's (2013) live tweeting of the manhunt for the Boston bombers that really showed how social media could be used as a news source and news broadcaster at the same time. Following the police on the manhunt, Mnookin says he had a reporter's notebook, but decided Twitter was a better way of taking notes, because the tweets would be time stamped. As they were public, Mnookin says he only tweeted informative comments. He explains:

> Historically, TV and radio have had the biggest competitive advantage in breaking news. But fluid, chaotic situations also precisely those in which the transfer of information from cameraman to reporter to producer to anchor is most prone to error. Plus when you're on the air, providing steady updates isn't an option – it's a necessity. And needing to fill airtime can cause problems of its own. On Twitter, if there's a new development every minute, you can update every minute: if nothing is happening, you can wait. (Mnookin 2013)

Social media as a news source in bushfire reporting

Critical analyses of media coverage of events, such as the London bombings, swine flu, and Boston bombings, shows the ways in which social media has become an important source of information for journalists reporting on crisis events. This section will now concentrate on the role social media played in the reporting of the Victorian and Tasmanian bushfires. Traditional media outlets, emergency services and the public used social media to share first-hand accounts and spread information during the Black Saturday bushfires (Moses 2009), illustrating how social media use was becoming more widespread as both an information tool and a news source. ABC News' (2013) online curation of the public's personal and media professional's social media texts from the Tasmanian bushfires via Storify (www.storify.com) – a social media curation tool – shows the social media platforms that were in use during the event. But, it also demonstrates how these texts were reused as sources by media outlets reporting the story.

Larkins' 2013 article reviewed the role mobile technology and social media played in connecting people during the Tasmanian bushfires, particularly the way emergency services and people affected by the bushfires used social media and smartphones to communicate. The article links to photos and personal accounts posted on Facebook and Twitter and includes an interview with a Tasmanian social media commentator, Polly McGee, who provided useful insights into the role social media played in reporting the 2013 bushfires. McGee says: "When a critical emergency is happening, people tend to jump on the channels and sms and Facebook and Twitter" (cited in Larkins 2013).

Muller and Gawenda's chapter, 'Media assessments of media performance' (2011), gave an insight into how journalists reported on the Victorian bushfires for print and online media outlets in 2009 and the role journalists played in telling people's stories, sharing vital information and drawing attention to what had happened during the crisis. This chapter provided a strong basis on which to position the analysis for this study by comparing *The Age*'s 2009 articles to *The Mercury*'s 2013 articles. Muller and Gawenda's chapter also highlighted the 'episodic' nature of crisis reporting (Iyengar 1991). They state: "There was some criticism that after the first 48 hours, the coverage became somewhat formulaic and fell back on old stereotypes such as 'heroes', some of which, in one respondent's view, had harmful consequences" (Muller and Gawenda 2011: 119).

In studying the traditional media coverage of the Victorian and Tasmanian bushfires, it is evident these stories are being told in episodic form (Iyengar 1991), because the coverage illustrates issues associated with specific events that are unfolding over time. As Iyengar (1991: 14) explains: "The episodic news frame takes the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances…" The episodic framing effect on news coverage is further defined: "Episodic reports present on-the-scene coverage of "hard" news and are often visually compelling," (1991: 14). It is the hard news coverage of bushfires within *The Age* and *The Mercury* that this study seeks to analyse.

Journalistic practice around the involvement of participatory journalists in news reporting and the reporting of crisis events between 2005 and 2013 has been reviewed here. There is evidence supporting the hypothesis that social media is now playing an

increasingly important role as a news source in literature relating to the California Wildfires, Haiti earthquake, swine flu outbreak, London bombings, Boston bombings, Black Saturday bushfires and Tasmanian bushfires. The idea of social media texts as a news source and how this has evolved over time will be examined in more detail in the next chapter in analysing the data for two bushfire cases studies.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will explain the methodology used to examine the relationship between traditional journalistic news sources and social media texts as news sources. As previously mentioned, the change in journalistic practice in relation to news sources was investigated using two bushfire case studies. The methodological approach used was a content analysis, where articles from two newspapers were coded according to how social media was used. These findings were analysed in conjunction with data from two semi-structured interviews with the editors of these newspapers. This methodology is outlined in more detail below, and includes a discussion of the strengths and limitations of each research method, and the implications of these methods for the study's analysis and findings.

As an avid social media user, I noticed a substantial change in the way social media texts were used by traditional media after the second bushfire event in Tasmania in 2013, with an even more significant change after the Boston bombings (these latter changes are discussed in further detail in the concluding chapter of this thesis). I wanted to investigate these changes in journalistic practice and chose to compare two bushfire events (i.e. the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday and 2013 Tasmanian bushfires), because they were major news events in Australia. Using comparative analysis also allowed me to highlight the parallels and variances in the way each bushfire event was reported. As Daymon and Holloway (2010: 119) explain: "The use of two or more case studies allows you to identify distinctive features by exploring similarities and contrasts between cases. It also enables you to generalize to some extent to a wider universe". Since the Tasmanian bushfire event happened four years

after the Victorian event, I considered this a suitable timeframe in which to explore the changing practices of news journalism, and its relationship to social media texts.

In particular, this study examined the impact of social media on journalistic practice by analysing how social media texts were used as a news source by *The Age* and *The Mercury* newspapers during the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday and 2013 Tasmanian bushfire events, respectively. News articles relating to the reporting of both bushfire events were analysed for the study; the findings of which were enriched by research interviews with the two editors of the newspapers studied. Content analysis and semi-structured interviews were selected as research methods to illustrate how social media texts were used in reporting both bushfire events and also to investigate the editorial decisions around the use of those texts.

Case studies

The 2009 Black Saturday bushfires and 2013 Tasmanian bushfires were treated as comparative case studies for this project, because they were both significant crisis events that happened in close-knit communities located outside Australian capital cities. As such, the two bushfire events presented relevant data from which to investigate the way news media professionals commonly report on crisis events. The four-year timeframe between the two events also provided an interesting comparison from which to study the evolution in the way social media texts were used in the reporting of these events.

