**Ideas and Society event: What's next for journalism?**

**Thursday 16 October 2014**

[**John Scott Meeting House**](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/melbourne/location)**, La Trobe University Bundoora**

**Professor John Dewar**

Well, it’s a real pleasure to welcome you all here today to this Ideas and Society event. I’d like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we’re gathered this afternoon, and to pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

My name is John Dewar. I’m the Vice Chancellor of the university and it’s my great pleasure in that role to have invited Professor Robert Manne, Emeritus Professor Robert Manne, not only to be a Vice Chancellor’s Fellow, but also to continue to run this wonderful program of events. And it’s been a bumper year for the Ideas and Society Program. Topics considered this year have included the future of Australian manufacturing, racism in Australia, communicating science, the power of sport to change the world, and in addition to that, we hosted three events at the Bendigo Writers’ Festival as part of the Ideas and Society Program, all of which were sold out, so it’s been a terrific year, Rob. Well done.

Our topic for today is What’s Next for Journalism? And as I’m sure many of you are aware, and I suspect there are a few journalism students in the audience, the profession of journalism is undergoing enormous transformation, perhaps more so than any other industry, with the possible exception of higher education.

Just a few of the environmental factors that have impacted on journalism in recent years have included have included the rise of online media and the loss of classified advertising revenue, the corresponding decline in traditional newspaper readership and the real time “reporting” of events by citizens on social media as and when they are happening. And all of that takes place against a backdrop in Australia of the highest concentration of media ownership in the world.

In her 2013 A N Smith lecture, Catherine Viner, who is the Editor of *Guardian Australia*, said, ‘digital is a cluster-bomb blowing apart who we are and how our world is ordered, with inevitable implications for journalism.’ But there was also an optimistic note to Catherine’s lecture, because she said that there is more a need than ever for the journalist as truth-teller, sense-maker and explainer.

So I’m sure that today’s panel will explore not just the challenges besetting the journalism industry and profession, but will also be looking at what the future might hold and the opportunities it might contain.

Now, to help us do that, Rob has, as usual, assembled an extraordinary panel to help us discuss these issues and I’ll start … I’ll go from your right to left, so I’ll start at the far end, where we’re delighted to welcome Helen Westerman, the Deputy Managing-Editor of *The Conversation*, and Helen has covered news, business and finance for the *Age* and was the Small Business Online Editor for the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* for almost eight years and we’re particularly grateful that Helen has stepped into the breach at the last minute because Andrew Jaspan, who is the Editor of the *Conversation* was originally advertised as the speaker. He had to withdraw but we’re delighted that Helen has been able to take his place.

Moving slightly closer we have Dr Fiona Martin, ARC Discovery Early Career Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Convergent and Online Media at the University of Sydney. Fiona researches the uses, politics and regulation of online media and the implications of technologies for media industry change.

Coming in again we have Jonathan Green, ABC Radio Melbourne presenter on Sunday Extra and a working journalist since the late 1970s, who spent fifteen years at the *Age*, is a former editor of *Crikey* and a foundation editor of ABC Online’s *The Drum*.

And then, last but by no means, least, we have our very own Professor Lawrie Zion. Sorry Lawrie, I’m just having to find you in my notes. But Lawrie is the Head of the Department of Journalism and Strategic Communication at La Trobe University and co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of our wonderful online magazine, *Upstart*, which showcases student writing and provides a forum for emerging student journalists.

Can you please welcome them all to today’s discussion?

[applause]

Now, before I hand over to Rob, in the spirit of the times and in the spirit of participation and perhaps of today’s theme, I’d encourage you all to join in the conversation on Twitter, using the hashtag Ideas and Society and be sure to follow La Trobe on Twitter via @latrobe news.

I’ll now hand over to Rob.

**Professor Robert Manne**

Thanks very much John.

Well, I thank the Vice-Chancellor for all the support he’s given over many years. The way I planned … I’m sorry about my voice, by the way, so forgive me, I’ve got a cold. What I’ve planned today is to begin with some very general questions about the role of journalism and the future of journalism and then turn to the work of people on the panel, with slightly more specific questions.

Panellists, feel free at any point to intervene. There’s no order of things and the more interventions there are, the more interesting it will become. Also, I want to leave plenty of time for questions from the audience. I think there are quite a few journalism students here. I would encourage you all to think about things you might ask when we get to the point of question time. I’d like there to be interactivity as there is in digital media. I’d like there to be quite a bit of interactivity in the audience as well.

I feel, as John was saying, very privileged that you’ve all agreed to come along today. We’ve got people here who are both media practitioners but also media scholars and I think the balance of the panel is great. Some, like Lawrie, are both.

Let me begin with a general discussion, with for me, the most obvious and in some ways the most troubling point of all, which is, I think that everyone agrees that print media is in decline. I mean by that, newspapers in their traditional form. I think some might think in very steep decline, and given your knowledge, your practice, judgment, do you think, let’s say, in fifteen, twenty years, what I regard as the sort of middle term, that we’re going to … that newspapers are still going to be a reasonably important part of a democratic life, a democratic society? I know it’s a very general question, and no one has the right answer, but I’d be very interested … would someone like to start us off?

Are newspapers finished, essentially? Not next year or the next five years, but in the middle and long term.

**Jonathan Green**

I think they’ve been in decline since the 1960s, you know, the golden age of print journalism, the big circulation and afternoon papers and all that stuff is a pre-television phenomenon, and they’ve been on the downhill run ever since. And there’s sort of … there’s a kind of newspaper that will survive I think, into your sort of period, and it’s going to be the tabloid paper. It’s going to be the mass circulation, sensationalist newspaper, because it has a reasonably intact business model, by virtue of selling a lot of copies, it can sustain itself and to a much better extent than the ones that used to run on the back of classified advertising.

And to that question of whether the continuing, enduring, publishing of papers matters to the democratic project, I think the fact that it will be the tabloid papers that endure is a thing which is coincidental to democratic health, if not harmful. Now, so that’s the sort of paper that will endure.

The other papers I think have the capacity potentially to make something of themselves in the digital environment but they certainly won’t have the capacity to survive as businesses in print and I think they will wither and die within that period, and I think *that* is potentially injurious to the democratic project. So it’s a sort of … the bit that survives won’t help but the thing that dies is what we would rather have survive.

**Helen Westerman**

I have a different perspective on that, in that I think that that actually is going to be the specialist press that will survive. That I would be concerned that the tabloid papers that you talk about peddle information and stories that are easily available on a myriad of different sources, often for free, and that it would be more likely to be the specialist business, arts, epicure, housing publications, or weekend press, aka Morry Schwarz’ *The Saturday Paper*, which launched earlier this year, that perhaps would survive amid a readership that can find that sort of titillating stuff that’s actually not very unique content, anywhere that they want.

So I think that that it’s not really going to be about the way it’s delivered but perhaps the sort of content that it delivers – it’s not necessarily the medium but it’s the content. People will still, I believe, want to buy a physical item that gives them something that they want to keep, that is interesting, that tells them something new that they didn’t know.

**Robert Manne**

Fiona?

**Dr Fiona Martin**

I’m inclined to agree with Helen in terms of the specialist focus of print publications, because magazines are I think the medium that will survive in print. People are more inclined to want to take a magazine, if it has long form journalist, as an object to take and share, to display as a status object and particularly now that magazines are moving to different experiments with digital, incorporating digital forms with the print. I think we’re more inclined to see that form of print.

Newspapers I don’t think will survive. I’m quite happy reading the *Sydney Morning Herald* on my mobile or my iPad and I think the question of the medium is a bit of a red herring. The question is whether the news companies that supply us with information about our politics and our civic functions, whether they will survive the transition to online.

