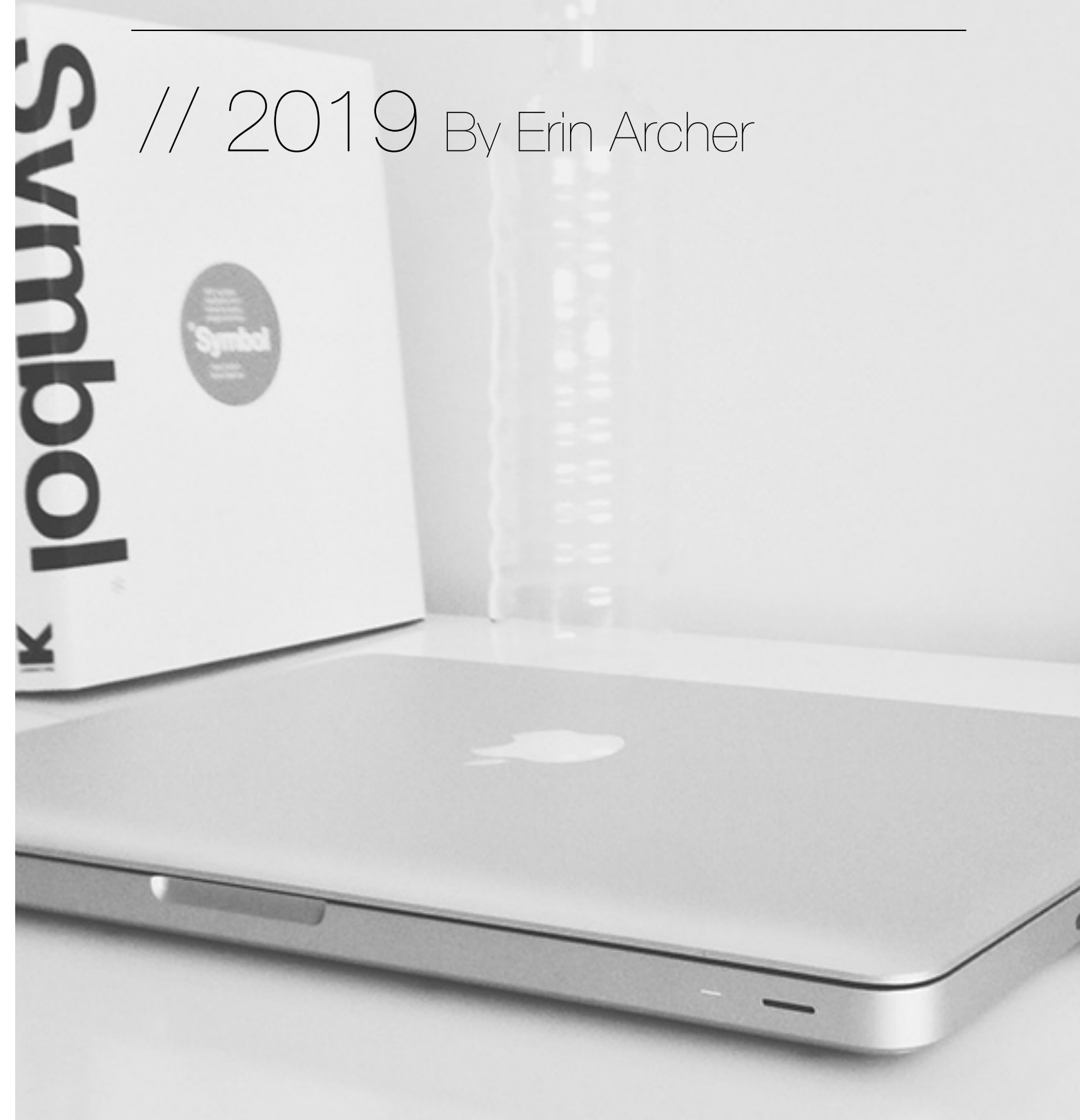


# The relationship between journalism and the audience: Report

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// 2019 By Erin Archer



# Executive Summary

This report examines the relationship between journalism organisations and their audiences, in an attempt to better understand some of the challenges facing the industry in the future. Research findings indicate the relationship between the media and the audience is currently strained, due to concerns over 'fake news', what is considered a 'journalist' and how to properly fund the industry. The report concludes that audience participation in media is not only important but also beneficial to the growth of the industry.