Case studies investigate social occurrences through detailed analysis of events, and their relationships, to understand complex issues. The evolution of journalistic

practice is examined here by studying how social media texts were used in traditional media reportage of two bushfire events. Two research methods - content analysis and semi-structured interviews - are combined in this study to illustrate the different angles that each bushfire case presented. Yin (1994: 13) defines a case study as "…an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". Additionally, Adelman et al (2006: 141) writes: "[c]ase study research always involves 'the study of an instance in action'".

Since multiple data sources are used here, case study is a valid research method because "...the case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations – beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study" (Yin 1994: 8). Adelman et al (2006: 148) explain that case studies allow generalisations, which is important in this study because a generalisation about journalistic practice was developed around the hypothesis that social media texts have become an accepted news sources. The two bushfire case studies allow that hypothesis to be tested.

Crises, as explained in the introductory chapter, are extreme events that may threaten our existence, with many complex social issues at play. Case study research helps to explain these issues because: "…the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events…" (Yin 1994: 3). Comparative analysis of case studies as a research method helps to explain complex social events, like bushfires, because it allows multiple data sources to be examined to find the relationships between the data.

Content analysis

In testing the hypothesis outlined in the introductory chapter, a content analysis was conducted of news content from *The Age* and *The Mercury* newspapers in the two weeks after each bushfire event. Krippendorff (2004: 18) defines content analysis as "…a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (and other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use". In this study, content analysis is used to examine the newspaper articles published after each bushfire event to understand the way in which social media texts were used in the reports, identify the prevalence of social media texts used as news sources and to identify any changes to journalistic practice in the four years between the bushfires.

For the Black Saturday bushfires, the timeframe covered was 7-21 February 2009 inclusive, and for the Tasmanian bushfires, it was 4-18 January 2013 inclusive. *The Age* and *The Mercury* newspapers were chosen because they are both major daily publications in Victoria and Tasmania. Digital archives were accessed for both publications. Each two-week period encompassed a full cycle of news reporting for both bushfire events, with articles covering the initial reports of fire locations, through to damage reports, victim and death tolls, fundraising events and memorials. The episodic nature of the reporting for both bushfires, and the fact that demand for information about the events was highest in the two-week period after each crisis, provided a comparative basis for analysis between the two events.

Archival newspaper articles from *The Age* and *The Mercury* for each two-week period were sourced using the web-based NewsBank database, accessed via the State Library

of Tasmania website. Two searches were conducted within the date ranges outlined above using the key word "bushfire", specifying "The Age" and "The Mercury" as publications. The first search for *The Age* resulted in 472 news articles in which the term "bushfire" was used. Since this study aims to investigate the use of social media texts by news media in the reporting of the bushfires, this sample of 472 was further delimited using three additional search terms: "social media", "Facebook" and "Twitter" (which were substituted each time). Facebook and Twitter were selected as additional search terms, because these were the two dominant social media platforms used by the public at the time of the bushfires, as outlined in the introductory chapter. A search of *The Age* newspaper, with the first search term as "bushfire" and the second as "social media" resulted in nine articles. The two subsequent searches with "Facebook" and "Twitter" as the second delimiting terms resulted in eight articles and one article, respectively.

After reviewing the resulting 18 articles mentioning social media, 13 articles were removed because they did not support the aims of the study. These articles included four duplicates (two articles from the separate searches and two from *The Age*'s second edition). In addition, five articles from the Business (n=2), Metro (n=1) and Letters to the Editor (n=2) sections and four articles mentioning the individual words "social" (n=1) and "media" (n=3) were removed from the sample. These media texts were excluded because they did not show how social media was used as a news source. This left five news articles from *The Age* for analysis.

A search of *The Mercury*'s content via the NewsBank database resulted in 131 news articles where the term "bushfire" was mentioned. Using the delimitation process

outlined above, subsequent searches of *The Mercury* produced 15 articles: "social

media" (n=6), "Facebook" (n=7) and "Twitter" (n=2). One article from the *Illawarra

Mercury* and four duplicate articles were removed, leaving a total of 10 news articles

from the Tasmanian-based newspaper for analysis. Together, this produced a sample

of 15 news articles from *The Age* and *The Mercury* for content analysis. This small

sample size was surprising, and while these results are contrary to initial expectations

the reasons for this are outlined later in this study.

To further characterise the distinct way in which social media texts were used in the

newspaper reporting of each bushfire event, the 15 articles were coded to show

whether social media was used as a news source (a text that gave information about

the bushfire event) or featured as a news subject (a text that was discussed within the

newspaper articles). Coding allowed the articles studied to be transformed into an

analysable unit, for example 'news source' or 'news subject'. McMillan (2000)

explains that coding units within a content analysis contributes to the researcher's

ability to count the content and place the coded unit within the context of the content.

As she explains:

> Coding units are the smallest segment of content counted and scored in the content
>
> analysis. The context unit is the body of material surrounding the coding unit. For
>
> example, if the coding unit is a word, the context unit might be the sentence in which
>
> the word appears or the paragraph or the entire article. (McMillan 2000)

In addition, coding the newspaper articles meant the data was recorded in a way that

could potentially be replicated and analysed by other researchers in the future. As

Krippendorff (2004: 84) explains: "Recording/coding bridges the gap between

unitized texts and someone's reading of them, between distinct images and what people see in them, or between separate observations and their situational interpretations". Coding the newspaper articles from *The Age* and *The Mercury* as part of this content analysis contributed an additional level of investigation by showing how the social media texts were used. This process answers the question of how social media was used in news reporting during the Victorian and Tasmanian bushfires.

Semi-structured interviews

The content analysis was complemented by two semi-structured in-depth interviews with the editors of *The Age* and *The Mercury,* Paul Ramadge and Andrew Holman, respectively. These interviewees were chosen specifically because they could provide an understanding of the editorial decision-making processes relating to the use of social media as a news source during the Victorian and Tasmanian bushfires. Ethics approval was sought for these interviews and consent forms from both research interviewees are included as appendices. Ramadge and Holman's interviews also contributed professional insights into the role and impact of social media texts within contemporary journalistic practice (as discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter of this thesis).

The Age's former editor, Paul Ramadge, was interviewed by phone on 5 September 2013, with the interview lasting approximately 20 minutes. The interview with Andrew Holman was conducted in person at *The Mercury*'s offices in Salamanca Place, Hobart, on 17 September 2013, and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Both interviews were transcribed and the data used as part of this study. These interviews

enriched the content analysis already conducted of the newspaper articles and provided additional data to answer the final research question about the implications of changing journalistic practice in relation to the use of social media texts as news sources in reporting future crisis events.