**Robert Manne**

And if that’s the question, what’s your view? I mean, you can read the *Sydney Morning Herald* online now in part because …

**Fiona Martin**

… I’m a subscriber?

**Robert Manne**

You’re a subscriber, but they also come out in print. Is there a business model possible for a newspaper as substantial as that to exist entirely digitally? Do you think?

**Fiona Martin**

Oh, it’s always hard being a futurist. I mean, the *Guardian*’s got this grand new screen where they’re going to have memberships and readers have actually suggested this, that this is one way in which they are going to feel more attached to the *Guardian* as a brand.

**Jonathan Green**

We’re speculating about what might succeed as future business models, but certainly none of the ones deployed currently can succeed, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Age*, yes, they can endure because they’re doing both and there’s still some profitability, but they won’t survive – they can’t survive as a non-print product. There’s not a model in digital publishing which will sustain them.

**Dr Lawrie Zion**

But if the brand … if the masthead if you like, let’s say for argument’s sake, they stop printing newspapers except at weekends, they could substantially still shrink the number of journalists in each title and still be in the competition for keeping eyeballs, possibly in a way to promote what they will sell as a patented version on weekends.

I think another … the reason I think … I guess I agree a lot with Fiona about, sometimes the actual platform’s not as relevant as how people are actually … the fact that that news is going to be out there in a kind of ambient form. A friend of mine coined the term ‘ambient journalism’ to talk about the fact that we don’t actually have to look for news now and I think the really important change of habits when you look at audiences is that it’s no longer the case and I use the example of my old dog Moose, who’s twelve, who was trained very early in the mornings originally to get his breakfast, to go out and he would bring in one newspaper and then I’d say, Moose, one more, and then it would be one more as well if it was a weekend, so he was used to the fact …

**Jonathan Green**

Last week he ate your iPad.

**Lawrie Zion**

That’s right, he ate my iPad. But the thing is now I can turn my Facebook on in the morning and because I’ve liked all the publications that I happen to subscribe to, that news is going to come to me. I don’t go to the news. The news comes to me. And Moose just complains that he hasn’t had his breakfast yet.

**Jonathan Green**

But someone’s still got to … in the journalism thing, of jobs in journalism and so on, someone’s still got to report stuff, and people have still got to hire the people that report stuff, whether you consume it, you know, through osmosis or through that sort of ambient gathering is yeah, okay, that’s a point about delivering a medium but at the end of the day, someone has to go out and ask questions.

**Lawrie Zion**

So to get back to how many people could … what’s the bare minimum that a masthead can keep going, just to keep its presence online? It’s probably a lot lower than it is now. But I think the point where I agree with you here is that the real question is, the benchmark for quality journalism, how many stories are going to be told that people don’t want to be told? In other words, are we going to actually get to the point where you can go beyond the sort of news we get on the wire services, repackaged, re-curated if you like, and actually get investigative pieces through the traditional producers of that kind of content, and I think that’s where the real worry is.

**Robert Manne**

I wanted to ask that, and I will. I mean, if I think of what I value newspapers for, clearly no longer breaking news. You know, you don’t wait for the *Age* or whatever to find out something that you knew twelve or eighteen hours earlier from radio, internet … but I valued newspapers for investigative journalism. For telling the society something often that they don’t want to know, but something that surprises them, forces them to reconsider the nature of the democracy. And I wondered whether online digital publications will do what newspapers traditionally thought they ought to do and as Jonathan said, because of the revenue from classified advertising, were able to afford to do, to allow a journalist to work for six months on a story and then at the end of that six months, produce something which … and the classic is Watergate, which fundamentally changes the political culture, or political society.

So that’s the question for me. Without newspapers, and particularly without quality newspapers, can digital forms, will digital forms fill that gap?

**Helen Westerman**

I’d like to answer that. I just want to go back very quickly to the discussion about the commercial business models of some of our big publishers and I mean, there’s certainly been a move towards diversification for those papers, so obviously Newscorp has a lot of big interest internationally that indirectly helped bolster their Australian products here. Fairfax has obviously attempted to do that through purchases such as Essential Baby, RSVP, the Trade Me New Zealand eBay style site that they sold just recently, but that was all part of an attempt I suppose to diversify the profitability of the company. So they’re not having to rely solely on the advertising dollars and those rivers of gold which we all agree have just recently … gradually just sort of dried up.

So, I’m not as pessimistic about the future of newspaper companies. I would like to think that ten, fifteen, twenty years ago that they will still be around but they won’t be monolithic creatures that just rely on one sort of source of income.

But the funding model is the hairy beast in all of this. My website, *The Conversation* is a not-for-profit model. We’re funded by the education sector including La Trobe University and the majority of the Australian universities support us to produce the stories that we do. So I’m talking about this because there actually are now models, not in Australia because I think we are lagging behind of online operations that are doing investigative journalism. And also there was a website called *Inside Climate* which won a Pulitzer Award a couple of years ago. They did a long investigation into a pipeline, an oil pipeline, that ran through a number of American states that was leaking into people’s backyards. But there was fundamentally a sort of systematic cover-up by the company and different authorities throughout that, and for that work – it took a long time, it was an ongoing thing – they won a Pulitzer Award.

**Robert Manne**

Do you know what their funding model is?

**Helen Westerman**

Yeah, they’re a not-for-profit as well. And I believe that they’re a bit of crowd-sourced funding as well. But they’re in the US, which has a much bigger philanthropic model of funding. We don’t really have that in Australia. Perhaps Graeme Wood was perhaps our best-known philanthropist in terms of funding the *Global Mail*. In America it’s much bigger. *Propublica*  is another good example I suppose of that. These are all models which don’t exactly … they don’t solve the commercial imperative of how to make money from media, but they do point to a certain future in investigative journalism I believe.

**Robert Manne**

I think the other one that I’ve been really interested in is *The Intercept* which Glenn Greenwald started, and that comes from a vast amount of money from … was it eBay, or PayPal, or somebody who made his fortune …

**Helen Westerman**

Pierre Omidyar.

**Robert Manne**

… who decided to put in I think $250 million into creating it.

**Jonathan Green/Lawrie Zion**

And the *Washington Post* who was bought by the owner of *Amazon* and he’s quite happy to run it as a loss, but he’s trying to apply almost a philanthropic model in order to rescue the paper.

**Fiona Martin**

The interesting thing is that there’s lots of examples of specialist reporting and investigative reporting that are coming out of these not-for-profit and philanthropic initiatives and also Helen made the point that there are explorations around different service models for journalism or for news media organisations and I think the question is, what sort of service will journalism offer us in the future? Because if you look at the media companies that are succeeding, the big tech media companies, they offer distinct information services. So Google’s survived its initial kind of diversification of services to come back to search and advertise and targeted advertising. Twitter, for example, allows us all to exchange news immediately and to kind of to curate that news and to circulate it.

So, the question is, what are those … current, our legacy news media organisations going to offer us in terms of a service? Are they going to do the curation of this specialist news? Are they going to do curation analysis? And that’s what we need to be looking at in terms of the future of journalism, what sort of service will journalists offer us?

**Jonathan Green**

The best thing we can probably do is in verification for a start.

**Fiona Martin**

Well, precisely, yeah.

**Jonathan Green**

We talk about Twitter and so on and I’m as keen on Twitter as the next person but it’s …

**Robert Manne**

Often to your cost …

**Jonathan Green**

But it’s unsubstantiated, it’s potentially meaningless, potentially meaningful, potentially absolutely right, potentially absolutely wrong.

**Fiona Martin**

Highly variable in its quality.

