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The Silent Partner: News Agencies and 21st Century News

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This article investigates the ubiquitous presence of news agencies (or wire services) in the daily news. While considering the international environment, it focuses on the sole Australian news agency, Australian Associated Press (AAP), and on its dominance within the Australian news landscape. The article presents the findings of two case studies, tracing press releases through AAP and into the daily news around the world, while also analyzing the media culture that accepts copy from news agencies as "gospel"—a commodity to be used and reused without checking accuracy, and often without attribution. In addition, we identify that the heightened status of news agency copy, coupled with the "not wrong for long" approach which permeates online news, is a combination which increases the potential for error and inaccuracy. The article suggests the need for a shakeup in how media researchers view news sources, as well as a closer analysis of news agency domination within the news environment. Drawing on political economy theory, it sets the foundations for a larger study which could investigate the contemporary production of news.

Introduction

In the Associated Press' recent history book, *Breaking News*, CEO Thomas Curley writes,

> You may not know us well, or perhaps haven't even heard of us. We don't publish a newspaper or run a TV or radio station; what we do is provide the news to those who do for a world insatiable for information. (Associated Press, 2007, p. 17)

Curley's comment speaks to this article with its identification of news agencies as the "unseen" player in the contemporary news landscape. We suggest that the seeming invisibility of news agencies and their copy, alluded to by Curley, coupled with their dominance in global news, raises issues for news diversity and free speech. This issue is particularly relevant as 24/7 newsrooms and the need to be "first

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with the news" are leading to an even greater reliance on news agency copy than perhaps at any other time in news media history. News agencies provide copy for newsrooms with diminishing journalistic staffs which appears to have enhanced the importance of wire copy in the daily news cycle (Collingwood, 1999; Raward & Johnston, 2009; Barker, 2009. See also newspaper reports on the loss of journalists in Zimmerman, 2009; Folkenflik, 2005; and others). The increasing role for news agencies in contemporary news—and particularly online news sites—provides the basis for this research.

While it draws on global examples and literature, our focus in this paper is on the Australian news agency, Australian Associated Press (AAP), an agency which has hitherto received little or no attention from scholars, despite being Australia's only dedicated news agency. At a time when diversity of news sources is under much scrutiny due to the impact of the Internet on news delivery, we argue that there is a need to look closely at the "silent partner" of journalists and their news organizations, and to consider its scope and reach throughout the entire news cycle. Of importance in our study is a focus on contemporary newsgathering and news production practices. We investigate the developing media culture which accepts news agency copy almost without question by news producers. We also look at the growing percentage of public relations-generated material which is often reproduced as news agency copy and "turned around" and distributed, sometimes unattributed, by news organizations, leading to claims of journalistic "plagiarism" by one group of media researchers (Lewis et al., 2008b). This paper presents two case studies which track news agency copy—from public relations beginnings, through news agency redistribution, and on to publication in the mainstream media.

News Agencies and Political Economy

Political economy theories provide a strong grounding for understanding the necessarily commercially-driven, rather than democracy-driven decisions that news institutions make every day. Trends over the past 50 years have seen news organizations shed journalists; conduct less original investigative journalism; and look to syndicated news, public relations firms, and news agencies for an increasing amount of news content (McChesney, 2003; Davies, 2008; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004–2008; Edwards & Newbury, 2007; Mackinnon, 2006; Reeds & Colbourne, 2000; Schiller, 1989, p. 21). Political economy suggests that this increasing reliance on news agency copy—among many other forms of "syndicated" news—is the rational decision for commercial news organizations to make, regardless of the impact that it may have on news diversity. Certainly, as online news journalist and advocate for the march toward smaller newsrooms Roy Greenslade (2009) recognizes, online newsrooms require far smaller staffs, and news managers are justified in shedding journalists to improve bottom-line performance. It has serious implications, however, for news diversity and public engagement (McChesney, 2003; McChesney, 2008; Lee, 2009). Political economy arguments put forward by U.S. scholars such as Bob McChesney focus primarily on the ways in which mainstream news practices fail democracy—an over-reliance on official "experts" and sources; a lack of context in most news reporting; and the prominence of the commercial motivations of media organizations which mould the news that consumers receive (see also Hamilton, 2004; Carey, 1989; and King, 1997). McChesney concludes, "A political economic analysis stresses that the reasons for lousy journalism stem not from morally bankrupt or untalented journalists, but from a structure that makes such journalism the rational result of its operations" (2003, p. 324).