In this instance, semi-structured interviews were preferred over questionnaires or surveys because of the level of detail in the data they produced (Legard et al 2003). The use of open questions and discussion within the flexible structure of an interview enabled Ramadge and Holman to elaborate on their responses and clarify complex points. It also presented myself, as the researcher, with opportunities to explore relevant tangents, such as particular instances where social media texts were used to report on the bushfires (drawing on the newspaper articles analysed). The ability to explore certain points further was useful since some of the issues raised – in particular, the need for accurate information – were not known in advance. As Legard et al (2003: 141) explains: "The material is generated by the interaction between the researcher and interviewee". Such data was especially relevant to this study, given the relatively small number of current studies on social media as a news source.

The questions asked during these interviews were formulated after analysing the news texts outlined above, and by considering Muller and Gawenda's (2011) study of journalists' opinions about their performance and media practices while reporting on the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria. The authors defined the reportage during this crisis event as a "watershed" in Australian journalistic practice:

> For many print journalists, the role played by online media was a revelation. These
>
> journalists were, for the most part, the products of an internal newspaper culture in

which the oriented version of the paper was the 'real' one and the online version was somehow inferior and separate. In covering the fires, however, they were required to file for both the printed and online versions of their companies' paper. In doing so they became exhilarated by the experience of rapid round-the-clock capability to publish. The old idea of one deadline a day was swept away. As a result, in many newspaper newsrooms the barriers between print and online came down. In this respect, the bushfire coverage may turn out to be a watershed in Australian journalistic practice. (Muller and Gawenda 2011)

The combination of content analysis of the newspaper articles from *The Age* and *The Mercury* and the insights gained through interviews with the editors of each publication presented many discussion points when considering how social media texts have been used as news sources in reporting crises. These are explored in more detail in the following Data Analysis and Discussion chapter.

Limitations of research methods

There were a number of limitations in the research methods used in this study, including a lack of rigour within the two case studies, the small data sample and the potential for an emotional response from the research interviewees. Case study as a research method has been criticised for its lack of precision and potential for bias in the researcher's interpretation of the data. However, it has been established as a suitable method for exploring a vast body of evidence covering specific social issues, such as the nuances of news reporting of crisis events. Yin (1994) outlines four common arguments for the limitations of this method: case studies lack the rigorous research of other methods; they provide little basis for scientific generalisation; they

take too long; and case studies are difficult to do. However, case study was chosen in this instance because it allowed the data across two bushfire events to be explored and interpreted in relation to journalistic practice.

The small sample of news articles examined in the content analysis could present as problematic because it does not represent all news media. This study analysed two small samples of newspaper reporting within two relatively short timeframes from two Australian events, so the analysis is not indicative of crisis reporting globally. However, in the context of the hypothesis and research questions that were outlined in the introductory chapter, this small sample is significant and illustrates how social media was used as a news source, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. This study was also limited to analysing social media platforms in use at the time of each bushfire event, so it cannot present a definitive answer to the question of how all social media platforms could be used during a crisis.

Conducting two in-depth interviews also produced a small sample of data and while this presents a limitation, it is lessened when coupled with the content analysis outlined above. Other limitations relevant to semi-structured interviews include the temptation to share personal insights, such as my thoughts about the use of social media texts, because this study developed from individual anecdotal evidence gathered while consuming news media coverage during the bushfire events. There was also the potential for an emotional response from the editors as the crises they were interviewed about included their newspapers' coverage of residents' loss of life and property, which was addressed in the ethics application process.

This chapter has outlined the research methods used to study the traditional news media's use of social media texts as a news source during two Australian bushfire events. Articles from two major newspapers and interviews with the editors of each publication offered comparative data from which to examine each case study. The way in which the social media texts were used by these newspapers will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the data analysed in relation to the two bushfire case studies to illustrate how social media texts have evolved as news sources in the reporting of crisis events. Once analysed, the data discussed in this chapter explicitly addresses research questions three and four, outlined in the introduction to this thesis. The data demonstrates how social media texts were used as news sources by traditional media during the 2009 Victorian and 2013 Tasmanian bushfire events and the similarities and differences in the way these texts were used in reporting both crises.

In presenting the data for both bushfire case studies, and through the comparison of journalistic practices during these crisis events, this study aims to address how the traditional media's use of social media texts as a news source has evolved between 2009 and 2013, which will answer research question two. It also uses this data to address the final research question by reflecting on how journalistic practices may continue to evolve into the future, particularly in crisis reporting, when the need for news coverage is heightened.

This data analysis chapter drills down into the way the newspapers *The Age* and *The Mercury* used social media texts to report on the Black Saturday and Tasmanian bushfires. The implications of using social media texts as news sources are explored, along with the future of social media as a journalistic tool, before the broader picture of the way social media has changed journalistic practice is addressed in the conclusion to this chapter.

Social media in bushfire reporting

Data analysis for this study showed *The Age* published five articles and *The Mercury* published 10 articles referencing social media in the two weeks following the 2009 Black Saturday and 2013 Tasmanian bushfires, respectively. This sample of newspaper articles represented 1.0 per cent of *The Age*'s articles mentioning "bushfire" and 7.6 per cent of *The Mercury*'s, which is a small proportion of the overall bushfire event reporting. It is clear from this data that the use of social media texts by traditional media has risen in the four years between the two bushfire events, but not to the extent expected when developing the hypothesis this study sought to test. Further analysis of this anomaly is explored later in this study with reference to data from the research interviews and studies into social media use during the reporting of the Boston bombings.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the 15 news articles from *The Age* and *The Mercury* were coded using two identifiers: 'Social media as a news source' (a text that gave information about the bushfire event) or 'Social media as a news subject' (a text that was discussed within the newspaper articles). Of *The Age*'s five news texts, one used social media as a news source and the remaining four reported on the public's use of social media, making it the subject, rather than the news source, for the articles. Three of *The Mercury*'s 10 news texts used social media as a news source, quoting Facebook updates and Twitter posts within the articles. The remaining seven news articles referred to social media as the subject of the stories.