**Jonathan Green**

Highly variable in its quality, yeah. And that’s … you know, there’s a lot of that about. I mean, I’m not a great defender of journalism necessarily as an essential craft. I’m not sure that it particularly is. But I think there’s something essential about enquiry, about reporting, about the pursuit of information, that is more than just the observation of events. We’re very good at the moment of sort of news, which is about an event, which can be observed and can be relayed, we’re kind of good at that and the times suit that and technology suits that …

**Lawrie Zion**

And crowd sourcing helps there as well.

**Jonathan Green**

Absolutely. And someone’s version of that, the blockage on that train line, is as good as anybody else’s and I’m glad to have it immediately. But there’s a whole lot of other stuff and newspapers for example, stopped doing this a long time ago, stopped reporting local courts, stopped reporting local government, stopped reporting you know, the fabric of the culture. That’s long gone and we can maybe see some of the consequences of that, and now that’s sort of working up the food chain.

**Lawrie Zion**

Well, in the States, where it’s been more … where the decline of local newspapers is more highly evolved to use an appropriate term, there, than here, one of the responses was for people to create not-for-profit, what they call in the States, hyper-local sites. So *Voice of San Diego*, which is not a radio station, it’s a website, I went and did a story for the ABC on this particular project which was one of the leading … three or four years ago, at least, hyper-local sites that was going back into the courtrooms in San Diego in a city where they’d lost one of their two newspapers and the one that was left was like a little pamphlet that you could read in about two minutes at breakfast time.

**Jonathan Green**

Like the *Age*.

**Lawrie Zion**

So they started to reclaim … no, no, it was not like the *Age*. But the *Voice of San Diego* started to reclaim this area of unreported news. And it’s an interesting model but the more I’ve looked at it, the more I realise now that those sort of hyper-local sites seem to depend a lot on university teaching hospital journalism school models and funding, so that the partnerships that universities make with communities now, can have a decisive outcome on the extent to which local news actually gets covered, which is something …

**Jonathan Green**

We should embrace this. The assumption here is …

**Lawrie Zion**

I do embrace it.

**Jonathan Green**

The assumption is that there was ever a business model that supported journalism. And there’s never been a business model that supported journalism.

**Lawrie Zion**

No.

**Jonathan Green**

There’s been a business model for selling classified advertising. There’s been a business model for supporting sort of tabloid mass circulation trash. There’s never been a business model that supported journalism that traditionally things like the *Age* or the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Australian* produce.

**Robert Manne**

One of the alarming … I was just thinking on my feet as we were sitting down, one of the alarming things is that really great journalism is coming from *Intercept*, from *Propublica*, from … and I take it the *Washington Post* will continue to do it with the Amazon owner, but that means that large amounts of subsidy, or philanthropy, is maintaining the great journalism that’s going on in the States and in a way the *Guardian* is a permanent sort of philanthropy … I was really amused to learn that it was a used car company that kept it afloat. It loses £50 million a year but it’s clearly one of the great …

**Jonathan Green**

What happens when cars go, that will be the end.

**Robert Manne**

In other words, the business model seems to have moved, if I could summarise, from classified ads to philanthropy, but apart from Graeme Wood …

**Helen Westerman**

Philanthropy and subscription. I mean, I subscribe to four different news publications in Australia that aren’t the mainstream media. So that subscription membership phenomenon I think is interesting because it moves again to the specialist press, to magazines …

**Robert Manne**

I read the *Guardian* and *Intercept* for nothing. I don’t have to subscribe.

**Helen Westerman**

You don’t have to, but wouldn’t it make you feel good if you could?

**Robert Manne**

No.

**Jonathan Green**

But the point you made about the size of the Australian market. These things are very sustainable in the US and there are good examples. We’re smaller here … it’s going to be more difficult.

**Robert Manne**

What’s going to happen in Australia …

**Jonathan Green**

Well, I think that’s where, I know I work there, but that’s where I think the public broadcaster role in this country is an extraordinary gift and a great hope …

**Robert Manne**

That’s exactly what I was going to raise. I mean, as a consumer, I don’t rely on the *Australian* for news. I rely on it for the increase of anger which I prefer …

**Lawrie Zion**

It gets you up in the morning …

**Robert Manne**

Or gets me down in the night. I don’t, to be honest, rely on Fairfax any longer for anything because I just don’t think the papers are what they once were. I do rely to a very large extent on ABC every day and I just wondered again, one of these future questions, whether very solid public broadcasting is, in Australia, and the BBC as well, is one of the keys to the future of good journalism and journalists.

**Lawrie Zion**

I think it is if it’s trusted and I think this is where the ABC has done extraordinarily well. There’s a publication, an industry publication, called *Essential Media* and they do a lot of polling, they do weekly polling on voting intentions, but they from time to time survey Australians’ attitudes to the media, trust in media, and across different genres of media. So if you look at the trends – I think the last survey that I’ve seen was early 2013, but I think that 2007 or 8 when they started doing these particular polls, that the ABC was kind of high on the scale compared to say, newspapers, commercial TV news, but they were all in a kind of bunch, and what’s started to happen two or three years into this and 2011 and 12 especially, was that trust in the ABC went up to around 70% or higher whereas a lot of newspapers went steadily downwards, and so this real gulf has opened up and it’s a really striking thing because I … this time two weeks ago I was spending a day with the national broadcaster in Croatia, being shown around this enormous building which people were very gently reminding was built in 1988, paid for by Tito, but they have an enormous national broadcaster there, for a county of four and a half million people. But the big dilemma that faces them at the Croatian national broadcaster, is that they’re not … they don’t necessarily have great audience reach. Their audience numbers are declining. And we had a kind of long talk about all these different things and it seems to me that the ABC in the last seven or eight years has really grabbed hold of its remit to be the national broadcaster in a way which builds on trust in its relationships with its audiences, and you can see this in the way Mark Scott created an office for editorial … what was the exact title? Of Paul’s job? Paul Chadwick’s job? Where they actually started to become very open and engage in conversation about the things that people traditionally question them about – transparency, the code of conduct, it started to make some really interesting kind of … put some really interesting stuff up on the site about how to conduct conversations. In other words, it’s really embraced the digital sphere but I think it’s also really tried to be responsive to the people who use the ABC. And that’s put it … whether or not … whatever happens with funding this year, I think it will ultimately serve the ABC well, whatever storms it’s got to weather with funding, the fact that it is very much a core institution …

**Jonathan Green**

I sometimes wonder whether it’s trusted by default, whether the things around it make it look a lot better than it is.

**Fiona Martin**

That’s possible also. I saw a scathing attack, only yesterday, of 702 Sydney, by one of the Stilgherrian’s, yes, exactly, where he looked at the fact that reporting of the storms in the Blue Mountains by Sydney 702, the ABC metropolitan station, had been woeful. And the information that they’d given out had been incorrect and inadequate and in fact he’d got more useful information by looking up the Bureau of Meteorology site and getting information off the railways app and whatnot and I think he raised some really important issues about the variability of trust across the ABC too. Because while people may see it as an organisation, as a brand, as a trustworthy brand, the relationship with individual ABC stations may be quite different and certainly you know, if a station like 702 focuses on inner-city Sydney, and I don’t know what the situation is here in Melbourne, but if it focuses on inner-city Sydney and not the entirety of the city, then of course the trust is going to suffer.

**Jonathan Green**

774 and statewide ABC and their bushfire emergency role, which is a thing they take extraordinarily seriously …

**Fiona Martin**

Oh, very seriously, yes.

**Jonathan Green**

I mean, those things are done well. I’ve worked in Fairfax, I’ve worked in news, I’ve worked independently. ABC is the last standing, sort of intact big newsroom culture in the country.

