

CHAPTER TWO: Trending as a microcosm of Australian society

“The news has to cover such a vast array of intelligences and so they have to feed the lowest denominator” – Julie², focus group participant

According to my interview with the Data Editor for the Sydney Morning Herald, Conrad Walters, “Journalism is a distillation of available information delivered within the limits of deadlines and available space.”³ At first glance this would suggest that the internet would be highly beneficial for the distribution of news however Walters discussed that although people believe that the internet has “endless room”⁴ in which proper articles and investigative journalism can occur, people are reading fewer words.

During my Generation Z focus group, I noticed that Generation Z participants had vastly different responses to the Baby Boomers in regards to certain news stories⁵, frequently with a different angle. I determined this to be attributed to the source of their news – social media.⁶ John⁷ stated that “there is so much noise [on social media], how does one discern what is important, what is peripheral, and what is real because there is so much stuff coming at you from all angles?”

Which led me to another line of enquiry, rather than being unable to discern the fact from the fiction, perhaps Generation Z prefers the fiction. There is a growing number of reality television shows in Australia, from talent contests to home renovating and celebrity shows, but their popularity has made them news too. “News” programs, such as the Today Show⁸, treat reality TV as news, interviewing stars of the shows, predicting outcomes and more.⁹ When there is so much important news that doesn’t get past the chopping board, why does reality TV and celebrity news get priority? Does the emphasis placed on this category of news reflect a society which is becoming increasingly narcissistic? Unlike older generations

² Baby Boomer focus group participant, name changed for privacy

³ Interview with Conrad Walters, Data Editor at the Sydney Morning Herald (09/03/2015), permission to use name and title granted

⁴ Ibid

⁵ The same reports shown to the Baby Boomer focus group as to the Generation Z focus group

⁶ The majority of the Generation Z focus group (71%) said that social media was their main source of news

⁷ Baby Boomer focus group participant, name has been changed for privacy

⁸ Australian breakfast television program broadcast on the Nine Network

⁹ Keeping Up with the Kardashians (an American reality television series that focuses on the personal and professional lives of the Kardashian-Jenner family) is a prime example of reality TV which has become a news item.

who seemed to accept news for being exactly that – news, younger generations seem to need an entertainment value in their news to satisfy their own personal cravings for enjoyment. The number of reality TV shows in America jumped from four shows in 2000 to 320 in 2010.¹⁰ This reveals a huge increase and suggests that society is craving more entertainment in their news, perhaps because they are bored with the real thing.¹¹ Hollie McKay writing for Fox News¹², asks the question “Is it time they re-named "reality" television to something more "real" – like imagined, feigned, or totally fake television?”

A study by The Atlantic¹³ further discovered that although most people, young and old, state they value “serious” news, their media habits say otherwise. My interview with Alice Workman was extremely useful on elaborating on the viewing and listening habits of younger people. Unlike my interviews with other journalists, Alice Workman works for JJJ Hack¹⁴, the only national youth radio station in Australia, and therefore had a huge amount of insight into the viewing habits of younger people. An interview was best suited for this part of the research as it allowed me to gather in-depth responses to questions and enabled me to mould my questions to the area specific to the journalist. Her responses highlighted that young people are more likely to only read headlines of articles, prefer more photos than content, and like short videos or audio. Workman stated that this made reporting on current affairs difficult “something we struggle to combat everyday” because there is a fine line between “too complicated or, on the flip side too simplistic.” This suggests that news bureaux consciously modify their reporting in order to suit the sophistication of their audience, and although this seems obvious, it reveals that the manipulation of language and content is an aspect of the news which is important to journalists. So is the intelligence of the news a reflection of the society or is the intelligence of the society a reflection of the news?

¹⁰ Although these are American statistics, similar trends are apparent in Australia with numerous American reality TV shows being watched in Australia. I unfortunately had difficulty locating these statistics. Anthony Ocasio, 'Reality TV by the Numbers [Infographic]' (*Screen Rant*, 2012) <<http://screenrant.com/reality-tv-statistics-infographic-aco-149257/>> accessed 9 July 2015.

¹¹ This is discussed more in chapter three

¹² Hollie McKay, 'Reality Bites: Is The 'Reality' TV Genre Falling Apart?' (*Fox News*, 2013) <<http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2013/02/05/reality-bites-is-reality-tv-genre-falling-apart/>> accessed 28 June 2015.

¹³ Derek Thompson, 'Journalism In The Age Of The Accidental News Junkie' (*The Atlantic*, 2015) <<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/03/journalism-in-the-age-of-the-accidental-news-junkie/387940/>> accessed 2 July 2015.

¹⁴ Interview with Alice Workman, Political Reporter, jjj Hack (previously worked at 2UE, 2GB, Sky News) (11/03/2015). Permission to use name and title given. 8 years of experience in the media industry.

