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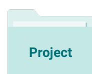

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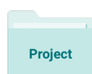

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UNDERSTANDING THE CIVIC IMPACT OF JOURNALISM
A realistic evaluation perspective

Margaret Simons, Rodney Tiffen, Doug Hendrie, Andrea Carson, Helen Sullivan, Denis Muller, and **Brian McNair**

The importance of journalism to civil society is constantly proclaimed, but empirical evidence on journalism's impact, and how this operates, is surprisingly thin. Indeed, there is confusion even about what is meant by the term "impact". Meanwhile, the issue of the role of journalism is becoming increasingly urgent as a consequence of the rapid changes engulfing the news media, brought about by technological change and the flow-on effect to the traditional advertising-supported business model. Assessing the impact of journalism has recently been the topic of debate among practitioners and scholars particularly in the United States, where philanthropists have responded to the perceived crisis in investigative journalism by funding not-for-profit newsrooms, with resulting new pressures being placed on journalists and editors to quantify their impact on society. These recent attempts have so far failed to achieve clarity or a satisfactory conclusion, which is not surprising given the complex web of causation within which journalism operates. In this paper, the authors propose a stratified definition of journalistic impact and function. They propose a methodology for studying impact drawing on realistic evaluation—a theory-based approach developed primarily to assess large social programmes occurring in open systems. The authors argue this could allow a conceptual and methodological advance on the question of media impacts, leading to research capable of usefully informing responses at a time of worrying change.

KEYWORDS journalism; journalism impact; media; media effects

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Introduction

The civic impact of journalism, including the importance of journalism in a democracy, is asserted as a truism by journalists, media proprietors (Simons and Buller 2014) and politicians. Yet empirical evidence on how journalism affects the operations of democracy, and civil society more generally, is thin. The study of the civic impact of journalism has been conducted in the margins of research that has had as its main concerns themes such as the study of social capital, or quantitative studies of agenda setting and media effects. We detail some of this history later in this paper. More recently, however, there has been an increased emphasis on attempting to quantify the social impact of journalism, largely because the business models that have supported many of the mainstream journalism outlets in Western societies are assumed to be under strain, or broken (Meyer 2009; Waldman 2011; Simons 2013). But attempts to measure impact, largely conducted by journalists and media outlets, have foundered due to the difficulties in conceptualising and then finding clear evidence of causal effects, or "impact".

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The issue of the impact and role of journalism is increasingly urgent as a consequence of the rapid changes engulfing the news media, brought about by technological change and the flow-on effect to the traditional advertising-supported business model. These changes directly threaten the large newsrooms, traditionally the main centres of journalistic capacity. Technological change, at the same time, has supported the emergence of networked communication and social media, which place the means of publication in many more hands with potential for far broader participation in the publication of news (Bruns 2005; Jericho 2012; Dunlop 2013; Simons 2013). Cumulatively, these technology-driven changes represent radical alterations to the operations of news media in Western democracies.

These changes raise questions about how the information needs of communities are being met, and are likely to be met in the future. As the big newsrooms shrink, there are suggestions that specific areas of information deficit are emerging, including regional journalism and "accountability" or watchdog journalism (Waldman 2011; Finkelstein and Ricketson 2012). At the same time, the barriers to entry in the publication business are now significantly lower than before the onset of digitalisation in journalism, and this creates areas of opportunity, but there are doubts as to whether the information needs of communities can be or are being met by bottom-up media production (Simons 2013).

For all these reasons, understanding the extent to which and the way in which journalism impacts on the operation of democracies and civil society is newly urgent. At the same time, the rapid reduction in the numbers of journalists in mainstream newsrooms, including those involved in reporting smaller towns, local governments, the courts and other civil institutions, means that there are new opportunities to understand the impact of journalism by examining the effects of the reduction of journalistic capacity.

The rapid changes and shrinking newsrooms offer an opportunity to test propositions about the impact of journalism through a close study of the effects of the change in journalistic capacity and activity on particular civil institutions and communities. To achieve this, however, a conceptually robust definition of journalistic impact is needed, accompanied by an equally robust, yet sophisticated methodology that takes account of the complexity involved.

In this paper we argue for a stratified definition of journalistic impact and propose a methodology for assessing it in particular contexts and locations, as part of a broader discussion of the impact of a decline or deficit in journalistic capacity. We detail a case study-based project putting these propositions to the test which is currently under way.

