

5.3 The Citizen Journalist and news images

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The decline in the readership of newspapers (particularly in America and Europe) and the even greater decline in advertising revenue were canvassed at a summit on the future of journalism hosted by the MEAA and Walkley Foundation on 1-2 May this year at the ABC's Eugene Goossens Hall in Ultimo, New South Wales. The migration of readers and advertisers to the internet was suggested as the major reason for both of these declines with Mike van Nickerk from Fairfax arguing that it is only through diversification (i.e. working across different media platforms) that print media companies can survive; newspapers alone will no longer be enough to sustain them.

The decline in print-based advertising is of particular concern for without classified advertising newspapers might not be able to afford to pay for journalist's salaries. It also raises a larger problem for diversification, as identified in the 5 May 2008 edition of ABC 1's *Media Watch*, how to get money from news websites to fund quality journalism. As *Media Watch*'s host Jonathan Holmes noted: "there's no obvious substitute for the newspaper business model when it comes to funding quality journalism."

The flow-on effects of this economic change are two-fold. First, there are already indications that the most popular news stories online are soft rather than hard news, moving the media sphere ever closer to the dissemination of entertainment and identity-based stories rather than information. Secondly, the lack of advertising means that news organisations will only retain a small core group of 'professional journalists' and have to rely more on 'amateur journalists' from citizen journalists to bloggers.

An example of this already occurring was in relation to the fire that gutted the historic Liverpool Street Myer store in Hobart, Tasmania, on 22 September last year. *The Mercury* newspaper, ABC Online and *Tasmanian Times* (an online paper) all encouraged their readers to submit photos and stories of the fire to be included as part of their reportage. *The Mercury*, for example, provided an email address for readers to send in photos and offered to put together "a gallery of the best [shots]" that is still accessible online. Many smaller online sites such as **LiveLeak.com** (with their slogan "redefining the media") and **blogonthespot.com** similarly hosted reports and vision from the fire. On the night of the fire itself it was interesting to see the number of people actively recording the blaze or taking photos on their mobile phones, which were then sent on to friends and family. No longer, it seems, are the public just passive witnesses to media events, they are active participants, serving as witnesses for those who cannot be present, capturing, archiving and reporting on the story – the very essence of the citizen journalist in action.

It almost goes without saying that for a long time now, the print media have played a subordinate role to broadcast media in terms of breaking news. Audiences tend to go to broadcast media for immediacy – the latest scoop, the most up-to-date information – and then turn to print media for more background detail, as Margaret Simons puts it, "looking to papers for *depth* rather than *news*". While some defenders of print media

have argued that newspapers still set the agenda for news, the steady proliferation of *media events* over the last few years, those news stories that receive blanket coverage across all media platforms, suggest that more than ever it is television that establishes the direction of reporting for each day.

This displacement of print media from its (formerly) central role in news reportage has only increased with online news sources. What were originally devised as web-based adjuncts to newspapers have all but replaced their print counterparts – be they newspapers or news magazines. In January this year after 127 years of publication, *The Bulletin*, Australia's oldest and perhaps most familiar weekly news magazine was shut down as it was no longer considered to be financially viable, its sales dropping from more than 100,000 in the mid 1990s to 57,039 by September 2007. ACP magazines chief executive Scott Lorson described the closure as being "somewhat symptomatic of the impact of the internet on this particular genre."