**Fiona Martin**

It’s very thing, newsroom. One of my friends is a Chief of Staff. She’s often the Chief of No Staff.

**Jonathan Green**

Well, they should look at some of the other ones.

**Helen Westerman**

Perhaps the ABC is trying to do too much.

**Jonathan Green**

Oh, without doubt, that’s true.

**Helen Westerman**

There’s a skeleton staff perhaps that causes the quality of that news to be less than what their listeners want it to be.

**Jonathan Green**

It’s too ambitious I think, that’s absolutely right, and has too many networks and all of that.

**Helen Westerman**

But at an individual level, you have people who are thoroughly professional and that they do a difficult job very well, pretty much 99% of the time.

**Jonathan Green**

I think that’s what I mean by journalistic culture. It is that the people there and the standards that they bring to their work, is still what it would have been in quality journalism in other places twenty years ago.

**Robert Manne**

I mean, we all have bits of it which we listen to and not others, but for example, every night … almost every night I watch *7.30* and I’m surprised by how often something new is broken … there’s a breaking story or something that I find interesting that I haven’t heard about before. So I think there must be a very good producer there, Sally Neighbour, but given that they must be under financial pressure, the fact that they can produce so much …

**Lawrie Zion**

There’s no other show in the country which takes seriously public affairs and the news of the day. There is nothing else. I mean, that I think is a perilous position for us to be in, to rely on something …

**Robert Manne**

Anyone who publishes a book, Lawrie has just published a book, will know that Radio National is almost the only place that you’ll get an extensive hearing. Isn’t that the case, Jonathan?

**Jonathan Green**

Oh, there’s other things like your colleague that you can talk to, Mr Faine or that sort of thing, but I mean there’s … it’s an organisation that doesn’t have a commercial …

**Lawrie Zion**

Or come on your program on a Sunday …

**Jonathan Green**

You could potentially do that.

**Lawrie Zion**

It doesn’t have the commercial imperative, it has that freedom. That’s a great thing. In other places, in the US, you would potentially have that access on NPR for example, or various other possibilities. I think this is the point about public broadcasting here is that we don’t have the population, we don’t have the funds, we don’t have the philanthropic potential, to have the sort of diversity you can see in a bigger country and a bigger population and a bigger market. Which is why, if we want to have fourth estate journalism in this country in some way, shape or form, it’s possible best hope is through public funding, because I don’t think anything else is going to step up to do that and I think that’s probably an important thing to do.

**Robert Manne**

I want to turn to particular bits of work that all of you have done. And I might begin Helen – one of … I always say original ideas are pretty unusual in any field, but I think *The Conversation* with which you’re associated is an original idea beginning in Melbourne and I think it’s been a remarkable addition to journalism and public understanding. I just wondered if I could just give you an open invitation to speak about both the idea of *The Conversation* …

**Helen Westerman**

Have we any academics that haven’t written for us yet? Put your hands up.

As I mentioned before, we’re a not-for-profit model that uses academics as our … basically as our reporters and our analysts. In fact I think I’ve just spotted an author right there. Yes?

We started three and a half years ago. Robert’s right about it being an original idea. The way that it came about was that the founder Andrew Jaspan felt that there were problems in Australian media that weren’t being met by mainstream outlets, which was, there was a problem with breadth and depth of analysis. We don’t by the way, do reporting as such. We don’t have a newsroom of journalists who run out and cover things, we ask academics to use their expertise and their knowledge of the subject area to write us informed, well-written short pieces that anybody can understand and read easily. So it’s not academic-speak, it’s journalism by academics.

The not-for-profit model is because we are unable to pay, and so we offer academics … we ask academics to extend their knowledge transfer responsibilities to write for us, if they so wish, and we have found that thousands of academics in the last three and a half years have been happy to do so.

The way that it essentially works is that we allow the academic a fair amount of collaboration with editors, they’re not all born writers. Many are great writers, many need a little bit of help from editors and there are two main differences to our site that I think have made us successful. And one is, the level of collaboration means that the piece does not go up until the writer and the editor are both happy, and the writer has ultimate sign-off. And that includes captions, headlines, picture choice, sub-headings, editing changes to their pieces – the lot.

So the reason that we do that is because we feel that it’s essentially it’s their work and their ideas and the feedback that we got when we were setting up *The Conversation* was that in many occasions, it was usually the headlines, often the captions, but usually the headline that usually upset when they sent their piece in to the *Age* or other outlets and the headline was completely contrary to the piece. But you know, it may also have been edited without them being asked.

So, that’s been a great strength in terms of asking people to do a second shift and write for us and the other main strength is we have a Creative Commons licence. Now, what that means is that anyone can re-publish our work without copyright restrictions. So Fairfax is quite entitled to and does so. News … they do as well. We have actually … we have 12,000 sites that re-publish our content. That’s globally. Many are in Australia.

What that means essentially is there is a source of good quality information written by people who know what it is that they’re talking about, that is easily available, well edited, and all they need to do is hit our re-publish button and they have you know, a great piece on their hands.

So those two things have been … the two reasons I think why we’ve been so successful and also we foster the highly collaborative relationship which means in the main hopefully, people have a pleasant experience of publishing with us and want to, and many come back to us and say that the ABC has contacted them after they’ve seen a piece of ours, or other media outlets, or they have been approached by other academics in other countries to collaborate on different things.

So it has a great reach, a policy reach.

**Robert Manne**

And do you find academics can in general write journalism?

**Helen Westerman**

Yeah, we were having this discussion earlier. Some can, some are fantastic, others I think take a little bit more coaching, so there’s the sort of classic academic style of starting at the very beginning of time, and in conclusion, getting to … ‘so in conclusion, I think that this government should be sacked’ is right down the bottom, so what I usually do is grab that line and pop it up the top for them and if they keep writing for me in that way, and I keep grabbing the bottom line and popping it up the top, the most important thing at the top, then after not very long, they get the hang of it and those pieces start to come in, in that form.

**Lawrie Zion**

It’s tricky, that journalism …

**Helen Westerman**

It is, actually, slightly harder than it’s been is the feedback I’ve been given.

**Robert Manne**

I just wondered if any members of the panel have views about *The Conversation* and I know Lawrie, you’ve written about it.

**Lawrie Zion**

I’ve written about it, and I’ve written for it. So let me explain, the last few years I’ve been working on a project looking at emerging best practices in digital journalism, and by that I mean, in a way that it kind of includes journalism ethics but I started noticing a few years ago that there were a lot of online sites who were being quite innovative with trying to make journalism better through particular sets of practices and that this was raising a whole lot of interesting questions about how things should be done in the digital sphere if you want to be ethically, and also strategically really good at getting the message across. So an example of that which has been talked about in a lot of other different publications but everyone knows that the ethical principle that you should correct mistakes means that you know, it’s not great to have something that’s wrong out there, and you might say something about it, traditionally in newspapers, the We Were Wrong on page 3, depending on which paper it was of course, might be the way to atone for something that was wrong on the previous day.

But when you get into the digital sphere, there’s so many different ways you can acknowledge a mistake, some of which would be very hard on the reader and the whole question of how the best practice model of correcting errors works, makes you think about a whole lot of different things like, what mistakes are too trivial, when you can do all these different things technologically, there’s all sorts of answers that crop up. One of the things I guess that really interested me about *The Conversation* was that it had created itself as something which was based on a new premise if you like, that this is something that would not have existed in print, but also that seemed in its policies towards contributors, towards authors, to really be looking at what you can do in the digital sphere and how can this make for better journalism in the long run?