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Declining Journalistic Capacity

In 2012, Australia's major print media companies, Fairfax Media and News Corporation Australia, shed key editorial roles. Between them, the two companies own more than 90 per cent of Australia's daily print media (DBCDE 2012, 60). The cuts generated critical debate and reflection on the role of the "quality" private press, its public interest functions and capacity to fulfil societal expectations of the media as a check on wrongdoing (Buchanan 2013).

The structural changes to newspapers and challenges to their institutional authority are not unique to Australia but, rather, part of a fundamental change confronting the press across liberal democracies in the digital era. In Australia, an estimated 3000 journalists lost their jobs in five years (Christensen 2013). In the United States, it is estimated that 15 per

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cent of journalistic jobs disappeared between 2005 and 2009, and the losses continue (Edmonds 2013). The impact on Australian civil society of the collapse of traditional media business models is likely to be substantial (Beecher 2005). Meanwhile, an exhaustive recent study of US news media concluded that technology and its effect on media business models had created a deficit in "accountability reporting", particularly at local level, and that this was likely to lead to "more government waste, more local corruption, less effective schools, and other serious community problems" (Waldman 2011).

No similar study to Waldman's exists in the Australian context. A much smaller Australian study conducted as part of the Finkelstein Independent Media Inquiry was limited to the economic health of news media, rather than its journalistic impact, and concluded that while the challenges were enormous, the main media companies were capable of dealing with them without broad impact on journalistic capacity. The inquiry rejected suggestions in some submissions that government assistance was needed to "heal weaknesses … likely to emerge", while acknowledging that there were some "pressure points" (Finkelstein and Ricketson 2012, 54–100). The Finkelstein Report noted that it was too early to predict how these pressures would be resolved in Australia, and recommended that the Productivity Commission undertake further study (10–11). The mass layoffs that occurred months after the release of the report suggest, however, that its conclusions were optimistic.

What is Impact?

Assessing and defining the concept of media impact is a topic of debate among practitioners and scholars, particularly in the United States where philanthropists have responded to the perceived crisis in investigative journalism by funding not-for-profit newsrooms, with ProPublica the best known (Waldman 2011; Tofel 2013). This is coupled with the ongoing shift to online news and the resulting availability of far greater data on readership. New pressures are being placed on journalists and editors to quantify or otherwise demonstrate their positive impact on society. The result has been a greater urgency to find methods for measuring the impact of journalism, and indeed attempts to define what is meant by "impact" (Stray 2012; Lewis and Niles 2013; National Center for Media Engagement 2013; Tofel 2013; Zuckerman 2014).

Philanthropic organisations can set the bar very high for their funded projects. The Gates Foundation, for example, defines impact for all its philanthropic funding as "ultimate sustainable changes, sometimes attributable to action", and distinguishes it from outputs as "the most immediate sets of accomplishments necessary, but not sufficient, to produce outcomes and impacts" (Tofel 2013, 8).

Tofel writes that impact is different from reach, circulation or readership. In some cases, a small but powerful readership might be enough to produce direct impact. In other cases, the impact of news media on democracy is cumulative, requiring the direct influencing of public opinion through mass circulation or viewership over time. Tofel concluded that "true impact" in the Gates Foundation sense, where changed outcomes could be confidently and directly attributed to the revelations of investigative journalism, is relatively rare, and that there was "no single algorithm that can be devised, no magic formula to load into a spreadsheet or deploy in an app" to measure impact (Tofel 2013, 21). Zuckerman mirrors Tofel's point that reach does not equate to impact, and adds that it is dangerous to use data-rich metrics similar to those employed by online content providers to demonstrate their appeal to advertisers. Traffic is not civic impact, he states. Instead, Zuckerman argues

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for participation as a possible metric of impact—if people take a measurable civic action after hearing of an issue in their local newspaper, for example (Zuckerman 2011).

Others have proposed metrics based on the knowledge-level of the target audience, or a change in audience belief as a result of reading news media outputs (Meyer 2009). Lewis and Niles, in a recent survey of the emerging literature on how to define impact, usefully observe that there are few definitive conclusions about how best to measure impact but that most proposed models incorporated some combination of two "strata": reach, meaning the number of individuals who come into contact with news content; and engagement, meaning an exchange of information between news source and audience (Lewis and Niles 2013). Tofel makes the key observation that both reach and engagement will operate differently in different contexts, and across different journalistic functions. For example, an explanatory piece of journalism might have the impact of a more informed population, even if there is no direct societal change as a result. Investigative journalism, on the other hand, might engage only a small number of individuals, but if they are in a position of power to correct identified problems, then the impact may be great (Tofel 2013).