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# Introduction

Most professions, if not all, have changed with the advancement of technology. The start of the 21st century brought with it social media, which for journalism, was a major stepping stone in how journalists and their audiences interacted. Wilkinson, Grant and Fisher say the invention of the internet provided one of the most incredible opportunities for journalism since the introduction of television news (2013, p. 176) which is undoubtedly true, however, it's also become easily exploited. The burden of 'fake news' continues to infect the industry, technology advancements have caused the exploration of new controversial funding avenues and the very identity of the journalist is starting to be called into question. These challenges affect the communicative relationship between the journalist and the audience, as well as question the trust and adaptability of the entire industry. This report will examine the relationship between journalist and audience, primarily through these three challenges, and provide recommendations for the industry moving forward.

# Fake News

The term 'fake news' often defines the use of deliberate misinformation or propaganda, spread through both traditional, broadcast and online media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The term was repeatedly used throughout 2016 US presidential election, however it's wrong to assume that the term is isolated to the United States. It has been adopted by politicians and leaders all over the world and has evolved into a technique to describe news they simply don't agree with (Compton, 2018). This is why various commentators are beginning to reject the term 'fake news' because it has become "weaponized" (Compton, 2018, para. 12). Social media expert, Claire Wardle, argues there are seven different identities that 'fake news' can fall under (2017), with some more problematic than others, as shown in figure 1.

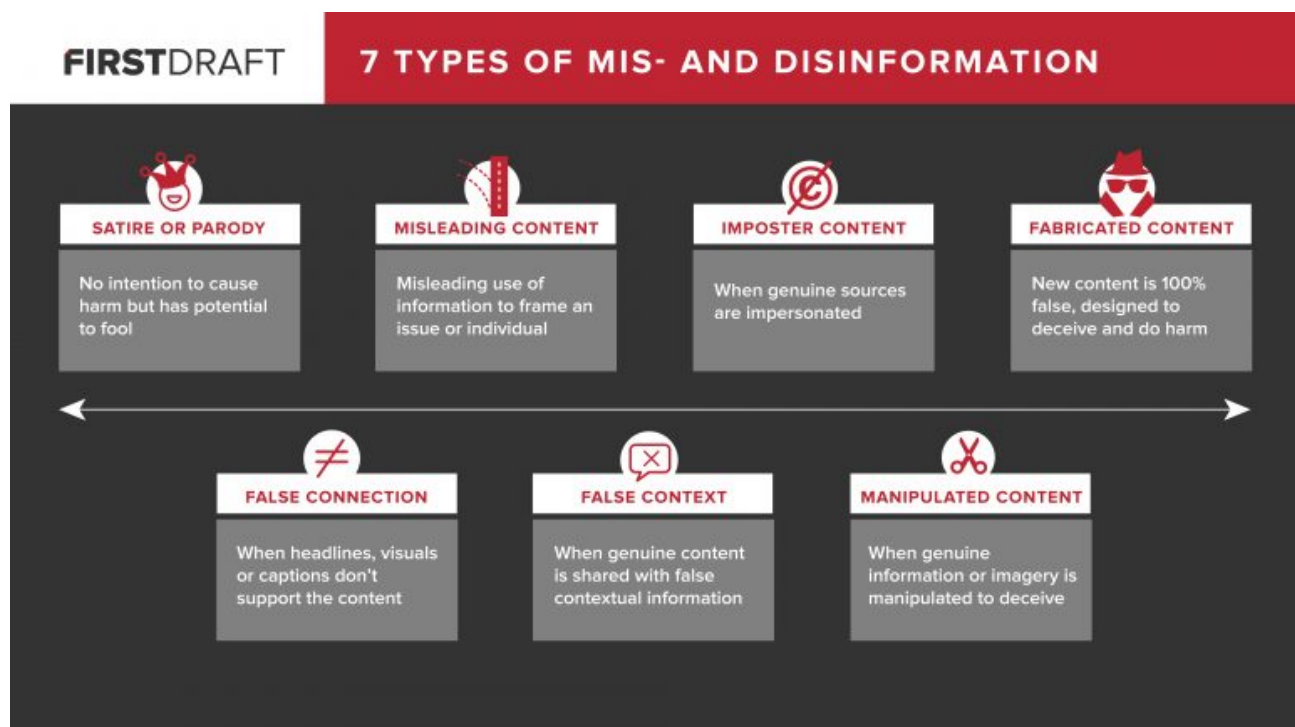


Figure 1. 7 Types of Mis – and Disinformation. Reprinted from *First Draft*, by C. Wardle, 2017, Retrieved from <https://firstdraftnews.org/fake-news-complicated/>

