

Getting Social: The Rise of Youth Media in Australia

Penny O'Donnell

Introduction

Aussie youth media is on the rise. There has been an explosion in online media outlets aimed at younger audiences. New local start-ups include *Junkee*, *Broadsheet* and *Spook*. Such sites offer proof of dramatic changes in the way young people access news and information. They are created, edited and staffed by young journalists who set their own agendas. More often than not, this means a visually rich, quirky mix of politics and pop culture, serious commentary and laughs, street-smart advice and buyer guides.

Social media know-how is essential. Connecting with younger audiences, these days, means going to the platforms and sites they use with strong, interesting content they will like and share. It also means communicating with them, a lot, via comments and conversations. Authentic connections of this kind are seen to drive content sharing, demonstrate integrity, and build reach that will appeal to advertisers. *Junkee*, *Broadsheet* and *Spook* are popular new players in the digital media landscape. Their appeal suggests a ready synergy between young journalists and their audiences. This chapter asks, do digital natives do digital media better?

It must be said that major media companies want younger audiences too. Market analysts tell us Big Media — that is, mainstream newspapers and television — are chasing 16- to 30-year-olds with purchasing power. They've been nicknamed the

millennials. In Australia they spend around \$67 billion dollars each year, which makes them very attractive advertising targets. Even so, marketing to millennials can be challenging. Traditional mass advertising strategies do not work online because audiences are fragmented, dispersed and transient. Instead, Big Media are investing in digital content formats or media sites that already have reach into the youth market.

The national television giant Nine Entertainment is at the forefront of commercial media efforts to grow the youth audience. In March 2015, it purchased a major stake in the online youth site, *pedestrian.tv*, which claims an audience of over one million young Australians. Around the same time, its online site *ninemsn* redesigned its lifestyle offerings in a bid to attract younger consumers. It now publishes three new brands: a fashion and beauty site called *Honey*, a diet and fitness site called *Coach*, and *Pickle*, a viral news video site that claims to be 'Australia's number one online destination'. Nine's Chief Digital and Marketing Officer Alex Parsons recently told *The Australian* that synergies between the company's broadcast and digital assets benefit consumers and create 'a more powerful media network'.

News Corporation, the parent company of Australia's biggest newspaper group, is also targeting the youth market. In May 2015, it launched an internet television project called *Internet Action Force* or *iaf.tv*. The site is described in promotional material as a 'buzzworthy viral video challenger to sites like BuzzFeed'. It boasts a nerdy but fun profile that is baffling industry commentators and audiences alike. *Mumbrella's* Nic Christensen questioned News Corp's move into viral videos, recalling chief executive Robert Thomson's putdown of *BuzzFeed* as 'strange' and filled with 'rubbish'. Jenni Ryall at *Mashable* labelled the new *IAF* site 'awkward', while John McDuling at *Quartz* surmised it was a case of 'if you can't beat them, join them'. Memes from *Twitter* folk lampooned the idea of a media giant producing funny videos for youngsters.

While Big Media's strategy of partnering with youth online brands to open up the youth market niche looks clever, it can also be seen as an admission of weakness. Mainstream media have a credibility problem with Australian youth. Research suggests young people resent the standard mainstream mix of intense advertising to young consumers, yet constant adverse news coverage of youth issues and negligible access for young voices. Big Media's recent interest in engaging youth tends to look expedient rather than a genuine attempt to integrate the internet and youth audiences into content offerings. This chapter therefore also asks, do the new forms of youth journalism provide better, more realistic and inclusive forms of youth representation?

Generational advantage?

There is a widespread belief that young people intuitively understand the internet because it has always been a part of their lives. This mistaken belief is captured in the buzzword 'digital natives', which suggests technology not only shapes young people's thinking but also their aptitude for digital media.

As far back as 2005, Rupert Murdoch told a gathering of the American Society of Newspaper Editors that the future of news is in the hands of people like his two youngest daughters who 'will never know a world without ubiquitous broadband internet access'. He pointed to a generational knowledge gap, saying 'the peculiar challenge then, is for us digital immigrants ... to apply a digital mindset to a set of challenges that we unfortunately have limited to no first-hand experience dealing with'. Murdoch told journalists to stop fixating on getting stories and, instead, to start thinking like 'digital natives' by asking: 'Does anyone want the story?'