Before these recent contributions, the study of the civic impact of journalism was fragmented. Putnam (2000), in his influential work on social capital, argued that the fragmentation of civil society into a set of individualised choices was implicated in the erosion of America's social capital. He demonstrated that newspaper readers belonged to more organisations, participated in more clubs, attended more local meetings and visited friends/neighbours more often, and argued that the decline in newspaper and television news readership and audiences with each new generation was therefore of concern (Putnam 2000). Meyer's work on newspaper influence concluded that it was declining along with profitability, which in turn diminished the informed polity a well-functioning democracy requires. Meyer drew on American quantitative sociological techniques to argue for his "influence model". He acknowledged that causation was impossible to prove, given the enormous number of potential societal variables (Meyer 2004).

More recently, Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido (2009) conducted a case study of the 2007 closure of a newspaper, *The Cincinnati Post*, and found that the closure contributed to a decline in civic participation, including a decline in the number of candidates for civic office, increases in incumbents re-elected, and a decline in voter turnout and campaign spending. In addition, new internet sources and television did not close the gap left by the *Post*'s departure. The authors used a "difference-in-difference" strategy to generate their findings, including a statistical technique mimicking experimental research design and using case study observations. The authors acknowledged their findings were statistically imprecise, but argued that they had demonstrated that even small newspapers could have a "substantial and measurable impact on public life" (5).

In sum, recent research has not yet achieved clarity about the concept of impact, nor a satisfactory way to measure it. Indeed, some scholars and writers believe it is not possible to do so. Lewis and Niles (2013, 7) write: "Chief among the assumptions made about measuring impact are that, quite simply, it's even possible. Digital delivery systems and their associated analytics tempt us into believing this fantasy is not fiction".

The Legacy of Earlier Research

There are, of course, older, and heavily contested, scholarly debates that form a background to the more recent endeavours to define and measure the impact of journalism.

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Media effects as they pertain to civic and political life have been of longstanding research interest.

The study of media effects, according to the leading scholar Denis McQuail (1977), has passed through several stages. Media effects theory initially stemmed from a fear of an omnipotent media, before veering to the opposite view of an impotent media. From the late 1960s on, McQuail notes, the field took an expanded view of effects. One manifestation of this was the "uses and gratifications" approach, which focused on what audiences did with the media rather than what the media did to them. A second, more enduring area was the emergence of agenda setting. Based on a simple observation by Bernard Cohen that the press is not very good at telling people what to think, but much more successful at telling people what to think about, the concern with agenda setting was stimulated by a seminal article by McCombs and Shaw (1972), and has been a staple of media effects research ever since.

This area points to a new horizon of concern—that media effects are not limited to individual members of the mass audience, but also the impact on participants and their relationships and decisions. Seymour-Ure (1974) and Tiffen (1989) outline how media affect institutions, processes and relationships. The media impact on elections, for example, is not just on which individuals' votes change, but on the whole conduct of election campaigning. Scandals in the media may have their effect less by changing public attitudes than by triggering, for example, judicial inquiries or resignations by key individuals or the fracturing of earlier political alliances (Tiffen 1999).

Research into the political economy of the media gives yet another perspective on impact. From a radical political economy perspective, the mass media are conceived as essentially anti-democratic and propaganda-based. This perspective aligns society's dominant economic forces with informal influences over the state by means of the commercial media and its concentrated, conglomerate ownership structures (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Herman (2000, 108) argues that global concentration of media ownership and the reliance on, and fierce competition for, advertising revenue has blurred boundaries between editorial and advertising. The consequence, in this view, is less professional autonomy for journalists and an aversion to journalism which challenges power structures (Herman and McChesney 1997). Journalistic impact, in this view, is seriously eroded by the effective capture of journalism by corporate and institutional interests.

More recently the propaganda model has been challenged by more pluralist theories of the media, advanced by McNair and others, who argue there are new opportunities for journalism to allow for "dissent, openness and diversity rather than closure, exclusivity and ideological homogeneity" (McNair 2006, vii), fuelled by the fragmentation of media brought about by the internet, digital technologies and the potential for a globalised public sphere—what McNair calls cultural chaos. The affordances of new media, can, in this view, undermine political and corporate control of the media, and lead to emergent civic hyperlocal media (Chen et al. 2014).