Table 1: Social media use in bushfire reporting

Number of articles	Number using social media as a source	Number using social media as a subject
15	4	11

Using the identifers outlined above to code the 15 articles studied in this sample, four indicated social media was used as a news source (see Table 1) and 11 featured social media as the subject of the article.

Social media as a news source

An analysis of news texts in the two weeks (see Tables 2 and 3 in the appendix for full references) following the Black Saturday and Tasmanian bushfires showed social media was used as a news source in *The Mercury* and, to a lesser extent, *The Age*. Bachelard and Fyfe's (2009: 3) article in the *Sunday Age* was the single example from the sample analysed where the Victorian newspaper used social media as a news source. This article explains that *The Age*'s journalists were scanning Twitter for information:

> But a Sunday Age analysis of records on the Twitter website (which re-broadcast official CFA warnings within minutes of them going online) shows that warnings for the Kilmore-Kinglake fire were sparse at crucial times…The first warning of the fire hit the Twitter website at 12.15pm on Saturday, 25 minutes after CFA officers arrived at the scene on a country property outside Kilmore and reported the fire was out of control and growing fast. (Bachelard and Fyfe 2013)

Although only one article from *The Age* demonstrated social media was used as a news source, this example does illustrate the way in which such texts have been incorporated into research within journalistic practice.

The Mercury's use of social media as a source in the news texts analysed spanned personal references – for example, Smith (2013a: 8) wrote about information that appeared on her social media account: "My Facebook newsfeed is filled with posts from people running fundraising pages and donation points". Facebook and Twitter posts for talk show host Ellen DeGeneres were quoted (2013b: 3) (for example, Smith wrote "Even Premier Lara Giddings has joined the social media push to bring the high-profile actor, comedian and presenter to Tasmania, after tweeting to DeGeneres: 'How about coming to Tasmania while in Aus? You would be most welcome. Help us to rebuild tourism post-bushfires.'"). Readers were also directed, via a factual reference, to view items in Rosny Park Bowls Club's online fundraising auction: "Items can be viewed by searching for 'auction for Tassie bushfires' on Facebook" (Fulton 2013).

Social media as the news subject

As shown in Table 1, social media played a bigger role as a subject, rather than a news source, in *The Age*'s and *The Mercury*'s reporting of the bushfire events. A public Facebook campaign against accused bushfire arsonist Brendan James Sokaluk, and Facebook's response to that campaign, formed the basis of *The Age*'s news reports where social media was the subject of the articles. *The Mercury*'s sample of news articles depicted social media as the subject in broader terms. These news articles mentioned public offers of support for those affected by the bushfires; calls

41

for donations and fundraising events on Facebook and Twitter; the evacuation of residents affected by the Tasmanian bushfires coordinated via Facebook; and the social media campaign directed against shopkeepers Branko and Roza Alilovic. These examples demonstrate that social media had become a more important reference tool for news journalists in the four years between the two bushfire events.

Editorial decisions around social media use

Paul Ramadge (2013, Research Interview, 5 September), the editor of *The Age* at the time of the Black Saturday bushfires, says more traditional news sources, including radio, the Australian Bureau of Meteorology website and the Bushfire Brigade's website, were at first used by journalists in their reporting of the crisis. However, social media was used as a source in the days after the initial reporting activity, including monitoring Twitter hashtags. This was evidenced in the content analysis of *The Age*'s reporting, with no mention of social media until eight days (15 February 2009) after the first bushfire report. "[W]e monitored Twitter in the main and we did become aware of Facebook postings, but the extent to which we relied on social media, I'd have to say, was initially minor," says Ramadge (2013, Research Interview, 5 September). Once the reporting moved from stating the facts about where the bushfires were and what had been affected, social media became a stronger source for *The Age* journalists. As Ramadge explains:

> …as the days went on and as it became more apparent about the number of fatalities and the effect on families and communities, Facebook and Twitter became more important as we became more aware of postings that related to those families…it had value, and it had some strength for us as we continued to gather the information. (Ramadge, P 2013, Research Interview, 5 September)

It was through monitoring the social media postings regarding the missing and dead residents that *The Age*'s journalists "learned how to use social media more effectively" (Ramadge, P 2013, Research Interview, 5 September). Monitoring social media websites has become part of a news journalists' information-gathering process, with some of these texts becoming news sources when journalists report on the event.

As Ramadge explains, *The Age* was just beginning to see the possibilities for Twitter as a news source when the bushfires hit in February 2009:

> *The Age* itself was probably beginning to use social media as a source of information more; but we hadn't moved to that point where we were openly using it, as might be occurring now [in] 2013. Years after the Black Saturday bushfires, we more often would run stories based on what was happening on social media. During the bushfires, we saw it as an additional possible source of information, but not as mainstream as it's become now. (Ramadge, P 2013, Research Interview, 5 September)

Andrew Holman (2013), editor of *The Mercury*, says the use of social media during the Tasmanian bushfires in 2013 was covered, but the newspaper was cautious in using the texts as news sources. "[T]he prevalence of social media during the bushfires was there; we covered it, but we had to be very careful with it. It did not replace traditional news sources," says Holman (2013, Research Interview, 17 September).

The Facebook community page, *Tassie Fires - We Can Help* (www.facebook.com/tassiefireswecanhelp), set up by Hobart resident Mel Irons, and referenced in *The Mercury*'s reporting, was "social media working at its best", according to Holman (2013). He says it "showed the power and strength of how you can rally people" (Holman, A 2013, Research Interview, 17 September). It also showed how social media could act as a community-building tool in times of crisis. A veteran of four major Australian crisis events (Ash Wednesday in Adelaide, Black Tuesday in Port Lincoln, Cyclone Yasi in Queensland and the Tasmanian bushfires), Holman claims social media has developed as a tool for both journalists and the community:

> I saw the full might of social media in an online blog when I was up in Cairns during the Cyclone Yasi, and we had millions upon millions upon millions of people logged in from all over the world talking to a community, and just watching the community come in and share information: 'I think it's passed us, how's things down south?', 'I believe power's been cut here,' …when you see that type of social media, it can actually bring people together. (Holman, A 2013, Research Interview, 17 September)

The community-building ability of social media is discussed in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

Implications of using social media as a news source

The analysis of the data pertaining to the reporting of the Victorian and Tasmanian bushfires shows social media was more predominantly used as an information-gathering tool than a news source. One of the reasons for the disparity may be traditional news media's continued reliance on accurate sources. In other words, if a

source – whether a social media text or not – cannot be verified, it will not be used to report on an event. This is particularly true when it comes to crisis events because the need for information is heightened, as explained further below.