Murdock's analysis suggests that the ways in which news organizations are financed and organized have an impact on content or "discourses and representations in the public domain and accessibility to audiences" (Murdock, 1989, p. 46). Even more relevantly, McChesney argued in 1999 that the "core structural factors" influencing the nature of media content include a variety of influences. When considered in the context of AAP, the only news agency in Australia which is also owned by the established major media groups, his words have particular resonance:

> The core structural factors that influence the nature of media content include the overall pursuit of profit, the size of the firm, the amount of direct and indirect competition facing the firm and the nature of that competition, the degree of horizontal and vertical integration, the influence of advertising, the specific interests of media owners and managers, and, to a lesser extent, media employees. In combination, these factors can go a long way to providing a context (and a trajectory) for understanding the nature of media content. (1999, p. 31)

In short, political economy, in many ways, offers a seemingly simplistic but accurate analysis of how most contemporary (particularly commercial) media operate. It suggests that commercial decisions, which must be made, affect the content the media produce, as well as the way they present it. These decisions take into account the existence (or not) of competitors; the needs of clients (in this case, media outlets); the needs of the clients' advertisers; and the broader interests of the media proprietors; with limited influence also coming from the news agency journalists themselves. This works on two levels for our study—first, in terms of the stories AAP chooses to cover and the angles they adopt; and second, in the news decisions made by the news agency clients (news media outlets) in terms of the stories they choose to (a) follow-up; (b) reproduce with limited follow-up; or (c) reproduce word-for-word, with little or no input from their own journalists.

A purely economic analysis of news and news decisions suggests even more clearly that economics might help explain this expansion of the role of news agencies in the current news media landscape. James T. Hamilton's comprehensive examination of U.S. news content across three centuries tests the power of market imperatives and produces significant evidence of the role that consumer "preferences" play in the content produced. Rather than news really being something that is "new and surprising," which is the way it is marketed or popularly defined, his study finds that news is more usually "expectations of the familiar" which "often drive consumption" (2004, p. 8). While Hamilton recognizes that economics may not always explain the *outcomes* of media markets and the *impact* of news content, it does explain a great deal about how the media operate (ibid., p. 9). This is our primary concern here. In short, political economy—the term "political" economy is appropriate because we are also considering the role of news decisions in shaping society and the political process—can help us to understand the decisions taken by news agencies in covering news the way they do. Further, it can allow us to go beyond straight economic theories by extrapolating what these commercial/capitalist decisions might mean for society and the political process more generally.

News Agencies and Diversity

In line with these considerations about the factors that control decision making—both by news agencies, and by their media outlet "clients"—Frijters and Velamuri note that due to economic cutbacks, most major newspapers now rely on "recycled news" from wire services or from a decreasing number of mobile journalists (2009, p. 8). This "passive processing of news material" has become widely known as "churnalism" (Davies, 2008, p. 59), which might be thought of as one of the key "political economies" of contemporary news journalism. Veteran Australian journalist and finance editor Geoffrey Barker (2009) recently reflected on the state of the Australian newsroom when he left his nearly 50-year career in national and international reporting: "Journalists are valued according to the number of times their name appears over articles, meaning that the most automaton-like information processors—purveyors of what Nick Davies calls 'churnalism' —are the most valued staff." This is further endorsed in the literature from the United Kingdom. An editor in a recent UK study noted: "We are 'churning' stories today, not writing them. Almost everything is recycled from another source" (Lewis et al., 2008a, p. 31). This trend has been developing for some time—in Australia in 1993, a government reform commission found a heavy reliance by media outlets on government media releases, with 279 media releases resulting in 220 news stories which had been "reproduced virtually unchanged" (Electoral & Administrative Review Commission, 1993, p. 70). The same report found that regional press, in particular, "often contented themselves with ministerial media releases and the AAP news service for copy" (ibid., p. 31; Grattan, 1998; Grundy, 1993; Maguire, 1992).

Paterson found that online news worldwide was based on the "de facto duopoly" of Associated Press and Reuters. "The political economy of online news is not one of diversity but one of concentration, and the democratic potential of the medium remains mostly that—potential" (Paterson, 2006, p. 19). He argues that the notion of diversity "is a pretence that cannot last," and that the Internet presents "the dangerous illusion of multiple perspectives which actually emanate from very few sources" (ibid., p. 20). In fact, the most recent *State of the News Media* report from the United States suggests the merging of news across platforms, as news on the Internet is fast becoming the same as news in other media (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). For example, in 2008, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times,* and the *Los Angeles Times*, "brought online and offline staff operationally closer together" (ibid.). The study importantly recognizes, though, that despite the promise of volumes of "new" news and perspectives from the news Web sites, these online news organizations are producing very little original content. Their economic framework, which still sees a low level of traditional advertising and very little user-payment for content, limits the amount of original newsgathering they are able to do.