While there are substantial areas of overlap with the concept of journalistic impact, neither media effects on individual audience members nor media agenda setting encompasses all of what is commonly meant by the term "impact". As Napoli (2014) observes, qualitative studies of media effects usually take the individual user as the unit of analysis. Impact, on the other hand, suggests a "macro" or "meso" level of concern, including broader systemic changes at the levels of organisations and institutions. At the other end of the scale, agenda-setting studies do not usually capture significant yet

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non-agenda-setting outcomes, such as a more informed population or the organisational responses of institutions to journalistic scrutiny.

While these debates continue, digital technology is having a profound effect on journalism and its relation to civic engagement and participation, though views on whether this is for the better or worse vary greatly (McNair 2006; Shirky 2008, 2011; Flew 2009; Gladwell 2011). A number of commentators and practitioners suggest that social media may constitute a "Fifth Estate" of networked individuals which can alter the boundaries of existing institutions, including news media, holding them accountable and contributing powerfully to social change (Dutton 2007; Jericho 2012; Dunlop 2013). Phenomena such as online discussion groups, political blogs and online deliberations both within and outside the mainstream media have opened up new fora for political discussion (Wright and Street 2007; Jericho 2012; Wright 2012). As Flew (2009) suggests, existing perspectives on these changes have tended to divide along two axes, which he defines as the maximalist/minimalist axis and the optimism/pessimism axis. The former relates to the question of whether change should be understood as transformative or merely incremental, and the latter to whether change should be viewed as positive or negative. Both approaches are impoverished by a lack of empirical data, and often by a lack of conceptual clarity. That said, the dramatic expansion of opportunities and affordances for user interactivity and engagement with media and politics is a reality.

As this diverse literature makes clear, the problem of assessing the impact of journalism on civil society, let alone the impact of a decline or deficit in journalistic capacity, is challenging both conceptually and in terms of methodology. But capturing impact, we suggest, is not impossible. The challenges are significant, as journalism operates across multiple audiences—international, national, regional and local, across a range of media, and a range of political positions, to say nothing of the enormous fragmentation of the media as the internet recreates us all as media producers and constant on-demand consumers. Journalism is experienced in heterogeneous ways, meaning that any assessment of impact must be, by its nature, tentative, many-sided and aware of its limitations.

Against that background this paper proposes two distinct but linked approaches to the impact question. First, we have attempted to better stratify and define what is meant by the impact of journalism on civil society. Secondly, we propose an application of critical realism, and in particular realistic evaluation, as powerful tools to assess the complex interactions that make up journalistic impact. Lastly, we give some details on how we are applying these insights in case studies of journalism impact in Australia.

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Stratifying Impact

Taking into account but seeking to progress from the debates outlined above, we believe that impact is best understood as a generic term, or a container. It incorporates both reach and engagement but goes beyond those ideas to encompass how users are applying news and information in their personal and civic lives (Clark 2010).
It is possible to stratify a variety of different kinds of impact:

- *Reach*: paying attention both to audience numbers and to the different demographics within an audience (e.g. general public versus opinion leaders/decision makers).

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- *Engagement*: assessed on a sliding scale, from thinking about or being informed by a news story, through to sharing or discussing it with others, and culminating in civic action, such as protest, letter writing or campaigning.
- *Relational*: capturing the social/institutional web in which journalism operates, and its relationship to audience, including how other institutions such as governments, non-governmental organisations and businesses have responded to journalism, both over time and in relation to particular news media outputs.

A useful definition of impact must be adaptive and reflexive. By this we mean it must recognise that the importance of each element of impact may differ across journalistic functions and geographic locations. Some impacts will be cumulative, others episodic. Some will be associated with the presence of journalists over a sustained period of time, and others tied to a definable journalistic intervention. For example, a local government may respond to the presence of a journalist in council meetings even if no story is written (relational impact). A story may result in an informed population, but with no definable action resulting (engagement). On the other hand, an investigative story may have narrow reach (decision-makers) but a high relational impact (leading to legislative change). This leads us to different types of journalistic function and practice, which we deal with later in this paper.