Issues around accuracy of information and privacy proved to be the major implications for *The Age* and *The Mercury* in reporting the Black Saturday and Tasmanian bushfire events. For a news source to be published, it must first be verified, making accuracy a key factor when using social media texts as sources of information. During the Tasmanian bushfires, Holman (2013, Research Interview, 17 September) says there were tweets from members of the public saying authorities were searching for bodies: "Well, you can't publish that. You just cannot publish that information until it's verified". Ramadge supports this view by explaining that tweets about Black Saturday bushfires were only used as news sources if the information could be confirmed. He states: "[Twitter] was good if there was a clear statement that, for example, the front was moving somewhere, according to somebody..." (Ramadge, P 2013, Research Interview, 5 September).

Even in the fast-paced 24-hour news cycle, accuracy still comes before being the first in breaking the story. Holman (2013, Research Interview, 17 September) explains this point: "In a case where people's lives and properties are at risk, our role is to try and be first, but I prefer to be last and right, rather than first and wrong. We had to sift through a lot of social media coverage, internet coverage, bodies reportedly found, which they weren't". Reporting inaccurate information not only affects the credibility of a newspaper, but it can also affect its brand and land a news organisation in hot water legally. As Holman explains:

If I get things wrong, I'm hauled up before the Press Council. If I get things wrong

people stop buying us. We're a commercial operation. We do have to have some sort

of credibility around town. The whole thing these days across digital media is, 'Be

first'. Yeah, 'Be first, but be right'. (Holman, A 2013, Research Interview, 17

September)

Muller (2010) also highlighted verification and being first as priority issues for news

media during the Black Saturday bushfires. He says verification was particularly

difficult when it came to those who had died in the bushfires:

A particular issue concerning verification arose from the use of social networking

website Facebook and other secondary sources, mainly for pictures of people. The

extent to which these secondary sources were verified before publication – especially

online – was problematic. While respondents spoke of their wish to ensure accuracy,

it was obvious from many respondents that getting material up online first was a far

stronger imperative than making sure it was right. (Muller 2010: 8)

The need for accurate information in a time of crisis is so important that Holman

(2013, Research Interview, 17 September) says he did not want *The Mercury* to

compete with ABC Radio (as the official emergency broadcaster) and affect the flow

of vital information: "I thought, if there's a message, let that message get out, and let

the message get out in its entirety and in the fullness of truth… I just didn't want to

confuse the issue by having too many official information sources".

Both interviewees commented that monitoring social media during the crises

presented opportunities to use information, such as photographs, that had been posted

on Facebook and were, therefore, in the public domain. The data analysis discussed

earlier showed Twitter and Facebook were monitored by news journalists at both newspapers, and texts from these social media platforms quoted in news articles. In Ramadge's words: "…it was the issue of pictures that had been posted, and to what extent we were able to get access to those pictures, and then turn around and try to seek approval, for example, to publish them, particularly if they were victims. The privacy issue was paramount when it came to photos" (Ramadge, P 2013, Research Interview, 5 September). If the missing or dead person was named it was easy to find relatives through address and electoral roll checking, Ramadge (2013, Research Interview, 5 September) says. Research interview responses provide context around the way in which social media is used for information gathering and as a news source by news journalists. These comments also explain the limited number of news articles that used social media texts because of the need for accurate and verifiable sources.

How social media has changed journalism

The relationship between journalism and its audience was explored in the introductory chapter of this thesis. However, another way of describing this symbiotic relationship is by looking at how social media has bridged the gap between the two. Broersma and Graham (2013: 446) found journalism and social media have entered "a convenient marriage" with traditional media outlets using social media to distribute news, market upcoming stories, and find and approach sources. Instead of going out on the beat to find news, journalists can now access breaking stories, information about those stories, find sources and quotes and verify the information all via social media.

Events within the past five years show social media can be the source of breaking news. Janis Krums broke the news that US Airways flight 1549 had crashed into the

Hudson River in January 2009 on Twitter (see Murthy 2011). As Murthy (2011: 780-781) explains, Twitter has also been used to:

> …effectively communicate timely information during disasters (e.g. the bomb blasts in Mumbai in November 2008 and the May 2008 earthquake in China's Sichan province) and social movements (e.g. the demonstrations against Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the country's 2009 elections or the student-led protests against the victory of the Communist Party in Moldova's April 2009 elections). At an individual level, tweets have reported everything from crimes in progress to unlawful arrests.

People using social media, whether they consider themselves to be participatory journalists or not, can share information about an event from the scene, using mobile devices to upload photographs, videos and insights to explain what is happening around them.

As Broersma and Graham (2013: 460) found, "Twitter has become a regularly used source for newspaper journalists". It makes sense for traditional media outlets to use the information that Murthy (2011: 783) calls a "seamless convergence of photographic and textual information from everyday 'citizen journalists'" to help tell a story. There are two major reasons for this: economics, due to less staff reporting the news or staff not being present at the scene of the event; and the ability to have instant access to the news item, which is particularly important in the 24-hour news cycle in which news journalists operate (Murthy 2011; Broersma and Graham 2013).

The role of social media in a crisis

Interestingly, it was within two of *The Mercury*'s articles that some of the most pertinent statements to this study were made. In the first, Crawley and Smith (2013: 1) quoted Tasmanian Fire Service chief officer, Mike Brown, speaking about the value of social media within a crisis event:

> Mr Brown credits a 'new approach' to firefighting including changes to the way firefighters prepare for and attack fires, along with greater use of social media with preventing loss of life… He said better use of telephone warning systems and social media updates also ensured people stayed safe.

Amos' (2013: 18) opinion piece in *The Mercury* three days later similarly referred to evolving role of social media in times of crisis:

> The rise of social media has made the response during this fire season different from any other preceding it, and the role that social media played in co-ordinating aspects of the rescue efforts cannot be overstated. On Thursday, it was non-existent, by the end of the first weekend it was playing a pivotal role… The fact of the matter is that social media is immediate. Government by its nature is much slower to respond. The fact that government was accessing social media during the most difficult days is a mark of the way things will work in the future.