In Australia, (then) Editor-in-Chief of AAP Tony Vermeer claimed the reality of news agency copy and converged news platforms was that, while the Web was often seen as an alternative news source, it was more realistically an "alternative market for agency copy . . . When people call up breaking news, more often than not [it] is agency news they are reading" (Vermeer in Knight, 2007, p. 20). This is further explained by the current AAP Editor-in-Chief Tony Gillies, who says that newspapers, already heavy users of AAP content, "may use three or four times that amount of [AAP] content on their Web sites" (Australian Press Council [APC], 2008, p. 34). An Australian Press Council report explains the increase: "Content

sources such as press agencies like AAP have long provided many stories for Australia's newspapers. The needs of a 24-hour newsroom have led to a greater reliance on such sources" (ibid., p. 7).

A recent study examining news coverage of the horrific "Black Saturday" Victorian bushfires in Australia's southeast corner certainly suggests that the "need for speed" is one of the key reasons that some of the coverage of the bushfires was incorrect and had to be quickly pulled down from various news Web sites. This natural tragedy, which unfolded over a number of days in February 2009, saw 173 people lose their lives, 400 people injured, and more than 2,000 homes lost. Journalists and editors interviewed in the aftermath of the Black Saturday crisis said the need for ongoing news on their organization's Web site "produced a further challenge to the standards of verification." The report found: Most of the media people in this study were required to file for their organization's Web sites, as well as for their newspaper, radio, or television station. This ceaseless demand for material created a situation in which, to quote one respondent, "what is fact right now can be proven to be fiction 20 minutes later." [Other] respondents said:

> "It's very easy in the online age to be swept up . . . in the story and just whack stuff on and off the Web."
>
> "The world is replete with online examples where everyone is in this mad rush to publish online. Everybody gets swept up in this. You've got a 24/7 news platform now."
>
> "[I said] 'We want rigour.' Obviously there are some things we are going to, with all good intentions, publish that in an hour or two, or next day, [are] going to be found to have been incorrect." (Gawenda & Muller, 2009, p. 67)

Indeed, journalists and editors working in the online environment told the researchers they tended to verify facts *after* a story had been published, rather than before, as is journalistic convention (ibid., pp. 12–13). In addition, it was clear from people working specifically in online news that "the pressure to be first was much greater than the pressure to be right" (ibid., p. 13).

Public Relations, News Copy, and News Agency Legitimacy

The pressure to meet the 24/7 newsroom's "hunger" for news, then, is significant and would appear to impact the reliance of the news media on agency copy to fill news space. Davies notes that the main suppliers of information to the news media in the UK and the United States are "two primary conveyor belts: the Press Association and public relations" (2008, p. 74). This is supported by Lewis et al. (2008a, 2008b), who studied 2,207 newspaper stories from five newspapers in the UK and found that public relations and agency copy represented 88% of stories. They suggest a "clear linear process in which PR material is reproduced by agency journalists whose copy is, in turn, reproduced in the news media" (2008b, p. 15). Their study also identifies an important issue regarding the different approaches to public relations-generated news and news agency-generated news: "We recognize, of course, that agency and PR copy are, from a journalistic perspective, epistemologically different" (2008a, p. 30).

We see evidence of this different epistemological approach in a 2010 study conducted by the Australian Centre of Independent Journalism (ACIJ) and the Australian daily alternative online news site Crikey.com. Their study into news and public relations found that nearly 55% of stories analyzed were driven by public relations activity, confirming previous Australian and international research (Edwards & Newbery, 2007; MacNamara, 1992; Lewis et al., 2008b). However, they noted that:

> As a by-product of our investigation, we tracked newswire material that made its way into newspapers. Newspapers have always relied on wire service copy to supplement their own journalism. Acknowledging the wire services is not a condition of their commercial agreements but failing to do so is not transparent. And putting a journalist's byline on AAP copy is downright cheeky. (ACIJ, 2010)

Despite this observation, neither the methodology nor the findings make any further reference to the quantity of AAP or other news agency copy being used. This reinforces our position that news agency copy is viewed *differently* to other external sources, with relative immunity from investigation, more as an internal contributor of copy rather than an external contributor.

While questions of balance, spin, rigor, newsgathering practices and news diversity are regularly aimed at other third parties—notably public relations—news material from wire agencies appears largely immune to serious scrutiny. News from AAP and other news agencies, bring with it an authority so absolute that the news media do not question its content or factual accuracy. There are numerous examples in recent years of news covered by AAP that is followed up, unquestioned, by major news sources (Australian Press Council, 2008, p. 32; Australian Press Council Adjudications, No. 1428, No. 1383; *Media Watch,* 2008).