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Critical Realism in Policy Evaluation

How, then, might this definition and stratification of impact be applied to the study of the impact of journalism in particular locations and contexts at a time of rapid change? Lau (2004, 2012) and Wright (2011) suggest closer attention to Roy Bhaskar's influential idea of critical realism, a philosophical and theoretical lens now being applied in fields ranging from nursing to economics to sociology to management to evaluation. As Wright (2011, 159) observes, critical realism offers journalism scholars a "middle path between constructivism and positivism: acknowledging the independent existence of objective reality, but asserting the constructedness of human knowledge about the nature of that reality".

In policy evaluation, critical realism is most closely associated with the work of Pawson and Tilley (1997). Realistic evaluation is a theory-based approach developed primarily to assess large social programmes occurring in open systems such as towns or national societies, where controlled conditions for comparative analysis or experimentation are difficult or impossible to isolate. The approach has the merit of allowing engagement with complex and diffuse impacts without leading to oversimplification in a search for causality, as can be the case with methods and data-driven approaches. Evaluation is saturated with a vocabulary of causation (Pawson and Tilley 1997, 31). The classic experimental design, involving an experimental group, a control group and pre- and post-testing, where the intervention or treatment is isolated and so can be identified as the agent of causation, offers such obvious conclusiveness as to make it attractive as tool of evaluation. The difficulty, however, is that beyond scientific or medical settings, interventions are rarely so precisely formulated or delivered as to provide the necessary isolation from other potential influences.

Theory-based evaluation offers a framework for understanding and explaining why and how things happen. Rather than "big picture" macro theory, the emphasis is on the micro or meso level; no attempt is made to provide a theory of everything. Attention is

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instead given to theorising particular policy programmes and using evaluation to explore what happens in the "black box" between programme inputs and outputs.

Pawson and Tilley's central idea is that Context + Mechanism = Outcome. By this, they mean that to assess the impact of a programme or intervention, we must gather data and make observations about the context (location, history, participants) and the mechanisms the programme leads to. Mechanisms can here be conceived of as the process of adaptation, synthesising or rejection of an intervention, not the intervention itself. In this respect, realistic evaluation focuses squarely on the behaviours, ideas and processes an intervention sets into motion amongst the players in the location, in order to describe and explain the outcome. As Pawson and Tilley (1997, 57) write: "Programs work (have successful 'outcomes') only in so far as they introduce appropriate ideas and opportunities ('mechanisms') to groups in the appropriate social and cultural conditions ('contexts')".

Realistic evaluations presuppose open systems and a model of causation which is iterative over time, which permits us to capture variable outcomes and theorise as to the likely role that the processes engendered by the intervention have played. As Astbury and Leeuw (2010, 366) observe, a major implication of the realist perspective in evaluation is that it is "not enough to simply cite programs as a cause of outcomes—the mechanisms connecting causes and their effects must also be identified". As Tilley (2000, 4) puts it, the key questions asked in traditional scientific-influenced evaluation were "Does this work" or "What works", whereas realistic evaluation is far more modest and contextual: "What works for whom in what circumstances?" By this, he means that we should expect interventions to "vary in their impact depending on the conditions in which they are introduced" (4).

We argue that this approach of "context" and "mechanisms" to societal interventions can be usefully applied to journalism. In a realistic evaluation framework, context–methodology–outcome (CMO) configurations offer a promising method of limiting and framing the scope of research sufficiently to be able to test multiple conceptualisations of how journalism operates in a civic sense. For journalism studies, the usefulness of critical realism lies in its tentativeness and provisional nature. It is an approach that developed to capture the complexity of the situations in which policy interventions occur. This is especially needed in studying media impacts. It goes beyond the methodologically neater measures used in survey research, goes beyond audience reach and individual attitude change to capture the impacts of media reporting on institutions, relationships and processes.

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Applying Realistic Evaluation to Journalism: Context

The realistic evaluation approach offers criteria for well-designed research on the changing civic impacts of journalism. It requires qualitative case studies that firstly give precise and detailed attention to specifying the context: to describing the media environment and how reporting impacts on the main participants as well as on the public more broadly. To test these CMO configurations, we have undertaken qualitative case studies centred around particular towns in which journalism is experiencing technology-linked flux (Carson et al. 2015). We have gathered primarily qualitative data through in-depth interviews with civic leaders, media professionals, politicians, police, religious leaders and business owners, as appropriate in each case. These qualitative data are being triangulated with selected content analysis appropriate to each case study and with quantitative data such as measurements of media reach and information on numbers of journalists employed on various tasks and changes in employment over time. By moving away

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from the national sphere and narrowing our scope to incorporate specific towns, we are using the realistic evaluation methodology to produce a set of tentative truths about when, to whom and how journalism generates an impact in a particular context.