Holman identified similar issues in my research interview with him: "There was a demand for a quicker response… than what authorities here were able to meet". He believes there are lessons in the Tasmanian bushfire situation for authorities: "…they need social media people in their offices; people that are able to swing into action and steer people, answer the tweets" (Holman, A 2013, Research Interview, 17 September). The 2013 Tasmanian Bushfires Inquiry report recommended authorities,

such as the Tasmania Fire Service and Tasmania Police, review the use of, and commit to actively managing, social media in emergency situations, and these recommendations have been accepted (Tasmanian Government 2013).

So, if the reporting of Black Saturday in 2009 was a 'watershed' for Australian journalism (Muller and Gawenda 2011), do Brown's and Amos' comments suggest the use of social media during the 2013 Tasmanian bushfires was a watershed for crisis communications in Australia? The way in which social media texts were used within the newspaper articles analysed, particularly *The Mercury*, the responses from research interviewees and the recommendations in the Tasmanian Bushfires Inquiry report (2013) suggests social media does have an important role to play in the reporting of, and communication during, crisis events.

This chapter examined traditional news media's reporting of the Black Saturday and Tasmanian bushfires in 2009 and 2013, respectively, and assessed the role social media texts played as news sources, as well as sources of information. The analysis shows that there is a relationship between traditional journalistic news sources and social media texts as news sources, albeit a smaller relationship than first anticipated. However, this does not necessarily diminish the role that social media might play in the reporting of future crisis events, as discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

The US Airways flight crashing into the Hudson River, London bombings and Boston bombings, all show the important role social media plays as a news source. In analysing the 2009 Black Saturday and 2013 Tasmanian bushfire case studies to see how social media was used in the reporting of these events four years apart, the evolution of journalistic practice due to the addition of social media as a news source was evident. While the sample of news articles was small, it did show that social media was used as a news source during both crisis events, and that this use increased in the period from 2009 to 2013. Further investigation (and contextualisation) of the research data via interviews with the two editors of the newspapers studied increased the level of insight around how social media texts have been incorporated into journalistic practice over a four-year period.

By considering how social media could continue to be used as a news source and its potential influence on future reporting, it is clear that these online platforms have already contributed to changes in journalistic practice. However, the profession is still underpinned by the value of accurate storytelling, and this value has impacted on the traditional media's uptake in using social media as a news source. Holman (2013, Research Interview, 17 September) says social media cannot be underestimated because "it can form and change opinions very rapidly". Therefore, there is potentially a more substantial role for social media to play – both within the institution and professional practices of news journalism, and within society as a whole.

This role involves both challenges – in ensuring the source material is accurate and can be verified, as outlined further below – as well as opportunities. Social media is a useful tool for traditional news media, because it helps users find, test and share information. In this way, social media provides an extension to the role traditional media plays in gathering and disseminating news.

Accuracy versus being on the spot

This study has demonstrated that, in crisis events like the Victorian and Tasmanian bushfires, social media often acts as a connector, information tool and broadcaster. However, it also functions as a necessary 'check and balance' for the content being shared via those online platforms. Holman explains this further:

> People are busy these days, but we probably keep in contact with each other more than we ever have. We're more connected with each other than we ever have [been]. And so social media will take an increasing part of our media role, but with it comes a lot of challenges: verifying information, keeping the debate clean, keeping the debate on track. (Holman, A 2013, Research Interview, 17 September)

By verifying information found on social media and then sharing this material, as well as aggregating online content, the media can still be at the forefront of breaking news.

The idea of breaking news on social media is not a new one, but it is the journalistic skill in checking that news for accuracy that highlights a major difference between traditional news journalism and participatory journalism. This was clearly illustrated when news of the US Airways flight crash into the Hudson River broke on Twitter first. However, accuracy is still key, as Ramadge explains:

I think Twitter, in particular, has an ability to break news. I think it can quickly harness groups of people, forms communities around issues… If you think about the Boston Marathon, there was a lot of Twitter activity – some of which in the wash-up of the day proved to be a little bit inaccurate but at other times amazingly accurate – by real observers talking about where exactly on the route the bombs had apparently gone off and what the damage was, how many were hurt, what they were seeing.

(Ramadge, P 2013, Research Interview, 5 September)

The ability to capture a story 'on the spot' using eyewitness reports, videos and photographs has always been valued highly by news media, but social media takes the eyewitness concept to a new level altogether, because so many people now have access to the tools needed (such as smartphones) to broadcast the news from the scene. An example of the value of having someone on the spot was seen when the media used the public's social media texts to report the Boston bombings. Holman says: "…the footage being used by the big TV networks, with millions and millions of dollars backing, actually was footage taken probably from an iPhone" (Holman, A 2013, Research Interview, 17 September).

Social media as a news source in future journalism

This study has demonstrated that the constant stream of information broadcast on social media platforms from people around the world can act as an online newsroom, but it can also help journalists discover breaking stories and find sources. Journalists can use social media to help tell the news because, as Ramadge says: "A reporter can't be everywhere; and to think, that in Twitter's case, you could have 1,000 or so

assistants [to help the journalist do their job]" (Ramadge, P 2013, Research Interview, 5 September). He explains the idea of crowd-sourced journalism further:

> …smart social media-savvy journalists have learnt that they can pose their own questions openly to an open audience, along the lines of, 'Look, I'm doing a story on X, Y, and Z, and I'd be very interested to get feedback about this particular issue'. And of course they can garner hundreds of responses…and that just rapidly extended their ability to report accurately. (Ramadge, P 2013, Research Interview, 5 September)

Using social media to gather information from a number of sources works on two levels: the journalist has access to a multitude of views and opinions on the subject, allowing them to tell multiple sides of the story, and media outlets can access people who can help them report on an event without the need to send a journalist out. The downside of this approach is, by using information that is readily available in the public sphere online, traditional media outlets are giving up exclusive rights to the content, unless they can find a source to give an alternative angle offline. As Broersma and Graham (2013: 461) argue: "[I]n a world where information is omnipresent, journalism has to redefine its relevance. Newspapers can make a difference in contextualizing tweets".