## Is Fake News Harming Credibility?

It's clear 'fake news' has developed into a term, that can fall under various categories, but how much damage is it doing to the credibility of news reporting and journalism? Park, Fisher, Fuller and Lee put forward, that the increasing occurrence of these different types of 'fake news' has created distrust in news for consumers (2018, p. 37). They reported 73% of Australians experienced one or more variations of the aforementioned 'fake news' identities and were concerned about the content they receive, particularly from online sources (2018, p. 35). 'Fake news' is a current issue that's impacting communication between the media and its audience, but it's also unlikely to yield any time soon, with Wardle describing it as an "information disorder" that will take 50 years to resolve (Compton, 2018, para. 6).

## Fake News in Social Media

Matsa and Shearer report that almost two-thirds of American adults turn to social media for their news consumption and do so for the "convenience" (2018, p. 2), however they continue to say that it's also paired with concerns of inaccuracy (2018, p. 7). This research is backed up by Deloitte's Media Consumer Survey 2018, which outlines Australian media and digital entertainment preferences. It states 17% of Australians rely on social media as their primary news source, however, 62% are also concerned about 'fake news' on social platforms (2017, p. 17). This shows how the prevalence of 'fake news' on social media, in particular, and public mistrust in online news content can impact how journalists and journalism industries interact with their audience on these platforms.

# The Professionalism of Journalism

With the rapid advancement of technology, there's no doubt the journalism industry, not unlike other industries, must adapt to keep up with its consumers. Social media has already influenced how news and current affairs are absorbed (Deloitte, 2018; Matsa & Shearer, 2018) therefore a different approach to journalism and journalism education is needed. Aspiring journalists need to be aware of the importance of forging digital relationships with their audience, by means of social media. The rise of social media has made it possible for anyone to "become the producers of news, fulfilling the roles of journalist, broadcaster and editor" (Mythen, 2010, p. 47, para. 3), due to the average person's ability to immediately report, comment, or share information with just the click of a button. Citizen journalists have, in the past, assisted major organisations with footage or information, during terror attacks (Spud, 2013) or natural disasters (Dameron, 2007, p. 90), but as Mythen points out, they are not as self-regulated in their output compared to professional journalists (2010, p. 52). Nevertheless, the audience now have the tools to produce and present 'the news' and this relationship must be strengthened for the sustainability of the industry.

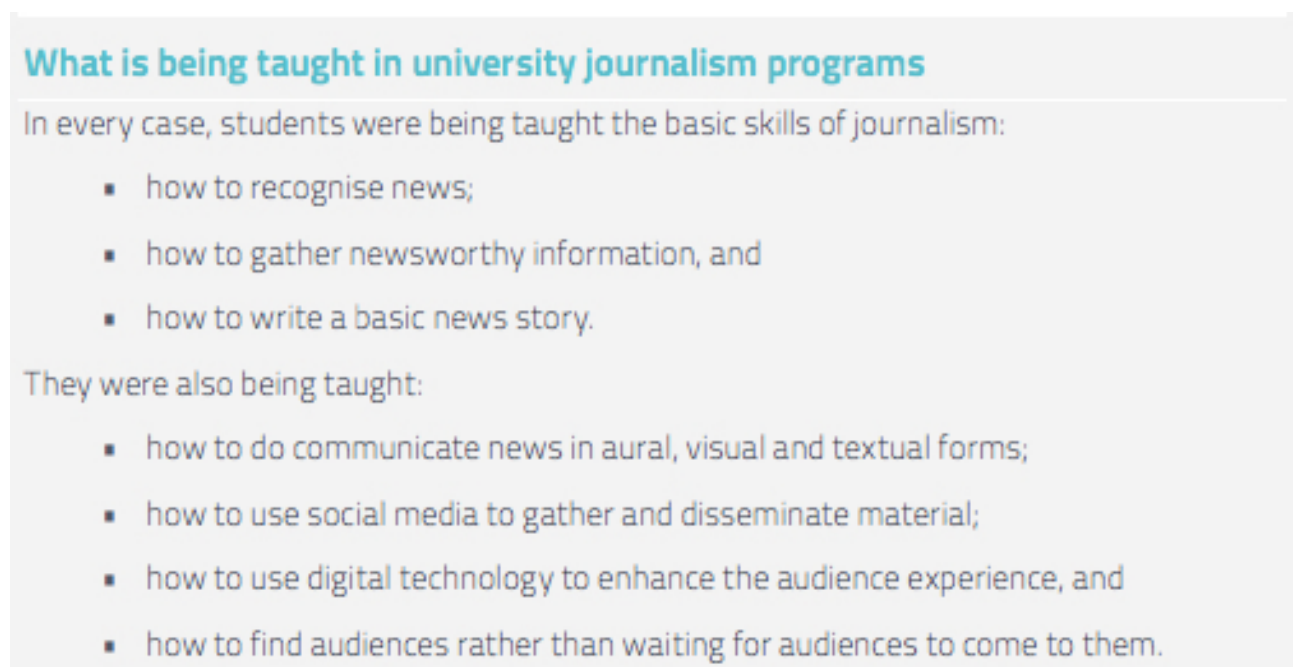
## The Journalist Versus Citizen Journalist