The legitimacy offered by AAP's "filtering" process is confirmed by one commercial television reporter/producer, who told Pearson and Brand's research team in 2001 that wire services were the most influential and trustworthy news medium, because:

> They don't make mistakes and that's usually the first priority . . . that's by far the most influential because if we've got a breaking story we'll pull up whatever is on wires, rip it off the printer and give it to the presenter, and they'll go straight to air and they won't even attribute it. (2001, p. 102)

Pearson and Brand's 2001 study, completed for the then-Australian Broadcasting Authority, found that most journalists believed news agencies or wire services such as AAP were, along with metropolitan newspapers and public radio, significantly more influential on the news products of other media. Pearson and Brand found that 78% of journalists and news producers used AAP as a news source most days—and that it was considered a credible source, comparable to metropolitan newspapers and ABC Radio's AM program as an influence on daily news agendas (ibid., p. 47). Journalists felt AAP had taken on a new role in the new media environment and had become a "media player in its own right, providing both a news service to traditional media and also a direct feed to audiences as the news provider for most portals and online news services" (ibid., p. 9). Other studies support this approach to AAP. A pilot Australian study of

FM radio news, which found that 61% of analyzed news bulletins came from AAP, concluded that, despite the emergence of new information sources, notably the Internet, AAP was still regarded as the most reliable and often the fastest supplier of breaking and developing news (Raward & Johnston, 2009).

Jack Herman, Secretary of the APC, which commissions the annual State of the News Print Media study in Australia, said a reliance on AAP copy, especially in 24-hour news environments, was to be expected (Herman, 2009). This has implications not only for news diversity, but also for issues of inaccuracy where the same error may be repeated time and again as more publications pick up the wire copy. If an online publication gets it wrong overnight, it is usually cleared up the following day (ibid.). A former online journalist for Melbourne's leading daily, *The Age,* clarified:

> The basis of AAP is their brand, their credibility is in their brand and so you don't necessarily question their copy. They have the resources to be out there getting the story, *The Age* doesn't have those resources so, you don't question them on it. But if they come up wrong . . . I mean the new catch cry in journalism is, 'you're not wrong for long'. So, if you're wrong, you change it. (Journalist 1, 2009)

What also comes with the use of wire copy is the adoption of it as a news organization's own, often without attribution, and the acceptability of this practice. The ACIJ/Crikey study noted that nonattribution was "cheeky," though Lewis et al. plainly state that "Such practices would, elsewhere, be regarded as straightforward plagiarism" (2008b, p. 15). They found that almost three-quarters of stories carried bylines; however, only 1% of those bylines were attributed to the Press Association (PA) or another wire service. While this seemed to indicate that wire service copy was only a very small part of the paper, on closer analysis, they found that only 25% of stories did not include any evidence of agency copy (2008a). They noted: "Newspapers make little acknowledgment of this reliance on agency copy even when they publish such materials in more or less verbatim form" (ibid., p. 30).

Our research confirmed the muddy waters that bylining agency copy presents. We examined the online "Breaking News" sections of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Age*, finding overwhelmingly that breaking news in online newspapers is synonymous with wire service copy (Johnston & Forde, 2009). The sample of 741 stories found that the largest proportion of news for both newspapers came from AAP. When we combined the figures from AAP and Agence France-Presse in *The Age* online, 96% of the stories were from just two wire agencies, with no staff input. The total for the *Daily Telegraph* was somewhere between 80% to 90%, but the composite was harder to gauge because of recycled news from other News Limited media, and because of difficulty in tracking bylined journalists (see Johnston & Forde, 2009, for further elaboration).

We take up two important issues raised in these studies:

- First, news agency copy can just as likely be made up of public relations-derived material as any other news story; and

- Second, there is a cultural or epistemological difference in how media, and indeed media researchers, often view public relations-generated stories and news agency-generated copy.

Methodology

This study aimed to test the assertions from the literature and from previous examples about news agency copy which is often reproduced from public relations material—often reproduced verbatim or near-verbatim by news outlets, particularly on online news Web sites belonging to major daily news providers. We adopted a case study approach to achieve this, coupled with some key interviews with people involved in the online newspaper environment and some investigations into Australian Press Council (APC) adjudications.

