

News and the Net: Convergences and Divergences

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This special issue of *Scan* starts from the claim that a thorough engagement with news remains central to an understanding of contemporary media. In the 1980s leading scholars could write that news was ‘high-status’ (Fiske 1987: 281) and that it enjoyed ‘a privileged and prestigious position in our culture’s hierarchy of values’ (Hartley 1982: 5). But in the early twenty-first century, as Graeme Turner suggests, the very idea of news ‘looks increasingly old-fashioned’ (2005: 13).

And yet this picture is a complicated one, with the traditional news media still far from being replaced by newer models. Anyone involved in media education will recognise that undergraduate students commonly say that they don’t read the papers or watch the TV bulletins, but rather go online for news. Pressed for details, though, this often turns out to mean they go to the websites of the main newspapers or TV news providers. Some say they prefer participatory news networks such as [Indymedia](#) or the experience of blogging to that of consuming news: but here again the agenda for discussion is often that set by the traditional news media. Others are happier with the blend of news and entertainment and satirical commentary offered by TV shows such as *Have I Got News For You?* in the UK, *The Glass House* in Australia, or Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* in the US (and beyond, with episodes widely shared online through applications such as Bit Torrent). And yet here again, the content of these shows — the menu of topics available to satirise — is often largely set by the current concerns of the traditional news media.

By contrast, practices of ‘citizen journalism’ emphasise participatory media production that contests the concentration of media power institutionally and professionally, and challenge the mass media’s apparent monopoly on the production of symbolic forms (Atton 2003; Couldry and Curran 2003). Citizen journalism constructs a reality that directly opposes the conventions and representations of the mass media. To link the practice of citizen journalism with the practice of citizenship might then be seen as an attempt to offset the ‘democratic deficit’ and to counter the growing lack of interest in political life. The creation of alternative media spaces therefore becomes an important element in the development of what Pippa Norris (1999) terms ‘critical citizens.’

The mainstream media are beginning to take account of such activities. UK newspaper the *Guardian* has re-branded its online op-ed page as a blog titled ‘[Comment Is Free](#)’ (‘... but facts are sacred’ as their former editor C.P. Scott had it), with some columns now attracting hundreds of follow-up posts from readers. The *International Herald Tribune* has signed a deal with the Korean participatory news website [OhmyNews](#), whereby stories written by its non-professional citizen journalists could be carried on the *Herald Tribune*’s website, and perhaps in the newspaper itself. These practices suggest new forms of reporting, such as that termed ‘professional participatory storytelling’ (Deuze 2005). They could be seen as realisations of the Internet’s democratic potential for wider participation in relation to news. Or they could be seen as part of processes of absorption and normalisation of the Net, with the established news media extending their influence and reach into the online environment, thus consolidating their positions.

This suggests two related conceptual positions: first, the notion of news as the outcome of professionalised practices and the challenges its institutionalisation faces through participation and connectivity; second, the struggles over symbolic power that new media practices have instigated. At stake here is media power, understood institutionally and symbolically.

The papers collected in this issue help us chart this emerging territory. The authors share a concern with developing new methodological approaches. They offer work which is empirically-informed as well as theoretically-grounded. From one perspective, these papers can be seen to engage with aspects of *convergence*, from multi-platform publishing to

concentrated ownership — the comings-together of content, communications and computing; of industries and audiences; of models and modes (Boczkowski 2004; Castells 2000; Pool 1983; Rice 1999). From another perspective, these essays are concerned with the opposites of convergence, with ways in which Net use can enable new configurations of news production, distribution and reception; new modes of authorship and audiencehood; new kinds of producer and consumer: pluralisation, multiplication, fragmentation — *divergence* (Atton 2004; Bruns 2005; Lovink 2002; Meikle 2002).

[Axel Bruns](#) offers a measured analysis of the [Wikinews](#) project, suggesting that the early evidence points to something of a missed opportunity. Bruns assesses *Wikinews* against some of the best available criteria for evaluating participatory news websites (including his own concept of ‘gatewatching’), and in the process provides a concise overview of the key characteristics of the most innovative online news projects, such as [Slashdot](#) and [Indymedia](#).

[Greg Elmer, Zach Devereaux and David Skinner](#) apply some experimental software tools and research methods to the automated [Google News](#) portal. Uncovering the extent to which large commercial news providers are highly ranked in *Google News* searches, and the degree to which such news is re-purposed newspaper content, the authors’ conclusion points to an extension of the reach and influence of the established news media in the online environment.

[Lee Salter](#) examines the pressures that impose limits on the kinds of participatory media democracy to which the *Indymedia* movement aspires. Salter adduces examples from around the world of government intervention in relation to the activities of *Indymedia* collectives, emphasising the need to consider such alternative Net news projects as embedded within spaces which are not only economically but also politically regulated.

[Trish Bolton](#) makes the case for a political economy perspective in assessing the Net’s capacity to enable a more plural news environment. She notes how commercial business models are implicated in such much-cited examples of alternative online journalism as [Crikey](#) and the [Webdiary](#) forum started by Margo Kingston during her time at the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Bolton also points to the reality that many news blogs and alternative sites lack the resources to generate original reporting.

[Megan Boler](#) examines the media event in which Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, appeared as a guest on CNN’s *Crossfire* and delivered a damning indictment of television journalism. [Clips of Stewart’s appearance](#) have been downloaded millions of times, and the event was by some measures the most-cited media story in the blogosphere for 2004. Boler traces the Stewart event’s iteration through the blogosphere, raising questions about the uses of satire in news commentary, and examining some key ways in which convergent media forms are being used to create new spaces and networks for political discussion.

Taken together these papers offer a sobering corrective to anyone still inclined towards enthusiastic generalisations about the Net’s potential. Arising from this work is a concern with missed opportunities and with the encroachment of the established news media on the possibilities of the Net.

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