In fact, there is little agreement in media or academic circles about what it means to be a 'digital native' and even less consensus on whether young people can make the most of digital media because of their so-called naturally acquired digital mindset. danah

boyd is one of the world's foremost researchers on young people and social media use. She says there is no 'magical relation' between youth and digital skills. People do not need to be 'born digital' to become digitally literate. Therefore, adults should not assume their teenage children automatically understand new technologies because they have grown up with them. Moreover, boyd claims the notion of 'digital natives' is distracting. She believes it obscures the fact that 'becoming literate in a networked age requires hard work, regardless of age'.

Australia's leading youth publishers, Neil Ackland, Tony Faure and Tim Duggan of Junkee Media (formerly Sound Alliance), work hard to keep abreast of what young Australians want from online media. Their titles include *InTheMix*, *FasterLouder*, *SameSame*, *Mess+Noise*, *AWOL* and *Junkee*. Curiously, Junkee Media's offering is not as high-tech as you might expect.

In a recent profile for the *Australian Financial Review*, CEO Neil Ackland shared his view that 'tech is an enabler of media, not a driver'. The company relies more on business acumen and audience research. A commissioned 2012 survey of 4000 young Australians, aged 18 to 29 years, produced surprising results. Four trends emerged. Young people's main concern is keeping up with new information, not new technology. Fear of missing out (FOMO) and fear of not knowing (FONK) drive their preference for mobile internet. They get their information from social media — which for 93 of every 100 survey participants meant *Facebook* — and share content that makes them look interesting or funny. They do not like 'advertising noise'. To cater for these newly identified trends, the company re-engineered its youth media business model and in 2013 launched *Junkee*, a mobile-first, pop culture site featuring native advertising.

The native business strategy involved risk: native advertising is mobile-friendly but can be expensive to produce given it yields only a fraction of the revenue earned by banner ads. Besides, Australians remain sceptical of branded content.

Even so, founding and former managing editor Steph Harmon found a way to make the *Junkee* mix of mobile-first, native content and pop-culture analysis work. The site now gets around 1.5 million unique domestic browsers each month. Harmon estimates 70 per cent of the site's traffic comes via mobile internet, and native makes up 50 per cent of the company's revenue. She believes the best native advertisers are the ones that say 'you guys know what you're doing'. Junkee Media Content Director Tim Duggan believes quality control is the key. He told the *Fin Review*:

I'm in charge of the editorial teams and we need them to put as much care into a piece for Coca-Cola or Contiki or Visa as a piece they'll write for themselves. That's quite fun and most of our writers are under 30 and they've taken this up with glee.

For CEO Neil Ackland, success is about getting the right mix of creativity and digital competence. He told the *Fin Review*:

good media is about being in the zeitgeist. So you have to be quick and topical and match the spirit of your audience. We use a lot of data analytics tools and real-time measurement. There's a mixture of art and science and the editors are trained to be writers but also data experts.

The Junkee Media experience helps us to see a wide disparity between young people's everyday familiarity with digital technology, and the expert knowledge needed to produce profitable digital media. This disparity points to an uneven social distribution of youth digital skills and, by extension, unequal capacity to deal with the access, participation, privacy, safety and other common challenges of living in a digital world. It busts the myth that those 'born digital' somehow do digital media better.

Youth journalism

This chapter contends that the real significance of the rise of Aussie youth media rests on its capacity to increase and improve

the possibilities for strong youth journalism. News production has changed in the digital age. It is fast, open-ended and multi-platform. Editorial and advertising content intersect more often. Shared news spaces and interactive relationships between content producers and users are replacing journalistic gatekeeping and editorial control. Competition for audiences is intense. In the youth media market, Big Media now has to compete with start-ups led by entrepreneurial journalists who want to try new forms of youth journalism in new settings. Competitive pressure is forcing all media players to rethink the media-youth nexus. This is a welcome development because new approaches to youth journalism, based on more realistic and inclusive reporting, are long overdue.

Jason Sternberg, a leading Australian researcher in this area, contends commercial television's negative and demeaning portrayal of young Australians remains a major obstacle to change. He has spent two decades monitoring what he terms 'the news media's war on youth'. His research finds young people are stereotyped, for example, as 'either over-the-edge violent sociopaths or vulgar brainless pleasure seekers'. Moreover, they get no right of reply because journalists do not see them as authoritative or credible news sources, and so deny them news access. Sternberg believes the constant negative bias against youth in television news media coverage is inexcusable as it may well affect young people's view of themselves, and discourage their news media use.