Our two case studies were discovered through sporadic searches of online news Web sites. They incorporate the background and impact of two news agency stories. Flyvberg reports that case studies, which are simply "a detailed examination of a single example" are usually identified by conventional researchers to be appropriate in the early stages of research projects (2004, p. 420), but that they must be coupled with hypothesis-driven research for more substantial studies. He argues, however, that the case study, rather than simply providing "a method of producing anecdotes" was able to draw considered conclusions based on concrete, in-depth examples (ibid., p. 422) and provided a strong opportunity for 'learning' (citing Eysenck, 1976). We follow Flyvberg's "information-oriented selection" as the basis for our case studies which were chosen to "maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases" (ibid., p. 426). As part of our method, we have also examined adjudication reports from the APC to determine the prevalence of publicized complaints against wire agencies for misleading or erroneous copy that is republished by news media outlets. While we have not quantified the APC adjudications index, we have presented two adjudications here to support the case studies. The semi-structured interviews with industry personnel have also provided something of a preliminary method—to couple our own case study approach, to draw examples and findings, and then to put those findings to people within the industry who might be able to better explain them. Rapley suggests that all forms of qualitative interviewing provide a key rationale of offering the researcher the opportunity to gather "contrasting and complementary talk on the same theme or issue" within a broad framework of a conversational but focused discussion (2004, p. 18). We had also sought to conduct semi-structured interviews with AAP personnel, particularly their Editor-in-Chief, but our attempts have so far been unsuccessful.

This methodology has developed with our project, and will continue to develop as the project expands. As Seale et al. (2004, p. 2) suggest, qualitative research practice is not a linear process. It involves "an engagement with a variety of things and people," including the research team's own past experience and aspirations. They report that "if practicing researchers are encouraged to write about their inquiries in a methodologically reflective way (though not in a purely self confessional manner), we may learn a great deal" (ibid.).

This is our aim in this study. We note that the method and sample detailed here are appropriate for a study of this size, but in a larger project, more developed content analysis and "tracking" data will be

coupled with enlarged case studies and interviews to arrive at more substantial conclusions about the position of wire agencies in the contemporary news landscape.

Case Studies

Davies argues that a key issue associated with news agency copy is that mistakes made at this level may be perpetuated as a story continues to be re-reported in unchecked form (Davies, 2008). On the Internet, "not wrong for long" might entail a retraction—or more commonly, the erroneous report may simply be removed ("killed"), never to be seen again once the error is discovered. It is almost as though it never existed. In a brief example before we move on to our case studies, a research assistant and former journalist working on this project who is of Dutch origin, is a regular reader of the Dutch newspaper *Trouw,* and he accesses his news through their Web site. He noted with concern one day that one of their leading stories, bylined to and originating with the Nederlands Persbureau (ANP), the major Dutch news agency, reported on an award presented to a 87-year-old Holocaust survivor, whom, they reported, had been a prisoner in "the Polish concentration camp Sobibor" (ANP, 2010a). Due to the reader's European heritage and the fact that his wife is Polish, he took exception to this inaccurate description of the concentration camp which was not, of course, a *Polish* concentration camp at all. He sent a correction to the newspaper in the "reader comments" section at the end of the story which read: "This article contains a factual error: 'The Polish concentration camp Sobibor' should be something like 'The German concentration camp Sobibor in occupied Poland.'"

The next day, he visited the Web site and found that, while the news story was still up, the description of the concentration camp had, indeed, been changed to his exact words—"The German concentration camp Sobibor in occupied Poland" (ANP, 2010b). The original wording had disappeared, and there was no indication that there had previously been an error which was now corrected. Meanwhile, the reader's comment had also completely disappeared from the Web site—possibly (we speculate) to remove any trace that they had been corrected. While this is anecdotal, when considered along with the case studies below, it does suggest that the combination of "credible" news agency copy; an increasing online 24/7 news hole; and the technological ability to make mistakes "disappear" immediately may be causing a significant shift in the way news is gathered and reported.

Our first case study is from a youth-oriented news satire program called the *Hungry Beast,* which airs on Australia's national broadcaster, ABC-TV. The first episode of this program, launched in 2009, featured an exposé of a well-orchestrated ruse that the *Hungry Beast* team had inflicted upon the Australian media about a survey reporting on the "gullibility" of Australian citizens. The story began as a media release put out by the fake "Levitt Research Institute" (set up by the *Hungry Beast*) which was picked up by AAP, and as a result, covered widely by news media outlets. As part of the hoax, the *Hungry Beast* team had developed a fake Web site for the Levitt Institute; written a fake 10-page research report about their survey; and provided a *Hungry Beast* team member as the "Executive Director" of the Levitt Institute to be available for interviews with journalists. The false report found, among other things, that Sydney people were the most gullible of all Australian citizens; and that people from Melbourne were the least gullible in that they generally did not believe a series of propositions put to them by the Levitt

Institute. The research had never been conducted, but according to the prestigious online version of Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper, it had. On September 20, 2009, they reported:

> **Sydney, the most naïve city, study finds**
>
> Psst! Have you heard the one about Captain Cook and his three wives?
>
> What about cricket legend Richie Benaud's Senate career?
>
> Many Australians have apparently heard of both, according to a report by social research company The Levitt Institute. They blame the internet and its plethora of unsourced and unverified information for such gullibility. (AAP, 2009)

The story continues, quoting fake Levitt Institute Executive Director Dr. Carl Varnsen along with another Levitt Institute source "research coordinator" Lauren Kennedy (*Media Watch,* 2009). The *Media Watch* program also points out that the name Karl (or Kel) Varnsen is actually an alias for Jerry Seinfeld from the television sitcom *Seinfeld* (ibid.).