So, I early on did an interview with Andrew Jaspan and in the book I’ve just edited, *Ethics for Digital Journalists: Emerging Best Practices* which Fiona is also a contributor, I had it as a case study in my opening chapter and it worked really well for the book because it’s already out there in the UK, but also I think it was unique really in all the different publications that all of our fifteen authors were looking at, in the way that it’s approached trying to create a new space for journalism in the digital sphere and that it’s been really successful in doing so, and other contributors and my editors in the States thought this was a terrific example.

I should also declare that, in the interests of transparency I’ve actually had a very positive experience publishing with *The Conversation* with part of a group of five who were looking at what happens next to journalists who have taken redundancy packages over the last three years, and we did a pilot study last year ahead of a journalism conference in December, and we all sat around and said, which newspapers should we try and get some coverage in, and the discussion then turned to, well, would it be better to … would it possibly be better for us to go with writing something for *The Conversation* because there’s the chance that if we do a piece for them, we’ve got a bit more control over it, what goes in there, but also, we’ll get a broader reach. And so the best practices of *The Conversation*, the sharing, the open journalism ethos behind it as a publication, meant that it got picked up by publications, not just in Australia, like mUmBRELLA – the *Australian* newspaper that liked the story and actually Sally Jackson, terrific journalist who recently left there, but she wanted to do a follow-up story, which was really great for us, and then it was re-published by *The Conversation* in the UK, shared so many times on social media that we really got a lot of responses to the project, including by the way, finding someone in the UK who’d done a study very similar to ours that we didn’t know about.

So for us this was really … it just really makes sense now, given the sort of project that we’re doing, to look at *The Conversation* as a kind of go-to place we’ve got any new research findings to report. So, you know, that’s my experience of publishing with them.

**Robert Manne**

Fiona, on this question, but I wanted to ask you something more general as well, but …

**Fiona Martin**

Oh, look, on *The Conversation* … as you know, Robert, over the last ten years I’ve been looking at how journalists are developing new relationships with their audiences and their sources online. So particularly in the online area, but not only there. And *The Conversation* is a great example of just that – a collaboration between journalists and academics, but also the Creative Commons licensing. I’ve seen, is it 81% or 87%, 87% of the articles are being re-published elsewhere. I mean, that’s an extraordinary kind of iterative effect for academics to have, their work, it’s always very difficult to get, or to persuade journalists to cover your studies, let alone to get them cover them correctly.

So that, as Lawrie was saying, *The Conversation* is a site where collaboration I think is actually resulting in more accurate and more interesting forms of journalism around expertise.

**Lawrie Zion**

The point is, the journalists don’t need to be journalists, either. This is the thing …

**Fiona Martin**

Well, journalists have never been just J-school trained journalists. There have always been people who have walked in to the journalism profession with good story-telling skills, with expertise from different areas, you know, they may be lawyers, they may be people from all sorts of backgrounds. That’s why we don’t have a protectionist professional scheme in journalism. There is no … we don’t have a journalism advisory board that screens journalists and says, you are trained and fit to be a journalist.

**Jonathan Green**

At the end of the day, yeah, it’s a craft but it’s also just a writing style. And you know, what *The Conversation* shows is that people with actual knowledge and information to impart, can master the style of effective communication with some craft help and become effective journalists, as it were and at a time when maybe that business is in peril, this sort of … it’s a sign of some sort of hope that actually you don’t need journalists to get good information out into the public domain.

**Helen Westerman**

Can I just add that, don’t write journalists off too quickly. I mean, academics are good at what they do, but you know, not wanting to say that we’re the puppet masters behind them, we still do a fairly integral job in terms of commissioning the pieces and making sure that they’re legal and they’re able to be published, that they’re in the form …

**Jonathan Green**

There’s probably better use of that craft skill than having actually having to prepare all the copy yourself as well, which would expand your work …

**Helen Westerman**

It’s not just a matter of, the stories just flow in to us, I guess is what I’m saying.

**Robert Manne**

I think one of the things with *The Conversation*, why I think Andrew’s idea was such a good idea, is that I think there’s like a genuine cultural crisis with the rise of commentary in newspapers and online, and I think the crisis has come to fruition with climate change, where the collapsing of the distinction between mere opinion and you know, your phrase, people who know what they’re talking about, has led to an inertia in the body politic in America and Australia at least, and to some extent Britain. So that I think there is amongst the intelligent public, a hunger to be able to read pretty reliably pieces in which people know what they’re talking about.

**Lawrie Zion**

It comes back to trust, I think, and I think that’s where *The Conversation*’s processes if you like, do enhance the practice of trust when someone reads something in *The Conversation* and it’s also possible … it’s very easy to comment or feedback or whatever.

A couple of things though … Helen said something about, don’t write journalists off, and I think it is worth also adding here that I think we’ve seen perhaps with *The Conversation*, journalism practice occurring but a lot of it’s occurring under the authorship of people who don’t consider themselves to be journalists and I think what we’re seeing now is journalism practice kind of evolving in a range of different areas, not just on sites like *The Conversation*. It’s evolving in the newsletters of suburban footy leagues in Melbourne and all these sites that have emerged since digital media have evolved.

But I still think that it is still true that we need journalists who’ve got access to people, and I think one of the limitations perhaps of saying that if all these people can practise journalism, do we still need journalists, is, you need people who not only have all the craft skills of a journalist but who have the access as well. And so you need journalists who, in the case of climate science, actually know who to go and talk to, and who can work through a range of different kind of sources. You obviously need them in the sphere of politics and you need them in … I think in all areas, including social affairs and a whole range of different areas. What’s starting to break down, and I think this is one of the questions we’re really exploring, looking at all these people who’ve left journalism in the last two or three years, what’s the loss of all this experience to journalism itself, and are there enough people around now who actually have the range of experience, who may have worked in a newspaper covering seven or eight rounds over the course of twenty or thirty years, who can move nimbly between these different areas and understand how to be credible and how to also have the contacts and the rigour and all those different things, to be able to perform.

**Helen Westerman**

I agree with that. I think *The Conversation* was always designed to be a marriage, not one thing replace the other in the marriage …

**Robert Manne**

Because time is flying, there’s a couple of quite different questions I’d like to raise and the first one, Fiona’s written very interestingly on this and Jonathan has direct experience of this, and it’s to do with something that’s happened, I don’t know, for the last ten years, fifteen years, because of digital media, a very lively interaction between what journalists write and what readers have to say. The interactivity … and when I wrote a piece for *The Drum*, there’d often be 500 comments that would come in and I sometimes read the blogs of Andrew Bolt through necessity, and there for example, I sometimes think what the interactivity is doing is both creating islands of like-minded people, only talking to each other, but also I sometimes wonder whether the main effect of that kind of thing is to create a kind of licence for bigotry, of a racial, religious kind.

If I could start with Fiona, you’ve thought a lot about the ethics of that interactivity, I mean, partly is that amount of interactivity good, is moderation working, do we need moderation or should it be uncontrolled in a free society?

**Fiona Martin**

In order, the interactivity’s great. I’m actually studying a shift in journalism roles to journalists as interlocutors, as facilitators of public debate, in real time, as mediators and moderators of public debate, and I think this is a new field for media and for journalism in particular. I don’t think it’s easy and I don’t think we’re really in the model-T Ford days of these practices. It’s only really in social media has taken off and it’s been widely adopted but we’ve seen really intense and widespread interactions between journalists and their audiences. I was about to call them users and then I thought, well, the readers, the audience, the people formerly known as the audience. We don’t really know what to call you any more, because you’re talking back.