In contrast, the youth journalism found in non-commercial news outlets — such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Triple J radio network, or community media — attempts to rectify mainstream media's misrepresentation and neglect of young people. It aims to give youth a public voice, encourage political debate about young people's concerns, and advocate for changes to improve their lives. Through their intense focus on young people's concerns, these alternative types of youth journalism establish close relationships with youth audiences. But they

occupy a precarious position in the media landscape, subject to top-down media policy and funding decisions, which shape and constrain their mission, content priorities and audience reach.

As Junkee Media demonstrates, the new look Aussie digital youth media are different again. They are both more profit-oriented, and more dependent on the powerful global tech giants (e.g. Facebook, Google, Apple) that connect them to audiences, enable user engagement and, thus, deliver profitability. Consequently, Australian youth journalism is developing a higher profile in the contemporary news market, even though questions remain as to how well it serves an otherwise misrepresented and neglected constituency.

Hal Crawford, former editor-in-chief and publisher of *ninemsn*, was a driving force behind Nine Entertainment's fresh approach to youth media and one of the architects of the network's innovative new approach to online youth journalism based on news sharing. He is co-author of a five-year study of news sharing that developed a new blueprint for profitable digital content. It's called SENT: keep it 'simple, emotional, new and triggered'. News sharing is a business strategy. It is the latest method for creating audiences as consumers that advertisers want access to and, thus, of raising revenue through advertising. Data drives content. News sharing works to grow audiences in the new youth market niche because it responds and adapts to young people's everyday interests, and is attuned to their existing online practices and values, including audience participation and interactivity.

Yet, as Crawford's blueprint demonstrates, there is no particular editorial brief driving news sharing. It simply turns away from the difficult work of giving public voice to the social and political concerns of young people. Nonetheless, Crawford remains adamant that news sharing is about more than clickbait. In his view, smart journalists should use market analytics, rather than professional news values, in selecting and reporting news because audiences find it more engaging. Moreover, Crawford's blog *Share*

Wars provides free advice and a news-tracking tool (a.k.a. the Likeable Engine) to help newcomers to get it right.

Nine's youth websites *Coach* and *Pickle* demonstrate how consumption-based lifestyles dominate the data-driven new news agenda for younger audiences. *Coach* offers practical advice on getting healthy, while *Pickle's* menu of viral and animal videos is 'quirky ... playful and fun'. Editor Sam Downing says the company's approach is 'very much about mainstream Australia'. The sites focus on producing light and likeable content that young people will share with their friends. They have *Facebook* accounts because it is the biggest social network and 'that's where our audience is'. They post stories on Instagram because 'it appeals to advertisers and PRs'.

There is no doubt that these forms of youth journalism make young people's lives and identities more visible to themselves and others. They represent a new era in commercial media's youth journalism. But, visibility is not the same as sociality. It does not necessarily achieve social recognition or respect for youth viewpoints. The problem with market-driven youth journalism that lacks a public interest orientation is that it runs the risk of ignoring the fundamental concerns of those it seeks to engage.

Downing's interest in developing an independent 'editorial voice' for the *Coach* and *Pickle* sites provides some evidence in support of this contention. He says:

... we used to joke a few years ago that if you put the word 'feminism' on the home page people will just not click on it ... [but] there's a noticeable change in that now.

He now tries to tell stories about 'gender politics, racial politics, that kind of thing' in ways that are interesting to mainstream Australia, that is, 'to someone's mum or sister sitting at home who wouldn't think of themselves as being media-savvy'. He admits it's a 'struggle' finding a way to tell those missing stories.

In contrast, the online cultural magazine *Spook* takes a more direct approach to reporting the fundamental concerns of young people. Its editorial brief covers sex, politics, art, fashion, film and music. The magazine labels itself as progressive and innovative. In 2014, it moved from print-based to digital news production, and revamped its profile. What had been an alternative ‘gonzo journalism’ press is now a digital culture platform ‘striving to bring a cleanly curated mix of local Australian and international content to our readers’. The magazine works not only to give voice to young people’s concerns but also to ‘spark dialogue wherever our voice is heard’. Editor and co-founder Nick Melin says:

You can produce as much fast news as possible, and fast clickbait content, but ... what we want out of our publication and what sponsors want, is engagement.

This means conversing with the audience and responding to their feedback rather than just publishing content.