Citizen journalism has always existed (Mythen, 2010, p. 47), but the progression of technology has exacerbated it, giving the average person a platform to instantaneously update the world on current events, through personal blogs, or social media. Debate on the relevancy of the citizen journalist is ongoing, with some describing the practice as "too incomplete to provide a coherent picture of crucial news" (Wall, 2015, p. 798), but failing to embrace this practice limits the availability of quality content for news consumers. In a digital world, journalism needs to adapt in

order to maintain its role as a trustworthy institution in society and Wall believes citizen journalism is too deeply intertwined within the workings of professional news for it to be ignored by the industry (2015, p. 807).

## Re-Thinking Journalism Education

Technology is constantly evolving and all industries are constantly attempting to keep up and stay relevant. Because social media is increasingly becoming part of standard news consumption (Deloitte, 2018; Matsa & Shearer, 2018) the ability to use it efficiently in the communication, and more specifically journalism industry, is paramount. Universities around Australia are beginning to incorporate social media studies within journalism and communication degrees, to match the basic skills needed for the industry (Carson & Muller, 2017, p. 26), as seen in figure 2.



**What is being taught in university journalism programs**

In every case, students were being taught the basic skills of journalism:

- how to recognise news;
- how to gather newsworthy information, and
- how to write a basic news story.

They were also being taught:

- how to do communicate news in aural, visual and textual forms;
- how to use social media to gather and disseminate material;
- how to use digital technology to enhance the audience experience, and
- how to find audiences rather than waiting for audiences to come to them.

Figure 2. What is being taught in university journalism programs. Reprinted from *The Future Newsroom*, by A. Carson and D. Muller, 2017, Retrieved from [https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/2517726/20913\\_FNReport\\_Sept2017\\_Web-Final.pdf](https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/2517726/20913_FNReport_Sept2017_Web-Final.pdf)



Goodman & Steyn write that there is a need to close the gap between academia and industry by continuously updating journalism programs, to fit the need of industry and society (2017, p. 106). They continue to say, that in today's society, multi-platform skills and cross-disciplinary programs that draw on print, broadcast, interactive and social media are needed in the classroom. Through investigating the challenge of 'fake news' it's known that more people are now turning to social media to consume news, however, are also increasingly cautious of misleading stories. Twitter and other social media platforms are valuable sources for breaking news, as well as a platform for reporting breaking news (Franklin, 2014, p. 484) therefore it's important that students learn to utilize it effectively. Bor suggests the teaching of ethical considerations, in-class social media activities, technical social media instruction, and learning the difference between personal and professional use (2014, p. 251-252). Using these techniques will assist students to maintain quality and trusting relationships with the audience.