Future research opportunities

This study used only two events to explore the role that social media plays in news reporting during crises. The small sample itself poses a limitation in drawing conclusions about social media as a news source for reporting in a broader sense, as discussed in the Methodology chapter of this thesis. However, the investigation of the

literature around the changing practice of journalism shows social media has developed as both a news source for traditional media and a source of news for the public.

The two bushfire case studies from 2009 (Black Saturday) and 2013 (Tasmania) presented small samples from which to test the hypothesis that social media texts have become an accepted news source, particularly during crisis events. However, these findings do raise questions about how journalistic practice has changed in relation to the use of social media texts over the time period, as outlined in the literature reviewed here. Therefore, there is scope to extend this study further by comparatively analysing newspaper reporting during other Australian crisis events, such as Cyclone Yasi or the Queensland floods, which both happened in 2011. A study of this kind could provide additional data in relation to the changing nature of journalistic practice in between the two bushfire case studies and, therefore, a more in-depth study into Australian news media's use of social media in crisis reporting. Additionally, the methodology used in this study could be replicated and expanded to compare how international newspapers used social media texts as a news source when reporting the Boston bombings, which would also account for longitudinal developments in journalistic practice in relation to social media use. Moving beyond journalistic practice around news sources, the influence of geographic and social factors in the news reporting of crisis events, and the affect these factors have on such reporting, is another area that could be explored in more detail.

As the research for this study demonstrates, there is a place for social media within journalism, particularly when information is hard to find and confirm in a fast-

breaking story like a crisis. When Mnookin (2013) live tweeted the capture of one of the alleged Boston bombers, for example, he was using his training and experience as a journalist to tell a news story, but used Twitter as his medium. Mnookin was the source *and* the journalist; sharing his insights from the scene. The texts he published were then used as sources for further reporting on the event, but they were also a source of news for Mnookin's followers who watched the event unfold via his tweet stream. It is the place where traditional and social media meets that offers much opportunity for the future of journalistic practice. Mnookin and Hong (2013) explain this by saying:

> There is a reflexive reaction to pit emergent social media behavior against traditional journalistic practices and norms. This defensive posture is counterproductive, for both sides. Rather than pointing out flaws to favor one model over the other, we should appreciate the interplay between them, an interdependence that ultimately produces a more participatory, accurate and compelling news cycle.

As Mnookin and Hong (2013) outline above, there is little point in positioning participatory journalism against traditional news journalism. Both have a place in the media; indeed texts produced by each inform and add context to the other. This study has demonstrated that social media texts have played a role as news sources in traditional news media's reporting of crisis events. Although the extent to which this was evident in the sample of news articles analysed was much smaller than originally anticipated, the research interviews and review of literature conducted for the study show that journalistic practice is changing. This includes news journalism's relationship to social media texts as news sources. Social media texts provide material for news journalists to report on during crisis events, as evidenced by the social media

campaigns against Solaluk and the Alilovics during the bushfires. These texts also provide source material for news journalists, as evidenced by *The Age* journalists monitoring CFA warnings on Twitter (Bachelard and Fyfe 2009) and Smith quoting Facebook and Twitter posts to Ellen DeGeneres (2013b: 3). While traditional news media's use of social media texts has not yet caught up to the public's use, this is also changing. As the use of social media increases and more people take on the role of participatory journalists, social media texts will become more prevalent in news media reporting.

The public's use of social media to share lived experiences during a crisis should not replace news journalism. A news journalists' role is to check the facts and craft a story based on what they find, whereas a participatory journalist is more likely to be sharing what is happening to them at a moment in time. Using social media texts as news sources has been seen to contribute to the unfolding story, rather than detract from it, leading to more rounded and faster reporting, particularly in the midst of a crisis situation. Social media is one of the tools journalists use to tell the news, with social media texts becoming more important as news sources, especially to report on fast-moving stories like crises.

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APPENDICES

The Age's Black Saturday Bushfire Reporting

Date	Author	Page	Article title	Social media use	Reference
15/2/09	Bachelard, M. and Fyfe, M.	3	*Lessons From the Ashes - A New Dawn - The inquiry*	Source	"But a Sunday Age analysis of records on the Twitter website (which re-broadcast official CFA warnings within minutes of them going online) shows that warnings for the Kilmore-Kinglake fire were sparse at crucial times…The first warning of the fire hit the Twitter website at 12.15pm on Saturday, 25 minutes after CFA officers arrived at the scene on a country property outside Kilmore and reported the fire was out of control and growing fast."
17/2/09	Collins, S. and Gregory, P.	1	*Accused arsonist named despite plea - After the Fires*	Subject	"As thousands of hostile messages about the alleged firebug appeared on the Facebook networking site, his counsel, Helen Spowart, told Melbourne Magistrates Court yesterday Sokaluk was not safe even in protective custody."
17/2/09	Milovanovic, S.	4	*Online hate mail threat to arson case*	Subject	"Since Friday, at least five groups on social networking site Facebook had attracted about 3500 people, with most users either threatening or inciting violence towards the accused…The messages were posted on Facebook groups which named Sokaluk over the three days his name was suppressed from publication by court order…Despite this, the accused's photograph, seemingly lifted from his own, private Facebook account, was circulating on the internet last night…An Australian spokeswoman for Facebook could not reach the company's US-based representatives for comment. But Colin Jacobs, vice-president of online civil liberties group Electronic Frontiers Australia, said Facebook usually removed offensive content if it received complaints, even if such content was not illegal. 'If the user posts something against the law, they can be prosecuted. If they get a court order, Facebook can

					reveal the identity of the user,' Mr Jacobs said. 'But Facebook and other social networking sites aren't in a position to actively police everything. I think it's ultimately desirable.'…He said that terms of service for major social networking websites generally excluded offensive content."
18/2/09	Hagan, K., Gray, D. and Moses, A.	4	*Fire accused a target over Facebook photo: lawyer - After the Fires*	Subject	"Lawyer Julian McMahon told the Supreme Court he was concerned for Sokaluk's safety after his photograph and 'vicious' comments, including calls for him to be tortured and killed, were posted on social networking website Facebook…Thousands of Facebook vigilantes defied the ban by publishing his photo and address, accompanied by violent threats…Facebook yesterday began removing postings threatening violence against Sokaluk. A spokeswoman said the website aimed to 'strike a very delicate balance between giving Facebook users the freedom to express their opinions and beliefs, while also ensuring that individuals or groups of people do not feel threatened'."
19/2/09	Anonymous	16	*Arson charges don't wipe out the right to a fair trial*	Subject	"By this week, however, the Premier was appealing for people to remain calm in response to the arson charges after a photograph of Sokaluk was published on the social networking website Facebook, together with messages calling for him to be tortured and killed…Facebook is removing such postings, but to do so while issuing statements about 'the delicate balance' between allowing freedom of expression and ensuring that people do not feel threatened is to evade reality."