One of the tougher challenges facing this type of youth journalism is finding a viable balance between strong editorial content and profitable audience creation. Melin believes media content with too much ‘youthful vibe’ makes advertisers hesitant. He says, ‘we do publish content that other publications may be too worried about to publish ... [and] that has worked for and against us at certain stages’. Risqué articles on sex, with headlines such as ‘David Bowie’s cock’, ‘Why owning a vibrator is everything’ or ‘11 (unexpected) lessons I learnt working in a sex shop’ are one example. The problem here is that market reluctance to invest in young voices frankly discussing young people’s sex lives and sexuality, and other issues of concern, has a knock-on effect: it stifles innovation and relegates this type of news content to the more advertising-friendly formats: clickbait, listicles and viral videos. This represents a regression to the bad old days of media industry fear-mongering and trivialisation of young people.

In response to the challenges of securing ad revenue, *Spook’s* business strategy is to foster brand loyalty by building a tight-knit

community around the publication through direct interactions between the publisher, news writers, and audience. The magazine keeps its advertisers onside via a mix of clickable headlines, social media presence, and sponsored posts on *Facebook*. Paying to boost *Facebook* traffic is controversial. Nine's *Coach* and *Pickle* sites do it regularly; *Junkee* does not. Melin admits the practice is addictive because it works. He says:

We see it as a bit of a growth strategy, because we're obviously a small player and want to expand our network ... it's certainly great to see the Likes go up.

Investing in yourself, or, rather, in the future of progressive and innovative youth journalism, takes a particular kind of passion. For Melin, it's about creating meaningful and lasting relationships with audiences, advertisers and young writers. He says: 'That's all part of being a modern-day media outlet online, otherwise you become too shallow and people forget about you.'

The *Spook* experience demonstrates small-scale entrepreneurial youth media offer a productive environment for building strong and innovative youth journalism capacity. It also suggests this potential will remain latent unless and until markets learn to properly value what young people have to say.

Decent work

This chapter closes with brief consideration of the media labour market and opportunities for young journalists to find decent well-paid employment in youth media and beyond.

On the positive side, work is available. Lifelong careers in journalism may be in sharp decline but there are still jobs in newsrooms that come with continuing contracts and reasonable salaries. In fact, the mainstream news media labour market currently favours younger journalists. Fairfax Media and News Corp, the biggest employers of Australian journalists, have shed hundreds of their senior journalists since moving to digital-first publication in 2012, and new hires tend to be younger journalists.

These recruits are seen to cost less and know more than the print veterans about the latest digital media trends.

On the negative side, newsroom work takes place in the shadow of ongoing job cuts, and performance management is very intense. At Fairfax Media, for example, journalists now get individualised weekly updates on how their stories are tracking online. The company uses analytics to determine the articles most in demand, and the latest editorial brief is to produce less but more ‘effective’ content, a codeword that points in the direction of clickbait. The wider view, across the industry, is that younger journalists are expected to be flexible, multi-skilled all-rounders. This means not only filing stories across multiple platforms from just about anywhere at almost anytime but also creating a sizeable following for that content.

Working in digital youth news media is very intense too, but in a different way. Youth media start-ups tend to be micro-media. They are small businesses run by small in-house teams, who often depend on casuals and freelancers to get the job done. Creating content that generates income tends to be the over-riding everyday preoccupation. Fluctuations in cash flow foster a volatile work culture in which entrepreneurship and versatility tend to be prized more highly than professional journalistic norms and values.

Broadsheet Media, a high-rating online city guide to restaurants and bars in Australian capital cities, offers an interesting example of this type of work. Editorial director Tim Fisher says *Broadsheet* employs a dozen people, with a mix of journalists, advertising and technical staff. They literally work cheek-to-cheek. *Broadsheet* took the idea of integrated online content production from the 2014 *New York Times* Innovation Report. Fisher believes it helps his team do their jobs better. He says:

We all talk ... everyone is in the same room, you can turn your chair around and talk to a developer or to one of the sales team, so we are all invested in the success of *Broadsheet*.

Even so, these jobs are tough because the pace of work is relentless. Fisher says:

... its so day-to-day and so fast and half the time I can't even remember the stories I've written on a particular day because they're so tied to that day and if you asked me again a few days later, I'm just like, something about a dog, maybe?

In conclusion, outmoded and unhelpful forms of youth journalism are seriously challenged by the rise of innovative new forms of Aussie youth media, especially those found in small-scale entrepreneurial news outlets. This analysis suggests an evolving capacity for building strong and diverse forms of youth news, audience participation and online interactivity, rather than endless clickbait, which may well develop more rapidly once the online market learns to value realistic and inclusive reporting of youth concerns. To understand and thrive in this emerging new context, aspiring young journalists will need to shift from journalistic gatekeeping to content co-production, from clickbait logic to youth logic, from the work of producing audiences for advertisers to the work of building meaningful forms of user engagement and sociality.

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