## Funding Journalism

The business model for traditional journalism used to be simple. It was supported by three types of revenue: advertising, direct payment and subsidy. Now, however, the way people consume news is changing, as more people turn to digital platforms (Watkins et al., 2017). One of the biggest challenges for traditional media brought about by the internet is the sharp fall in classified advertising aligned with the growth of websites that specialize in consumer-to-consumer advertising. Until the turn of the century, classified advertising generated between 25% and 40% of most newspapers' revenue, before falling to less than 5% just 10 years later (Wilkinson, Grant & Fisher, 2013, p.268). Advertising space is still essential in creating income for journalism. But most

publishers are now of the belief that this revenue on its own won't support high-quality journalism and has led to an increase in subscriptions and per-article payments (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy & Nielsen, 2018). As technology evolves, audiences have come to expect news on demand (Wilkinson, Grant & Fisher, 2013, p. 97) but paywalls are increasingly starting to irritate consumers, according to Newman (2019, p. 6), who is also concerned that the practice may lead to audiences avoiding news. This will undoubtedly be problematic for journalism in the future. The audience's claim to immediate, quality news content has forced journalism organisations to adapt, and in some cases, merge together like Australian companies Fairfax Media and Nine (Janda & Chalmers, 2018).

## Are Paywalls Necessary?

Restricting access to content, unless it is via a paid subscription, creates another source of revenue for the journalism industry, but according to Newman, quality news is disappearing behind paywalls (2019, p. 24). It can be argued however, that because we are living in a 'fake news' era, and consumers aren't trusting the media (Park et al., 2018) a need to control what is considered 'the news' is surely needed. However, bigger organisations such as The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, and The Australian have had paywalls added by their parent companies, Fairfax and NewsCorp, as a way to increase falling revenue (Dick, 2011). They've been met with some backlash from news consumers, who believe public interest stories should be free (Barry, 2018). Levy and Nielsen say pay walls could have much greater implications, where only social elites can afford high-quality news and the rest of the public is left with a poorer news and information delivery system (2010, p. 19).

## Merging Organisations

In a more disruptive way to help fund the industry in the future, organisations are beginning to merge together, to form large media conglomerates. In Australia, the change of media ownership laws gave the green light for organisations Fairfax Media and Nine, to create a new media giant (Barker, 2018). The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission found that Australia will be slightly worse off, because of the reduction of competition in the news market (Chau, Ryan & Khadem, 2018) and criticism of the plan has been well documented since the announcement (Muller, 2018; ABC News, 2018; MEAA, 2018). But as Heffernan (2014) explains, “growth, learning and creativity always depend on a vast array of people and ideas, freely shared and generously celebrated” (as cited in Crestani, 2019), so mergers could, in fact, expand media diversity. How the approved merger will affect the relationship between the audience and media in Australia remains to be seen, however, there are already concerns surrounding the impact it will have on regional newspapers (Millington, Martin & Webber, 2018), which could affect those communities’ relationships with their local news.

# Conclusion

Maintaining a good relationship between any workforce and the audience is important. In communications industries, such as journalism, relational behaviours between professional communicators and clients, or audiences, is a crucial aspect in the industry (Schnurr, 2013). According to Loosen and Schmidt, the relationship between journalism and its audience has always been complicated (2012, p. 868), but that it still plays an important role in journalistic practice. This report has found that the relationship between the media, and more specifically, journalism and the audience has become strained. While technology and subsequently social media, makes it easier for people all over the world to communicate with each other, this report's findings show that it can also play a role in damaging relationships. Trust in the media is beginning to deteriorate and it's due to the continued occurrence of 'fake news' (Park et al., 2018), which worryingly, won't desist for another five decades (Compton, 2018). Tasfati (2003) outlines that trust, from the perspective of communication research, is a crucial variable for media effects (as cited in Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 231) and that it's an important basis for social order and a foundation for social cohesion. The trust in the relationship between the media and the audience must be rebuilt in order for journalism to continue functioning as the Fourth Estate.

Digital technology changed the way news organisations made a profit, as classified advertising moved online (Felle, 2016). It forced the industry to invoke a new funding model through paywalls, however, this report found that this approach caused a rift in the relationship between the media and the audience. Pickard and Williams argue that paywalls defy the internet principles of openness, disenfranchise people who can't afford subscription costs and inscribe commercial value onto news-gathering processes (2013, p. 207). But the aforementioned fake news challenge,

alongside the need to fund the industry, has made paywalls a necessary short-term solution for journalism in a technological future.