Much of the discussion of the far-reaching changes that the digital revolution has brought to journalism has concentrated on the national level. Our place-based case studies adopt a more differentiated approach, concentrating also on metropolitan centres, a large regional city and smaller towns. Employing this approach leads us to testable hypothesises around journalistic impact as it pertains to the effect of the internet and new media on regional towns in Australia.

Regional Australia has not been immune to the sweeping changes to the economics and business models of journalism in a digital environment characterised by user engagement, fragmented markets, and the blurring of professional boundaries between journalism and non-journalism. While many are experiencing old media fragmentation at a local level, there are *ad hoc* forms of online journalism or para-journalism emerging which may, in part, fill the emerging gaps in journalistic capacity. These, however, raise questions of quality in relation to the veracity and reliability of information.

It is not only the size of communities that is relevant; so also is their "civic cohesion". Regional towns differ substantially in terms of social cohesion, based on factors such as crime (which leads to distrust), economic stability, large-scale arrival of ex-city tree or sea changers, and so on. More socially cohesive towns are more likely to generate civic responses to the downturn in journalistic capacity.

Communities also differ markedly in their media environments. Radio, particularly the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation network of local radio stations, may be particularly essential to the civic life of regional and remote communities, given the geographically distributed nature of populations in and around towns. Cuts to radio may, therefore, have a larger effect on journalistic capacity than print or television. In addition, internet in regional Australia is generally more expensive than in the major cities, which may act as an inhibiting factor to the emergence of grassroots or para-journalism.

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Mechanisms

Key groups respond to changes in the local media environment in their own ways, but the combination of these changes can have far-reaching impacts on traditional journalistic functions of disclosure and debate, and for democratic ideals of accountability and participation. Four possible scenarios are given in capsule form here:

1. *The "civic journalist" mechanism*: The increasing gaps in capacity may, in towns with strong social cohesion, lead highly civic individuals to use the affordances of new and social media to produce some form of citizen-led journalism.
2. *The "media workaround" mechanism*: As regional media decline, previously well-established relationships between journalists and local sources of influence such as councils, police, sporting clubs and churches may become renegotiated, leading to the establishment of new niche forms of media such as official police Facebook pages.
3. *The "disinterest" mechanism*: As traditional regional media declines, citizens may simply turn to the curated echo chambers of social media, relying for news on gossip and links to better-resourced national media coverage of the regions.

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4. *The "institutional capture" context*: Decline in journalistic capacity in the regions is likely to manifest as a strengthened institutional voice in the media—i.e. an increased appearance of unchallenged "authoritative" voices, and a parallel increase in reliance on press releases, as cheaper, less experienced journalists are brought into newsrooms and their workloads significantly increased.

Types of Journalism and Their Impact

How will the application of realist evaluation guide us in our examination of journalistic impact across journalistic function? As previous authors have observed, impacts will differ markedly across different types of journalism (Tofel 2013).

To assist in designing and conducting our case studies, we have defined five functional categories of journalism. These are influenced by, but depart from, Schudson's seven categories of democratically "useful" journalism (Schudson 2008). Because of our focus on democracy and civil society, we have excluded journalism focused on entertainment and celebrity, although we recognise that these also have impact, particularly at the level of effects on individual moral and consumer choices (Pype 2009; Turner 2013). Our functional categories of journalism are:

- *Campaigning journalism*: Journalism that focuses on a particular cause or issue with the objective of achieving societal change and where the media platform transparently declares its objective.
- *Investigative journalism*: Journalism that requires substantial original inquiry by the journalist(s) which results in the creation of an evidentiary basis for a story or stories, without which that story/those stories would not have existed.
- *Civic forum journalism*: Journalism that focuses on the processes, proceedings and activities of public institutions such as parliaments, courts and local councils.
- *Reportage*: Journalism that describes society to itself, including events, social problems, trends, public policy, business, culture, education, science, media, industry, environment, religion, health and other centres of power/influence.
- *Commentary and opinion*: The provision of a forum for debate and the exchange of ideas and opinions, enabling discourse in the public sphere.