The media’s always been interactive Robert. It’s been … I mean, the *Bulletin* used to be an interactive forum where contributors would send in poems and stories and articles. But the real time nature of that interaction I think has introduced some really interesting ethical questions about how we address each other, about what we can say in certain spaces, and about I suppose the guidelines to speech in real time, because we know how to behave in this sort of forum. You’re being nice and quiet. There’s no heckling, I’ve noticed. We know how to behave in churches, in meetings, but the rules of interacting in online spaces are only just emerging and I think that’s one of the really fascinating challenges for journalism, is how it deals with that interaction and how we learn to develop social bonds with our sources and our audiences online.

**Robert Manne**

You say we’re in the T-model Ford moment. What would be your main concerns, or how could things be improved in the question of … I’m just thinking of an article published on *The Drum* or Andrew Bolt blogs something …

**Helen Westerman**

Andrew Bolt blogs. I’ve read them too. They’re terrifying sometimes.

**Robert Manne**

Well, I read one recently about Waleed Aly, and I was astonished at the degree of what I regard as racism, that was despite the moderation, allowed to come through and I wondered … one view would be, this is a useful safety valve, if people are saying this in the pub …

**Jonathan Green**

Racism in the responses?

**Robert Manne**

Yeah, the article was something or other … I can’t remember.

**Helen Westerman**

It’s very common, yeah.

**Robert Manne**

I read, like, 200 comments and they were saying he should leave the country and he doesn’t belong here and who does he think he is …

**Fiona Martin**

And at what point should journalists or editors intervene in that debate? There’s been a great exploration in texts, the engaging news project, which has actually looked at the way journalists engaging in debate, intervening, calling people out, calling them to account for their comments, that's actually improved the civility and the quality of debate.

**Jonathan Green**

Has this got anything to do with journalists? I mean, the assumption there is that the journalists have to leave the discussion. I mean, those discussions … I agree with you about the T-model. We have no idea where this goes and certainly where that sort of interactivity is related to journalism. It’s incredibly primitive and it’s not at all interactive. It’s not real time. It’s passive. I’ve got a piece on *The Drum* which probably by the end of today will have three or four hundred comments. I won’t read any of them. Least of all get involved and interact with them. Because it’s uncivil, because it’s vicious, because it’s just people talking amongst themselves, I’ve put a thing out there, I’ve written a thing …

**Fiona Martin**

Is that all of the comments? How do you know if you haven’t read them?

**Jonathan Green**

Well, yeah. Because I’ve been doing it for a lot of years and I’ve sort of got the tone by now.

**Lawrie Zion**

I said, good article Jonathan. You’re not going to see that … but the point being, there is none of that … there’s great potential for that real time sort of thing. There’s great potential for actual conversation but it’s not being had in places like *The Drum* or Bolt’s blog, or …

**Fiona Martin**

But maybe that’s because there has not been a consistent or extended effort to build that community with that focus. If you look at Karl Kruszelnicki’s *Service Science Forum*, which is one of the longest running discussion forums in Australia …

**Jonathan Green**

Actually discursive.

**Fiona Martin**

It is actually discursive. And over time the people who’ve been involved with steering that community, like Ian Allen and the moderators, they haven’t actually spent a great deal of time exploring the sociology of community building, using various tactics to promote good commenters as leaders of discussion, giving additional privileges for example … they don’t get moderated.

**Jonathan Green**

Excluding those they don’t like.

**Fiona Martin**

Yeah, occasionally blocking people.

**Lawrie Zion**

But the problem is the journalistic model in which these things occur, in places like *The Drum* or Bolt’s blog, it wasn’t about creating a discussion. It was about somehow attracting other page views.

**Fiona Martin**

*The Drum* was originally called *Unleashed.* I mean, that gives you an idea. I think there was a working title which was something … *Gloves Off*. So you know, that gives you an idea of the vision. It was about provocation, debate rather than exchange.

**Jonathan Green**

*Unleashed,* actually, I started *The Drum* and *Unleashed* was the theme that we morphed into it. And the intention in *Unleashed* was to have that sort of community sense. It was to have ordinary folks doing the writing and a conversation which would evolve from that writing.

**Robert Manne**

But you’re obviously, if you now don’t even read the comments on your own writing, that hope for you at least, has been unsatisfied.

**Jonathan Green**

Well, because of that structure, where the journalist puts out a piece of writing, people are invited to respond in a way that is, yes, moderated for swear words and litigation possibilities, but in no other way, and there’s no … I mean, I could get involved in those comment threads but it would … I don’t have the time, and that’s not actually the intention. The intention is to amass this body of page views beneath a piece of work. And back in the days when they used to think that was important in digital publishing, it was why they thought that comments were great because, look, all these extra eyeballs. But it’s never been explored in a way that empowered that audience, or interacted with that audience or involved that audience effectively. It’s always been in this … we’re the journalist, capital-J model, the rest of you can have a chat there if you want, but you know, we’ll …

**Helen Westerman**

Actually can I add something about comments on our site, called *The Conversation*, so it’s supposed to be interactive with readers. We have spent a fair bit of time looking at the quality of the comments that are left. We moderate reasonably rigorously and crack down on people who contravene our community standards, which are, we are constantly reminding people of. The interactivity on our site comes from the writers. I often … we found that when the actual author of the piece dropped in to comments and started to reply to some of the comments that were left, that things became a lot of more civil interestingly enough. We really try hard to weed out trolls and people who you know, begin okay and then just launch into personal attacks. That’s you know, just … that’s not what the site is there for. It is for back and forth debate. And what we find on our site, and we’re a specialist site, is that you’ll often get a collection of different academics who might come in to that piece and start commenting on it, and among each other, and that can really lift the quality of the comments. So it is useful for that. It certainly isn’t just about page views for us and I’d imagine it wouldn’t necessarily be about that for the ABC either.

**Jonathan Green**

No, but in a mass market area, it’s so often just a window to our not nice selves.

**Robert Manne**

I often think it’s the electronic equivalent of road rage. People can feel they can release their anger and you know, on *The Drum*, I began being very excited about all these comments as I wrote, and I actually wrote … Jonathan won’t remember this, I wrote to him saying, why don’t you then have a convention at the end of these comments. The author comments on the comments. To which you very politely said, I’ll think about it. Meaning, what a ridiculous idea. And nothing came of it. And I later realised why, because so much, you know, 80% of the comments were either people just giving their opinion, not having read the article properly, or expressing road rage.

But Lawrie, do you have any … I mean, you’ve edited a book on the ethics of digital media …

**Lawrie Zion**

Yeah, and I also had a really … I co-supervised a really great PhD student who got a PhD last year or the year before, Renee Barnes, whose thesis was on exploring comments on sites, and she did four case studies in Australia and the States, and I think it depends on … what does the publication itself really want from the comments, and if it’s really harnessed in a particular way, it can actually add a lot and almost set the editorial tone. If a journalist or a contributor is trying to, in a way, get a conversation started using comments in that particular way, that’s going to engage audiences, and bring some people in. Even though she found that only about … it was the same ratio that you get for other forms of participation, that you have a lot of people who were never adding comments themselves, but were actually reading all the comment threads, and if they’re curated in such a way that that’s something that’s possible for someone to do without becoming alienated or angry or upset themselves, that in a way can also give a real personality to the publication in question and I think one of the interesting sites that does this really well in Australia is *mUmBRELLA* which I think is a fascinating site because it’s really covering the media and public relations sector really well. It’s been set up by a British journalist – Tim Burrowes moved here a few years ago and their business model, I won’t go into now, is quite intriguing but they do actually create within that publication they have some people who were like star commenters and so what you get there, if you want to compare it with … we haven’t mentioned talkback radio, but really you have something that’s sometimes in sync with what happens in talkback where you‘re going to get people who are being rude or you know, Jon Faine will read out always a number of tweets or text messages that say that he is obviously a member of this, or he’s unfair, or whatever, but you do get, within I suppose good comments are actually allowed to have a starring role, if they can be configured in such a way, and that I think makes something that again brings another distinction into what’s possible in digital media, I think Jonathan’s right, because I wrote a piece for *The Drum* a few years ago where I think there was I think seven or eight hundred comments, most of which were vile and he had a real knack for attracting these … and I thought, I don’t know if I want to do this again. But in other environments I found that it’s fine.