Another major finding of this report is the number of people consuming their news online or from social media websites (Matsa & Shearer, 2018, p. 2). This shift in news consumption creates a need for the next generation of journalists to be adaptable to the forever changing media environment and prepared for a digital workforce. Creating a focus on social media during the early stages of journalism education, also corresponds with the challenge of 'fake news', as the majority of instances of fabricated news comes from social media websites (Silverman, 2016). But while technology has brought unfavourable challenges to the industry, it's also brought the rise of the citizen journalist, which in the future will have an influence on journalism and its relationship with the audience. Wall puts forward that citizen journalism reflects a broader paradigm shift toward participation by more untrained people (2015). This report found benefits of citizen journalism and its acceptance among the media community.

# Recommendations

## Fake News

The term 'fake news' doesn't begin to describe the complexity of the different types of misinformation and disinformation, currently circulating the information ecosystem (Wardle, 2017). Because of this, there is no solution that will combat the challenge overnight, however, people want media and technology companies to do more to separate what's real and what's fake on the internet (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy & Nielsen, 2018). 'Fake news' has been found to be the driving force behind public distrust in the media, causing tension in the relationship between media and audience.

The challenge of the phenomenon remains complex and largely unanswered, but Konieczna & Robinson put forward that news organisations need to be producing quality content that promotes civic engagement and recommends bringing the audience into the news gathering process for an improved relationship (2013, p. 983-984). Wardle believes, that because the news ecosystem is now so polluted, it is the responsibility of both the media and audience to independently check news credibility (2017). However, there remains the challenge of the misuse of the phrase, by describing news that is of conflicting opinion. Pogue says that for every person who flags a story as fake, "the parallel universe on the other side of the hyperpartisan divide will mark it as true" (2017). Therefore, any solution for tackling 'fake news' must first start from the audience questioning what they read online. This approach has already made a difference in traditional news media, as the audience grows to distrust social media as a news source (Duke, 2018).

## Professionalism of Journalism

General technology advancement has been both a blessing and a curse regarding the future of journalism. While it's caused a downfall in profit for the industry, it's also expanded it through the creation of the citizen journalist. The term 'journalist' has been broadened to a range of societal groups, including what was once the audience, and according to Bruns, the mainstream media no longer provides the only space for public discussion of news and current events (2011, p. 132). He suggests the need for balance between the production of original news content by professional journalists, and other online and social media sources, to create value and attract news users (2011, p. 133). Haak, Parks and Castells state that the unearthing and collecting of information by citizen journalists, will support the creation of multidimensional news, but also reiterates that fact-checking and analysis is still required (2012, p. 2928). Collaboration is recommended to move the relationship between professional journalism and the audience forward in a positive and beneficial way.

Social media gives businesses a platform to build their network and attract their audience. Utilizing these platforms efficiently is increasingly becoming a skill that employers look for, or even a job position in its entirety (Wilkinson, Grant & Fisher, 2013, p. 211). The use of social media as a form of communication creates a balance of power between organisations and the audience which adds additional value to the relationship (Culnan, McHugh & Zubillaga, 2010, p. 244). Therefore an understanding of how best to use social media in the journalism industry must derive from educational institutions, so young professional communicators are properly equipped to better engage news consumers. Carson and Muller say trust and accuracy are what matters the most in digital newsrooms (2017, p. 19) and because people are more frequently turning to social media

for news, skills to quickly and accurately produce content is what's needed to keep with societal changes in media consumption.

## Funding Journalism

Paywalls and subscription funding models are a necessary step for the journalism industry going into the future, however, various commentators believe it won't be sustainable. Eric Beecher, the chairman of Private Media, says the news has become a free commodity, due to the immediacy of content availability (Carson & Muller, 2017, p. 41). He says digital subscriptions will continue to have a role in funding journalism, but that it will not be able to support the industry alone and suggests government funding assistance for journalism organisations (Carson & Muller, 2017, p. 40). News consumers are increasingly agitated by the erection of paywalls on media websites. To help move that relationship forward in a positive way, Levy and Nielsen suggest more of a focus on ensuring the underlying functions of journalism are protected (2010, p. 23). Guaranteeing journalism fundamentals in every story behind a paywall will rebuild trust between news consumers and news providers.

The ongoing transformation in the media industry calls for constant change and new funding ideas. Sweeping changes to the way journalism industries record revenue are forcing companies to reassess and to create new ways of working in media (Malmelin & Villi, 2017, p. 6). It is too early to tell how the merger between Fairfax Media and Nine will affect the relationship between the media and the audience, however concerns have already been raised about job cuts, particularly in rural areas and about a loss of media independence (Muller, 2018; ABC News, 2018; MEAA, 2018).



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