According to Professor Taggesell “We influence our media outlets, our media outlets influence us. We emulate what we see”¹⁵

In order to try and find an answer to this question, I compared two opposing articles on the “dumbing down” of the news, both by the Sydney Morning Herald. The first article held Australian society to blame and the second article found fault with the media and politics. The first article¹⁶ actually contests that we are being dumbed down however concedes that “the digital revolution has dumbed down the news agenda. People - especially younger people, digital natives - have neither the time nor the appetite for detailed reporting or long-winded analysis.” However the article does provide examples of some exceptions of sophisticated and intelligent reporting which has thrived in recent times. The second article¹⁷ however argues that “it's the media that are overly preoccupied with and impressed by the new rather than the old, by the flashy and the emotionally gratifying, by what's on the surface rather than what's underneath.” Another thing that caught my attention was the suggestion that “the speeding up of the 24-hour news cycle is essentially the product of the media's ever-shortening attention span” which is directly contradictory to my interview with Alice Workman who suggested that that “we [Australian society] have lost our attention span” and as such “media organisations....spread themselves too thin to do more.”¹⁸ This discrepancy suggests that there is no real answer and it is a symbiotic, self-perpetuating relationship which one has as much chance of finding an answer to as the “who came first the chicken or the egg” question.

Social Constructionism explains that newspapers are social constructs, implying that they only have meaning because society gives them a meaning.¹⁹ Therefore, how can a social construct have dominance over a society? Through my research, I have uncovered that society has created this news industry, which has in turn become an entity in its own right. Its

¹⁵ English and Mass Media Professor in the article: With Any Tragedy, Sensationalism Follows Teal Christensen, 'With Any Tragedy, Sensationalism Follows' (*The Sounds News*, 2013) <<http://www.thesoundsnews.com/news/special-report/with-any-tragedy-sensationalism-follows/>> accessed 17 June 2015.

¹⁶ Jonathan Holmes, 'No Need to Dumb down on Digital Platforms' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2014) <<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/no-need-to-dumb-down-on-digital-platforms-20141202-11y4yz.html>> accessed 4 June 2015.

¹⁷ Ross Gittins, 'Politicians and Media To Blame for 'Dumbing Down' News' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2015) <<http://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/politicians-and-media-to-blame-for-dumbing-down-news-20150524-gh8irn.html>> accessed 4 June 2015.

¹⁸ Interview with Alice Workman, Political Reporter, jji Hack (previously worked at 2UE, 2GB, Sky News) (11/03/2015). Permission to use name and title given.

¹⁹ Paul Boghossian, *What Is Social Construction?* <<http://philosophy.fas.nyu.edu/docs/IO/1153/socialconstruction.pdf>> accessed 19 May 2015.

ability to adapt and change with the times, yet continue to serve the same purpose, shows that it holds power and authority in society, as an entity separate from the society that made it. Therefore it is able to influence society without society instigating that action, and as such it is possible that society can be a reflection of the media.

Alice Workman stated that Triple J uses social media to engage with the audience, a view which is supported by my interview with Liam Howitt²⁰ who stated that in his profession social media is used as a “hook.”²¹ However the “hook” sometimes draws people’s attentions away from the more serious stories. The Huffington Post did an analysis of their biggest Facebook stories in January 2015 and the results (below) feature no top news stories from mainstream media.

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Figure #3

Headline	Total FB
109-Year-Old Woman Gives A Remarkable Reason For Her Long Life	1,014,372
The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, and It Is Not What You Think	928,770
12-Year-Old With Down Syndrome Shuts Down Statistics With John Legend Cover	701,629
They Should've Warned Me	588,490
Seattle Dog Figures Out Bus, Regularly Rides To Dog Park Solo	494,596
10 Signs You Are Living With a Threenager	389,347
This Teacher's Dance To 'Uptown Funk' With His Students Gets An 'A' In Breakin' It Down	354,284
11 Things Empty Nesters Want Parents Of Little Kids To Know	353,572
To My Daughter, At Halftime	329,087
An Entry-Level Pay-As-You-Go Lamp is the First Rung of the Energy Ladder	287,200
For Medical Issues, Some Seek Advice From Clairvoyants	287,200
What They Should Have Told Me Before I Rescued My Pit Bull	286,068
12 Lessons Learned In 12 Years Of Marriage	264,649
11 Habits of People With Concealed Depression	251,125
Here's Why It's So Hard To Have Your Period When You're Homeless	238,788

The Huffington Post's Biggest Facebook Stories, January 2015

²⁰ Interview with Liam Howitt Media & Communications Coordinator Surf Life Saving NSW (Previously Cadet Journalist Australian Associated Press, Newcastle Herald Intern) (15/04/2015). Permission to use name and title granted

²¹ A thing designed for catching hold of things - in this case people’s attention.

²² The Atlantic, 'The Huffington Post's Biggest Facebook Stories, January 2015' <<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/03/journalism-in-the-age-of-the-accidental-news-junkie/387940/>> accessed 11 June 2015.