**Jonathan Green**

It’s got a lot to do with software too. The better … *The Drum* for example still uses the same moderation software it did back in *Unleashed* and it has no capacity for giving you hero commenters or for fast tracking people with a good record.

**Fiona Martin**

There are so many ways in which we could make the conversations better.

**Robert Manne**

If this is your T-model Ford idea …

**Helen Westerman**

Well, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and *Mozilla* have got together. They’ve got a $3.9 million grant from the Knight Foundation in the States to develop an open source commenting system which allows some of the things that we wanted to happen, like journalists to interact with users more easily. I mean, when I was a journalist, it was very hard to actually comment on a user’s comment, because you didn’t have an account. Very simple things like that, better software, but also some ethical practices and standards and guidelines …

**Jonathan Green**

I think by registering your actual name so that you’re not there as an anonymous person.

**Lawrie Zion**

But there’d be intention too. An intention to create those conversations rather than the intention of putting out …

**Helen Westerman**

Precisely. Mia Freedman is another person who’s done this really quite well and capitalised.

**Lawrie Zion**

And she creates communities …

**Robert Manne**

There are a number of things I’d like to ask but I know that if I don’t open it to questions now, we’re not going to have time. We have to finish at 2. So can I ask, and I would very much like it if the journalism students here, amongst others, had things they’d like to ask. Maybe about their future even, in journalism. Anyone like to begin us.

**Q:**

I would like to know, is it in some ways ideal that in the journalism world that you have that mix of different media outlets? What I mean by that is, is it good that there is that one part … you have media outlets like the ABC that focus on ethics and being informative, doing things properly and then you get that blend of say, News Limited, and they have all these sensationalist news stories. Do you think it’s good to have that contrast out there at least?

**Jonathan Green**

Absolutely. The more the merrier and everything has a different … everybody has a different story to tell and a different take on a set of events and the more you can have diversity, the richer that interpretation of the world will be. That’s unarguable. It’s obviously and definitely going to be to the benefit …

**Lawrie Zion**

I strongly agree with what Jonathan said, Peter. I think the more diversity the better in general is the rule of thumb. And I think we are actually seeing an explosion in … we’ve got a surplus if you like of media compared to thirty years ago. That doesn’t necessarily mean we’ve got better diversity all round, but I think having different types of media and media trying to do different sorts of things I think is really, really great. The fact that this is happening in some encouraging ways in a range of different areas, some of which we’ve talked about today, makes me a bit more optimistic about the future of journalism and media than I was perhaps two or three years ago.

**Helen Westerman**

I just wanted to also add that Lawrie earlier was talking about how he no longer had to go to the media, the media came to him. What I find the most interesting thing that’s happened, is the way that journalists and media outlets tell stories is actually changing a lot as well. So, people would probably be familiar with the BuzzFeed approach. Does anybody know BuzzFeed? Yep. So the *New York Times* recently put out a report that was leaked a couple of months ago where they talked about where their stories were actually repackaged by BuzzFeed and got phenomenal traffic to BuzzFeed, not back to the *New York Times*.

What that to me indicates is that those more traditional companies are not really giving the readers the story the way that they want to consume it. So there are … BuzzFeed does give you the story in a different way, vox.com I’m not sure if anybody knows about that one, Ezra Klein, is similar in its attempts to actually present the story in a different way.

Vice, yes, so there’s all sorts of really interesting, I guess, start-ups and experiments in how to get the news over to people. So it doesn’t just come down to – there’s a tabloid, there’s a broadsheet, any more. I would wager that … I know a lot of you are probably journalism students, so you do read the paper every day, but what I hear is that people don’t even come to homesites any more, they tend to get their news delivered through Twitter or Facebook or some other sort of aggregator, and the *New York Times*, the same report indicated that that was a problem, that actually the traffic that was going to their homesite as a destination was actually falling. And even our experience at *The Conversation*, we launched – we didn’t have a budget for any sort of marketing so we decided that we would just use social media to launch *The Conversation* and we’ve always had a really active Twitter account and Facebook and that is where the majority of our traffic still comes in. So maybe less than 20% of our daily traffic comes through the open door, as it were, through the homesite. So it’s all about I guess how the story is packaged up.

**Q:**

I think it’s really interesting that you bring up those sort of aggregators and communities that do drive audiences to those sites. I was just wondering if you guys feel that some publications might not necessarily be equipped I guess, to attract that audience. I’m currently researching Reddit.com and I find some of the communities like ask site are really interesting in the way that they aggregate content and the way that the comment feeds actually can be I think better sources of information, particularly in correcting misinformation that often pops up in a lot of, I guess, threads that you do need to be an expert to understand the content a bit more thoroughly. So I guess cancer research and things like that, for that, often hugely sensationalised by the mainstream media and sites like Reddit do seem to provide actual scientific experts a place to come in and say this is actually incorrect and this is why, and this is sort of the implications of this research.

So I just wondered what you thought about those sorts of communities, I guess, facilitating the correction of misinformation within the sort of community of experts.

**Helen Westerman**

Well, when one of our stories goes to Reddit and gets towards the front of Reddit we get huge spikes in traffic so we’re definitely familiar with the community and you know, we will try and alert Reddit to pieces that they might be interested in as well. Some of our biggest spikes in traffic have come from sites like … it’s got a swear word in it, but it’s called I F’ing Love Science … people are familiar, obviously nods. A fantastically lively site and just for us, it drives a huge amount of traffic to our pieces and we actually find health and science are those two areas where we do explainers and they get picked up everywhere because there is that appetite for some accurate expert information.

**Lawrie Zion**

Just on that note, I just want to pick up on explainers, because I know our students, we’ve tormented you to insist that you do these in a number of assignments, but I think that that’s another interesting phenomenon of the digital age if you like. It’s really, *The Conversation* has had a pretty pioneering role in doing them in Australia. I’m interested Helen, can you tell us a bit about how you think they form part of the package of what you do, because they’re something that you do as editors of the site rather than getting contributors to do.

**Helen Westerman**

Well, we actually do … they’re written by contributors as well. Explainers, yeah. So there’s very little of the content on our site that’s actually written by editors. But the process behind an explainer is pretty simple really. If we think that there’s a topic out there that hasn’t been well explained, we’ll just go and ask somebody to explain it. And it’s amazing.

I have to say it’s not quite an explainer, it’s a regular series we call Health Check which runs every Monday. It has given us the largest traffic. It was the most popular story and it was a story explaining ear wax. And quite simple things like that where people just like to sort of click in thinking, what will I learn about ear wax? I’m intrigued. They often do really well. So just simple things I suppose that we think that people might like. But explainers on asylum seeker policy, you know, business concepts, those sorts of things we’ll also try and do. Yeah, essentially if we see a gap in the mainstream reporting of that issue.

**Fiona Martin**

Just before we move on, the point about aggregation and also about understanding news sharing, I think that’s a really critical area for journalism. And for journalism studies now, because understanding what people share and why they share it – I’ve got a particular interest in this because we’re teaming up with 9msn on an ARC linkage grant to actually look at what Australians are sharing across Twitter, Linkedin and Facebook in order to understand whether it’s the same sort of stuff that journalists put emphasis on, whether the same sort of news values are driving what people share, because we think they aren’t, or what the 9msn pilot shows is that it’s not the same sorts of stories.

