

15.15 Reporting Social Services: Who really cares?

Dr Sally Young - Senior Lecturer, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne

The current media environment

- marked by major shifts in audiences, the use of media and technology and, as a result, media company business models and the way they present news and information
- newspapers and TV news and current affairs are especially undergoing rapid change and grappling with new models
- 24 hour news cycle and breaking news focus
- Fragmentation of audiences
- Online news – in some respects, wider audience but also a more transitory approach. Media companies trying to ‘monetise’ it. Only model so far that has really worked is business news.

What the research says about coverage of the not-for-profit sector:

- Entrenched news media focus on established ‘authoritative’ sources but especially government spokespeople, police, political parties, business
- This focus increases as journalism resources decline and demands on journalists increase
- In Aust especially – a limited number and range of external sources used in news stories
- News journalism good at reporting episodic events but struggles with thematic and big context themes (e.g. poverty)
- Some topics considered ‘audience killers’ and don’t fit with consumer purpose of commercial news
- A focus on the visual, the personal and the sensational in news reporting
- The ‘activist’s dilemma’

My own research into news – esp political/election news

- spokespeople from NGOs, unions, even academics quoted rarely in Australian media compared to US/UK
- limited audience for broadsheet ‘serious’ political news but an influential one
- limited space for policy news
- limited space in Aust news journalism for viewpoints that are unpopular or eccentric.

The ‘bad’ ‘news’

- one trend in not-for-profit sector is paying for media access in order to bypass news workers decisions about what/who is newsworthy – e.g. unions and anti-*WorkChoices* campaign. This is a slippery slope.
- still media ownership concentration
- News Corp and its dominance over newspapers in Aust
- Role of tabloids/talkback and their often conservative agendas
- News in Australia very homogenised
- Lack of focus on social policy – whole areas of social life not making it into news
- Focus on ‘sellable’ news - celebrity, entertainment, leisure, headline-oriented
- Will need new reliance on civil society to make the links, fill in the gaps

The 'good' news

- an unanswered question: will media companies stagnate or decline or will they work out new models and continue their dominance?
- either way, increased strength of civil society in some elements of news – role of citizens in news production and selection of news (e.g. use of citizen photographs, comments online, social networking, on other sources), ability to use the internet to create newsworthy events
- 'there is a capacity for non-elite, poorly resourced actors to challenge institutionally located power through strategic actions, many of which rely on symbols with cultural or historical resonances, in order to circulate their messages within and by the media' (Lester 2010).
- the symbolic power attached to 'challenger' groups, rather than 'authorities', can sometimes counter the structural and routine imbalance of power (see the work of Libby Lester, Alison Anderson and Simon Cottle)
- optimistic accounts of changes – see John Keane and work of Brian McNair. McNair says 'As opposed to the linear model of top-down cause-and-effect... [there is now increasingly]... a non-linear model of constant feedback and adaptation as the news cycle evolves, each iteration of the cycle determined by what has gone before, the future of the system contingent on its past, and the evolution of other, interacting cycles. In this environment, there is loss of control, dilution of authority, and expanded opportunity for disruption of elite power'. (2006: 50)
- at a practical level - increased space for opinion, commentary – role of op-eds
- because of pressure on journalism resources, external actors who know routines and processes, can influence content (can be used for good as well as ill)
- providing the raw material for news
- politicians more aware of audience fragmentation (e.g. go on comedy shows, FM radio, breakfast shows etc). Talkback's influence has declined. Tabloid news influence will, I think, decline given audience base and shifts in media and technology. The future of online news has a different audience and a different news model will be used.

Strategies – what politicians do, activists can do

- Some decentralisation of power, definitions of politics widening, politicians-journalists roles changing
- be aware of different audiences and different approaches – go where 'news' goes and where audiences go. Think broadly about what 'news' is.
- use the internet, Twitter to reach individuals, raise awareness, raise money
- create ads on the internet – cheap and, if good enough, may be picked up by free media
- fill in the gaps for reporters – do the research, the context, the things journalists and media organisations are unable/unwilling to do
- contribute to debate through op-ed columns
- use alternative media
- make choices - fit news within media's preferred framework - visual, personalised, breaking news - or do own news the way you want it using different means