The story is bylined to AAP, and appeared in almost exactly the same format in newspaper Web sites around the country, and was followed up the next day by the well-respected ABC radio along with 32 other radio stations, Fairfax newspaper Web sites and News Ltd. Web sites. Even regional newspapers such as the southeast Queensland *Gympie Times* and the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, picked it up—and are still running the fake story on their Web site at the time of this writing. Both stories are bylined to AAP. When the hoax was exposed by ABC's *Media Watch* program the day after a tip-off from a sceptical audience member who had seen the story on a news Web site, *Hungry Beast* admitted their role in the story. Indeed, *Media Watch's* investigation indicated even the most basic research from any journalist involved would have uncovered the truth—the Levitt Institute's purported headquarters, for example, is a boarded-up and derelict terrace house in Sydney (*Media Watch*, 2009). And a quick Google search of the Executive Director Carl Varnsen shows up very little, apart from a recently added one-line Wikipedia reference to a "public intellectual and leading sociologist in Australia" (ibid.).

AAP Editor Mike Osborne recognized they had taken the bait and their lack of background research had been exposed, but he also defended the organization's decision to run the research findings and release it to their clients:

> As the national news agency, AAP receives many hundreds of reports on a weekly basis and always attempts to verify information, either by phone call or e-mail. While this incident has caused us to review our verification procedures to minimise the chances of it happening again, any fair-minded observer would understand how this hoax, with supporting Web site, 10-page report, and PR people spruiking the results could deceive a busy reporter facing rolling agency deadlines. (Osborne, 2009)

The Australian newspaper, owned by News Ltd., which had run the story on their news.com.au Web site, reported that the story was originally presented as an "Australian Associated Press exclusive" (Robinson, 2009), which suggests that the *Hungry Beast* decided the best way to disseminate the false information, quickly, was to send it through the AAP filter. If they had sent the fake press release out to news organizations directly, there was a higher chance that journalists might question the veracity of a press release, but coming through AAP, it was automatically given credibility. Thorough newsgathering practices and background checks would be assumed to have occurred at the AAP level, and news organizations would be more likely to run it as it was. This is precisely what did occur. Unfortunately, it was not the first time AAP had fallen victim to a press release hoax—*Media Watch* had uncovered another similar, but less orchestrated, 2005 case involving a supposed visit to Australia by former U.S. president George H. W. Bush (*Media Watch*, 2005; see also Johnston & Forde, 2009, for more detailed discussion).

More recently, in 2010, AAP filtered and disseminated what was, on this occasion, real survey results sent in a media release. The survey results were covered by AAP after they received the media release from "FebFast," a group which campaigns to highlight the dangers of drugs and alcohol. FebFast's original press release suggested their survey found that *many* Australians "would rather give up sex, their car, technology, and their friends" than give up alcohol for a month. It was disseminated with the headline "No sex, please—We're drinkers!" As a novelty/humorous story appealing to Australians' self-perception as a relaxed, hard-drinking culture, the story was picked up by most major news Web sites, including capital city dailies the *Sydney Morning Herald,* the *Herald Sun,* and the *Courier-Mail,* which ran the story with an AAP byline. The story evidently also appealed to more international perceptions of Australians, as we have found evidence of the story also running in *Pravda, Times of India,* Britain's *The Daily Star,* Vietnam's *DatViet,* and Serbia's *SrbijaNet*.

The story, as presented by AAP and, subsequently, by all the news Web sites mentioned above, generally ran with the FebFast angle. However, AAP had chosen to take the story a little further, and in so doing, appears to have exaggerated the survey findings quite considerably, presumably to make the story more likely to be picked up by media outlets. The headlines on the bylined AAP article were, variously: "Sex, cars and mates play second-fiddle to Australians' love of booze;" or "Aussies 'rather give up sex than grog.'" The AAP story (2010) begins thusly: "Australians' love affair with grog is so great they'd rather give up sex, their car, and their friends than lay off the bottle for a month."