The Mercury's Tasmanian Bushfire Reporting

Date	Author	Page	Article title	Social media use	Reference
7/1/13	Anonymous	18	*We'll stick together*	Subject	"People are flooding social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter with offers of support and points of contact for donations, which are flooding in."
8/1/13	Anonymous	8	*Community services guide*	Subject	"Massive Facebook response: Page 11."
8/1/13	Mounster, B.	9	*Spirit amid the adversity*	Subject	"The main vessel was Pennicott Wilderness Journey's 40-seater speedboat, accompanied by privately owned speedboats, and co-ordinated via a Facebook page."
9/1/13	Smith, L.	8	*Charred bricks & twisted metal I had to question the cruel randomness…why was my grandparents' home gone*	Source	"My Facebook newsfeed is filled with posts from people running fundraising pages and donation points."
9/1/13	Anonymous	20	*State shows true grit*	Subject	"Others have used social media to start collections."
14/1/13	Crawley, J. and Smith, L.	1	*Firefighter Dies Victorian hero falls on backburn mission Firie dies on backburn job*	Subject	"Mr Brown credits a 'new approach' to firefighting including changes to the way firefighters prepare for and attack fires, along with greater use of social media with preventing loss of life…He said better use of telephone warning systems and social media updates also ensured people stayed safe."
14/1/13	Smith, L.	3	*Clamour for Ellen to visit Tassie Bushfires spark online campaign to lure TV star*	Source	"'I know your (sic) a long way from Australia and even longer away from Tasmania, but we could really use your help right now,' said one Tasmanian's plea on DeGeneres's Facebook page…It is just one of many messages Tasmanian sent to DeGeneres in recent days, many of them attracting thousands of 'likes' and comments from

					others keen to see DeGeneres visit the state. Even Premier Lara Giddings has joined the social media push to bring the high-profile actor, comedian and presenter to Tasmania, after tweeting to DeGeneres: 'How about coming to Tasmania while in Aus? You would be most welcome. Help us to rebuild tourism post-bushfires.'"
16/1/13	Smith, M.	9	*Summer Hellfire: The Recovery My name's been cleared Profiteering smear campaign untrue*	Subject	"Everyday Nubeena shop owners Branko and Roza Alilovic had been the subject of a social media campaign accusing them of profiteering as bush fires raged around the southeast township last week. The accusations prompted IGA to strip the store of its branding and issue a statement on its Facebook page saying the franchise was appalled by the accusations…'It was obvious in these discussions that he is deeply troubled by the allegations and has suffered greatly as a result of them, including being harassed and berated by people within the community and on social media,' he said…He said it was difficult dealing with rumours on social media."
17/1/13	Amos, J.	18	*Humanity at its brightest blaze*	Subject	"The rise of social media has made the response during this fire season different from any other preceding it, and the role that social media played in co-ordinating aspects of the rescue efforts cannot be overstated. On Thursday, it was non-existent, by the end of the first weekend it was playing a pivotal role…The fact of the matter is that social media is immediate…The fact that government was accessing social media during the most difficult days is a mark of the way things will work in the future."
17/1/13	Fulton, T.	40	*Ten pairs roll through to championship quarters*	Source	"Items can be viewed by searching for 'auction for Tassie bushfires' on Facebook."

CONSENT FORM

Understanding how social media is used as a news source in the reporting of crisis events

1. I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet' for this project.

2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.

3. I understand that the study involves being interviewed for approximately half an hour on my involvement as a newspaper editor associated with the reporting of the case study events.

4. I understand that participation involves disclosing aspects of my media practices for study.

5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored in a safe location for at least five years, and will then be destroyed when no longer required.

6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

7. I agree that research data gathered from me for the study may be published.

8. I understand that the interview will be taped, and I will receive a transcript of the interview to review.

9. I agree that my name may be used and identity disclosed in publications resulting from this research.

10. I understand that any information I supply to the researcher(s) will be used only for the purposes of the research.

11. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and if I so wish, may request that any data I have supplied to date be withdrawn from the research.

Name of Participant: PAUL RAMADGE

Signature:

Date: 28/08/13

Statement by Student Investigator

✔ I have explained the project & the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐ The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

Name of Student Investigator   Johanna Baker-Dowdell

Signature of Student Investigator

Name of Chief Investigator: Dr Katrina Clifford

Signature of Chief Investigator ___ _____

Name of Student Investigator: Johanna Baker-Dowdell

Signature of Student Investigator

Date 28.8.13

CONSENT FORM

Understanding how social media is used as a news source in the reporting of crisis events

1. I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet' for this project.

2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.

3. I understand that the study involves being interviewed for approximately half an hour on my involvement as a newspaper editor associated with the reporting of the case study events.

4. I understand that participation involves disclosing aspects of my media practices for study.

5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored in a safe location for at least five years, and will then be destroyed when no longer required.

6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

7. I agree that research data gathered from me for the study may be published.

8. I understand that the interview will be taped, and I will receive a transcript of the interview to review.

9. I agree that my name may be used and identity disclosed in publications resulting from this research.

10. I understand that any information I supply to the researcher(s) will be used only for the purposes of the research.

11. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and if I so wish, may request that any data I have supplied to date be withdrawn from the research.

Name of Participant: *Andrew Holman*

Signature: Date: *9.9.2013*

editorial Office Manager

Statement by Student Investigator

> I have explained the project & the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐ The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

Name of Student Investigator   Johanna Baker-Dowdell

Signature of Student Investigator

Name of Chief Investigator: Dr Katrina Clifford

Signature of Chief Investigator _   _____

Name of Student Investigator: Johanna Baker-Dowdell

Signature of Student Investigator

Date 28.8.13