The potential benefits of realistic evaluation research designs are already emerging in case studies which the authors are undertaking. The tentative findings of one case of campaigning journalism, the Melbourne *Herald Sun*'s 2013–2014 Take a Stand campaign on domestic violence, showed its interactions with policy decisions and community activity. The Victoria Police responded to the campaign by co-operating with reporters, and both political parties took domestic violence policies to the 2014 state election. The web of causation is complex. However, the role of the media amplified the actions of others, particularly the police and the domestic violence sector, and played a role in carrying them into the election campaign. Similarly a recent case of investigative journalism—the *Newcastle Herald*'s reporting on child abuse in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, led to a Royal Commission. These two cases show the news media continuing to play one of its traditional democratic roles.

Another case is less optimistic, and an example of how journalism as a mechanism for institutional accountability may be declining. One of the key areas of civic forum journalism is court reporting. Results so far in a Melbourne case study point to the relational impact of perceived deficits in court reporting capacity, with the courts expending more resources to assist increasingly inexperienced and stretched journalists to access information and

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accurately report cases. Some courts are considering producing their own media content on their websites, including video content, summaries of judgements and even commentaries on judgements written by retired judges.

In three communities—chosen for their contrasting characteristics, a remote country town (Moree, NSW), an edge of urban Melbourne suburb (Broadmeadows) and a large regional community (Byron Bay, NSW)—community groups faced with declining local journalism are using social media, particularly Facebook, to connect locals to services and community news. Community service providers are increasingly adept at using social media and, in many cases, prefer it to legacy media to gather, disseminate and exchange news information. Concurrently, legacy media have lost journalists, hampering their capacity to practise "shoe leather" journalism and making them more dependent on official sources without independent verification. Meanwhile, news outlets are adapting to a reduced financial base to support their journalism, including forming symbiotic relationships with non-media news providers. There are promising alternatives for fostering civic discourse and engagement in local communities through digital technologies but, at the same time, we have found there is a reduced capacity for independent journalism and this impacts on local governance and institutions including police forces, community groups, schools and councils in important ways (Carson et al. 2015).

Since the effects of the digital revolution have begun to be felt, the choices made by stakeholders—in particular publishers, broadcasters and audiences—have changed, as has the availability of resources. Clearly there are many factors in these changes that fall into Pawson and Tilley's category of confounding variables, rendering a classic experimental research design unsuited to this research. By contrast, their "realistic" model of evaluation seems to offer a plausible and practicable way of assessing the civic impact of journalism and the effects of the changes currently under way.

Realist evaluation is theory-driven and understands that evaluations are most useful when they are cumulative. Realistic evaluation is effective, its authors argue, because the research over time accumulates knowledge that is transferrable through the process of moving from one specific case to a general theory and then to another case and readdressing the theory as needs be, and so forth. The analysis, more than the data, are what are transferable between cases. The overall process might take "perhaps scores of researchers over dozens of years" (Pawson and Tilley 1997, 120).

This "realist movement" also has suggestive advantages for the evaluation of the impact of journalism in its various guises and contexts. It has the flexibility to use multiple methods and to be cumulative in its findings. It is in our view the best way to understand inside the "black box" (Astbury and Leeuw 2010) of the impact of journalism on civic society and how this works.

Conclusion

The large loss of mainstream media jobs and the challenges to the commercial basis of big media companies is an important change in the functioning of Western democracies, but we know little about what the effects might be. While digital media offer many opportunities, including lowered barriers to entry to the media business, access to greater diversity of opinion and the breaking down of tyrannies of distance, empirical evidence on what might be lost and gained is scanty. As we have outlined, the conceptual tools for studying and understanding

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these changes are lacking. This is not surprising, given the complexity of factors involved. Journalism operates in a complex web of causation. Any study of journalistic impact must seek to gain an understanding of this complexity, rather than attempting to oversimplify it. The challenges are considerable, but not unparalleled. Realist evaluation was developed as a method of studying and assessing the impact of interventions in complex social contexts, and has proven utility for understanding the generation of the outcomes of given interventions. The application of realistic evaluation is, we have argued, ideal for the study of news media impacts, once those impacts have been robustly stratified and conceptualised. We believe this stratification of journalistic function combined with realistic evaluation could allow a conceptual and methodological advance on international scholarship on the question of media impacts, allowing mixed-methods research capable of usefully informing the responses of governments, individuals and organisations at a time of worrying change.

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