So it is no longer "many Australians" who would rather give up sex, their car, and their friends, as FebFast reported, but the (implied) majority of Australians generally. However, the statistics bear out neither AAP's lead paragraph, nor the headlines that appeared with the story. The statistics from the media release are, as the story later reports, that only one in five Australian drinkers said they would prefer to go without sex than alcohol. So, four in five had said that they *would not* give up sex for alcohol. Only 12% said they would ditch their friends over alcohol (88% presumably said they would not); and another 12% said they would rather give up their car than alcohol. Even if these three categories are combined, and we consider the lead paragraph reading instead that Australians would rather give up "sex, their car OR their friends," it is still well under half of the sample.

FebFast, as a charity organization promoting their own anti-alcohol campaign had put a particular slant on the data, but still presented it reasonably accurately. In their processes, however, AAP had exaggerated the press release further, with the end result being quite inaccurate reporting. If we revisit the various headlines

> "Aussies 'rather give up sex than grog.'" (*Coffs Coast Advocate; Sydney Morning Herald* Australia*)*
>
> "Sex, cars and mates play second-fiddle to Australians' love of booze." (*Herald Sun*; *Courier-Mail* Australia)
>
> "Aussies love booze more than sex, cars!" (*Times of India; MyNews.in)*
>
> "Australians would miss booze more than sex." (*Daily Star,* UK)

. . . these headlines do not suggest that only 12% –20% of Australians said they would give up these things.

The international newspapers reported their own versions of the story, all based on the AAP copy, while the UK's *Daily Star,* which bylined the story to their own "Daily Star Reporter," changed the wording slightly and added one sentence from an Australian living in London. The *Daily Star* lead paragraph read thusly: "Hard-drinking Australians would rather give up sex than give up the amber nectar for a month" (Daily Star, 2010).

None of the international news Web sites bylined AAP—they all bylined either their own publication, their own national news agency, or occasionally, no one at all. So, even when the statistics are not false; even when there is no trickery; even when the statistics are staring the agency and news media journalists in the face, they continue to reproduce the angle from the media release—and in this case, to exaggerate the media release's angle to the point of inaccuracy—perhaps, we suggest, to fit within established news frames. What the statistics show is that Australians overwhelmingly (80% of the sample) *would not* rather give up sex than alcohol, and would not give up their car (88% of the sample), nor their friends (88%).

The Australian Press Council (APC) is aware of the erroneous reporting that comes through the news agency filters, and the heart of the problem seems to genuinely lie in the credibility bestowed upon any stories coming through the agency filters. We have mentioned the Australian Press Council's *State of the News Print Media* (2008) , which highlighted some concerns about the immediacy of online newsrooms and the pressure this is placing on journalists, and AAP, to be churning out stories as quickly as possible without proper checking. Further evidence for this can be found in some Press Council adjudications which have found AAP to have insufficiently checked or followed up media releases coming through their filters and disseminated to their clients. In January 2008, the APC upheld a complaint made by the Jewellers' Association of Australia against a story published on the *Sydney Morning Herald* Web site about a survey

which claimed 70% of consumers felt they were being "ripped off" when they bought diamonds, with the story generally suggesting people should go to an independent appraiser before making purchases. The survey, which was an online poll of an unknown number of people carried out and released by diamond-grading company the Diamond Certification Laboratory of Australia (DCLA), suggested most Australians did not "trust jewellers." The Press Council found that AAP, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *news.com.au* should have questioned the methodology and depth of the survey, and the motivations of the DCLA in releasing it. The *Sydney Morning Herald* addressed the APC's findings:

> *The Sydney Morning Herald* responded that it took the AAP article at face value. It said it generally accepts that its wire services follow proper procedures, and it is impossible for an entity like *smh.com.au* to afford the time and staffing needed to check the huge volume of stories that AAP contributes. (APC Adjudication 1383, January 2008)

A former online journalist from *The Age* online reinforces this view and describes his processes when considering how to work with and attribute agency copy:

> An AAP story comes in, you might follow it up with an extra interview, [there's] a lot of that. Or you might just add another little bit of fact [so] that you can put your name on [it] . . . there wasn't really a general rule, as long as I had contributed something, I got the byline. If I genuinely followed up something, and called someone and contributed something new to that story then I got the byline . . . but the Breaking News section is primarily wire copy because it's coming through all the time, you just turn it around and put it up. You know the term churnalism? Well that's what churnalism is, getting the AAP story and just turning it around. (Journalist 1, 2009)

Briefly, in a second adjudication in 2009, the Press Council found AAP had reported a story about a regional hospital in an "unfair . . . and misleading" manner and upheld a complaint from one of the hospital's doctors against AAP for what the complainant had called "either grossly incompetent or misleading reporting" (APC Adjudication 1428, June 2009). Consistent with the previous cases, this story had been published widely after being originally disseminated by AAP, which again confirms the status, enunciated within much of the literature above, that any copy coming through AAP is, quite often, churned, or "turned around" as quickly as possible without any journalistic input or checking.