So that understanding of what people share and what they wanted aggregated and provided back to discuss, is a really fascinating area of research.

**Q:**

Just a quick question for the panel. Picking up on Helen’s comment about design being an important part of the way that information is communicated in the digital age. We’ve heard a lot about traditional skills which are continuing to be important into the future. One traditional skill that journalism really does badly at, is numeracy and I’m just wondering whether there’s any advice that the panel has for our aspiring journalists about the important of numeracy, particularly in relation to data and how data might be an important newish area to develop further. What kinds of things would you be looking for?

**Lawrie Zion**

25% of journalists are good at figures and the other 90% are terrible.

**Helen Westerman**

My advice would be, learn how to read a spreadsheet and learn how to build one, because data journalism is going to be pretty important. And a lot of interesting stories come out of that and are presented from that sort of data. So, that would be my advice.

**Fiona Martin**

Also, learn how to form collaborative teams with people who are good at statistics, good at data visualisation and who actually have maybe expertise that you don’t have, because even though you know, you might get basic stats in your journalism course, if Lawrie’s doing the right thing. You’ll still be able to draw on expertise that will help you build interesting info-graphics, interesting explorations, data-mining explorations of information that you may not be able to do yourself.

**Jonathan Green**

That’s the really important thing in journalistic futures, is to be open to the possibility that you don’t know everything. And to be open to the idea of collaborating.

**Fiona Martin**

Because we were all taught to be generalists. To be able to go out and cover anything.

**Jonathan Green**

Journalism was always the art of instant expertise. It was spending two hours on the phone through the afternoon and be able to write 500 coherent words about it and maybe not get much of it wrong. And that’s ridiculous now because people know better, and people who do know better have access to the same publishing tools that you do, and can do a much better job of it than you can. And the journalistic role would be to collaborate with people who have skills to use the craft skills of journalism which are about presenting stuff for an audience and making that work in a way that an audience can understand and want to consume, but not necessarily to hold all the expertise or all the techniques of analysis.

**Fiona Martin**

I mean, just moving through the space of digital environments, right? Working with designers and developers so that they can present your story in a way that’s easy to navigate. I mean, that’s a new skill. It’s not one that I had before I started teaching online journalism and yet I had to develop it. I had to work out how you signpost, where you go in a linear and multi-thread story.

**Lawrie Zion**

I think it’s both the scariest and also the most exciting thing about journalism at the moment is the extent to which journalists, to really develop their stories as well as to be able to find audiences, and to engage with people who may not be aware that they might be interested in what you’re doing. They have to be able to collaborate now in different kinds of ways. And I think that that’s been a very painful process for a lot of journalists to realise that. It’s no longer a case that they are a designated authority on particular areas. They write an article, people might read it, some might write a letter to the editor, but generally the pattern of … then you just go and do the next thing the next day. All of that is completely falling down now and there are a lot of problems that have arisen because of that, but I think there are some opportunities that people are beginning to work with and to embrace and I think that really points to some of the good things that journalism might be able to achieve in the future.

**Robert Manne**

One final question and then we’ll have to wrap it up.

**Q:**

Just a small one. In regard to the current Australian government looking to hush some journalists using different measures in regard to Snowden, WikiLeaks kind of reporting, do you believe that journalists are still seen by the public as the ones to go out and ask these questions, the hard-hitting ones?

**Jonathan Green**

I think the government in part gets the opportunity to do what it’s doing because of the low reputation of journalism. I don’t think that journalists would have that many public defenders or people who would see the issue of what is being done in that particular piece of law, and that’s a troubling and awkward thing. But the progress over, not just this moment, but the progress over successive years has been to narrow and contain and tighten up. The fact that journalism hasn’t got people out there right now defending it quite vocally in the face of that possibility is sort of telling and a bit sad.

**Robert Manne**

One of the things to say is that a discussion of the new laws, and I have someone in America who’s astonished at the kinds of things that are being suggested here, to get a robust discussion of these things, one of the problems is that two-thirds of newspapers are owned by a highly conservative corporation. The ABC is limited I think in how far it can go in such discussions because there’s a permanent kind of interest from the government in it being a cheer leader of the fight against terrorism. And I think Fairfax doesn’t play the kind of role it once did in public discussion.

So I think your question is excellent. Even in the States, which has many things going against it, there is a very strong tradition of freedom of speech because of the Fourth Amendment, and we don’t have such a strong tradition and I think it is a big problem in this country that the level of discussion of such matters is rather primitive.

**Lawrie Zion**

And tellingly, the time of Finkelstein, when the commercial interests of the biggest media group in the country were threatened, there was huge discussion and huge outrage. Now that the political interests of the big publishing group coincide with the legislative interest of the government, there’s no discussion, no outrage. The outrage was never journalistic. The outrage was based on freedom of information. The outrage was never based on the public’s right to know. The outrage, like so much else in mainstream journalism now, was based on making money. And that’s why people think journalism sucks.

**Fiona Martin**

The other reason why my students think journalism sucks is they are liable to be prosecuted. I mean, they see around them really good investigative journalists being prosecuted, for years, in court, for the work that they have done. So you look at people like Chris Masters who were worn into the ground with repeated court appearances. And that sort of pressure applied selectively over time, really turns a lot of young people away from the difficulties of the job, I think. Certainly I see more of our students looking towards lifestyle journalism.

**Robert Manne**

Because they fear …

**Lawrie Zion**

Be careful about a bad restaurant review, because you can go into court for that.

**Fiona Martin**

Absolutely.

**Jonathan Green**

Never mind national security legislation. What’s far, far, far more constipating of discussion in defamation, people can reach for a lawyer. And that goes unremarked, unchallenged. Suppression orders, you know, the full apparatus of the courts.

**Fiona Martin**

Injunctions. On and on it goes, yes.

**Helen Westerman**

Can I just add, one of the things about the national security laws is that it actually makes a non-journalist position even less tenable than a journalist’s. So it doesn’t include bloggers or citizen journalists as such. You could definitely find yourself on the wrong end of those laws very, very easily as a non-journalist.

So I agree. I am deeply troubled by the basic silence around … from the industry about these laws. That there didn’t seem to be much, it seemed to be quite muted and quite delayed. It’s very troubling, but for non-journalists, it’s possibly worse. So you know, in some ways, I wonder if this is just … this is part and parcel – governments are always going to push the line as far as they can in terms of what powers they can do and how they can get their message out to a sort of a muzzled media. It’s indicative of the strains I suppose, the structural issues that the industry has been going through in the past couple of years, that this is the response. The totally just, you know, sort of shoulders up response that we’ve had from the media in the main. Newscorp was very quiet on this, very surprisingly, and Fairfax was as well, again, very surprisingly …

**Fiona Martin**

I was surprised that we didn’t see a re-assertion of the Public Right to Know Coalition for example.

**Helen Westerman**

For sure, yes.

**Jonathan Green**

And data retention will make this ten times worse. It’s one thing to jail you for revealing special operations but data retention will compromise all your sources. Data retention will compromise the person within the department who made the phone call or the email, to let you know about the thing. That is a thousand times bigger than the potential for being jailed for naming an ASIO officer or revealing an operation.

**Robert Manne**

So thank you for that last question. I realise now we could have another half hour on this topic. But unfortunately we can’t. Someone even mowing lawns realises that.

So, I think it’s been a wonderfully interesting hour and a half of conversation and you’ve been a great audience. But could I ask you to thank the speakers …

[applause]