Discussion and Conclusions

The APC's adjudications, along with the case studies, confirm several issues that the literature, recent research reports, and interviews with industry personnel had enunciated. First, as a wire agency, the copy coming through AAP—and indeed any news agency—is treated differently than press releases, statements from lobby groups, direct tip-offs to journalists, and so on. Copy coming through news agencies is *assumed* by journalists and editors to have already gone through fact-checking, background research, and verifications, and to contain original material. As a result, copy from AAP or other agencies

is often churned, disseminated, "put up" on the subscriber's news Web site as soon as possible with little or no change. The status of AAP in the Australian news media landscape as a credible source of news is considerable. However, what this research suggests is that AAP is sometimes churning not other agency copy, but media releases which rigorous and accepted newsgathering practice would suggest should be questioned, checked, and followed-up. When the media release, now rebadged as AAP copy and sent to news organizations is received, it is considered "credible" copy, even though very little (or no) checking or newsgathering may have occurred after the original media release was received. The news program *The Hungry Beast* proved this point well with their bogus research institute, bogus research report, spokesperson, and Web site that received national media coverage. The anti-drugs and alcohol charity FebFast also successfully identified a somewhat dubious angle and headline that would appeal to mainstream news media outlets' news frames, which they sent to AAP, only to have it further exaggerated to the point of inaccuracy by AAP. Again, with the AAP badge on the story, however, national and international media picked it up and ran with it almost word-for-word according to the inaccurate headline and lead provided by the wire agency story.

Interviews with our former online journalist suggest that, while he would check *any* media release coming across his desk for accuracy and would always follow-up with an interview, he did not treat AAP copy in the same way. Indeed, he indicated "churning" a press release was a sackable offense at his news organization, while churning AAP copy was standard and accepted practice. On one level, then, the findings suggest that the *status* of news agencies within the news media industry as a credible source of information is enabling inaccurate copy to be disseminated widely, and very quickly, in this online news age.

The Melbourne study of the "Black Saturday" bushfire coverage—along with evidence presented here—suggests that a second factor at play may, indeed, be the increasing pressure from the 24/7 online newsroom for lots of copy, fast, that is putting pressure on news agencies such as AAP, AP, Reuters, and so on to be providing more copy now than they ever have before. In their haste, and in their desire to meet their own commercial goals of having as much copy "taken up" by their clients as possible, they are sometimes producing poorly researched news stories which may have simply been turned around from a press release or reported without any verification. The economies operating at AAP may indeed explain their decision to exaggerate the findings of the FebFast alcohol survey to make a "stronger" but ultimately inaccurate story to ensure it was picked up, widely, by a range of national and international news sites.

Both case studies perhaps also provide evidence of Hamilton's assertion that an economic analysis suggests news is usually not at all "surprising or new" but is, in fact, driven by consumers' desires for something familiar and predictable (2004, p. 8). McChesney's identified factors—the pursuit of profit, the size of the organization, levels of competition (of which there is none for AAP in Australia), and the influence of advertising—do appear to be playing a part in the stories chosen by AAP, in the way they are covered by AAP, and then in the way they are either "churned" or adjusted slightly by the news organizations themselves. AAP's decision to churn the *Hungry Beast* media release and develop a story from its printed research report was an economic one—it was an efficient way to "churn" a story that they knew would appeal to their clients' news frames with minimal input from the AAP journalist. The lack of competition in the Australian market meant there was no other consideration for AAP journalists and

editors to make about coverage of the story. Whatever they produced would be picked up by the news Web sites. This is the economic and political context of the agency's operations, and it goes a long way toward explaining its content decisions. One point of encouragement in our research lies in the news production of independent news producer *Crikey.com,* which does not put up any wire copy—or indeed, subscribe to any wire service at all (Beecher, 2010)—unlike the mainstream news Web sites, which are increasingly relying on agency news stories. We note, though, that this appears to be exception rather than the rule.

Our previous research alludes to an increased, potentially dominant, role for news agency copy in the online news environment (Johnston & Forde, 2009). Similarly, this current examination of selected case studies of AAP content and follow-up stories on news media Web sites provides some indications that the special "heightened" place that news agencies occupy in the news media may be leading to increases in the publication of poor and inaccurate copy. Coupled with the ever-widening and speed-driven Internet news hole, news quality and diversity on major news Web sites may be under threat, and at the very least, this field of study requires further critical analysis.

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