



Selected Papers of #AoIR2017:
The 18th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Tartu, Estonia / 18-21 October 2017

FROM PORT ARTHUR TO THE LINDT CAFÉ SIEGE: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL PUBLICS IN CHALLENGING AUSTRALIAN PRINT MEDIA AGENDA SETTING PRACTICES

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In the two decades since Australia's worst mass shooting at Port Arthur in 1996, the Australian print media landscape has changed significantly. Technological developments such as the internet and smart phones have created digital public spaces that did not exist at the time of the massacre. Initial expectations were that these developments would enable digital publics to challenge the traditional media's agenda setting role in an unprecedented manner. By the time of the Lindt café siege in 2014, during which hostages were taken by a gunman in a café in Sydney's CBD, journalists found themselves competing with social media posts from eyewitnesses using their phones to report the incident as the siege unfolded. Today, audiences have more opportunities to participate in the news agenda than ever before, facilitated by tools such as: social media, comments on online news stories, eyewitness contributions to news websites, and community discussion platforms such as Reddit, as well as sophisticated audience measurement tools. Conducted as one part of a broader doctoral thesis, this study examines how these increased opportunities for public involvement have affected the Australian print media's ability to set the agenda for discussion in the aftermath of events of national significance.

Agenda setting theory has evolved considerably since the ground-breaking Chapel Hill study (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Contemporary agenda setting research currently identifies four levels at which the concept occurs: object salience, attribute salience, network agenda setting and need for orientation (McCombs 2014). However, a key concern for agenda setting research remains whether early hopes that the internet would challenge the traditional media's agenda setting function (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Savigny 2002, Trenz 2009) have been realised through greater public input in the generation of news content. This study addresses this concern by taking a historical

Suggested Citation (APA): Son, C. (2017, October 18-21). *From Port Arthur to the Lindt café siege: The role of digital publics in challenging Australian print media agenda setting practices*. Paper presented at AoIR 2017: The 18th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Tartu, Estonia: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

perspective, and comparing the object and attribute salience present in print media reports from a seven week period of the Port Arthur massacre and Lindt café siege, to assess the impact of digital public participation on agenda setting by the Australian print media.

Using a combination of content and discourse analyses of almost 300 news reports, and oral history interviews with eight journalists who reported either or both incidents, this study explores Australian journalists' self-perceptions of their changing agenda setting roles in response to increased public involvement. Journalistic attitudes towards greater public input to the discussion of nationally significant events are assessed, and compared to the findings of content and discourse analyses to determine whether journalists' perceptions of the challenges presented by digital publics are reflected in the content of news reports. Reports are analysed using Leximancer content analysis software to determine the salient objects; that is, the topics or issues represented as of high importance in news reports of both incidents (Dearing and Rogers 1996; McCombs 2014; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Salient attributes used to describe the characteristics and traits of topics in reports of both incidents are examined using Van Dijk's (2013) method of analysing news discourse.

Examination of the Australian print media's agenda setting practices from a historical perspective facilitates new understanding of whether, and how, digital publics have impacted the mainstream media's agenda setting role towards the discussion of nationally significant events. Although journalists now compete with citizens equipped with mobile phones and ubiquitous internet access to break and disseminate news, the number of objects present in reports of the Lindt café siege in 2014 was fewer than those in reports of Port Arthur in 1996. Likewise, the salient attributes in reports of Port Arthur were substantially more complex than the attributes featured in reports of the Lindt café siege. Thus, early expectations that greater public participation through digital technologies would influence media agenda setting practices (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Savigny 2002, Trenz 2009) have so far proven unfounded in terms of the news reports assessed in this study. Despite this finding, journalists interviewed for this study stated that they perceived digital participatory technologies, particularly social media and audience measurement tools, as a challenge to their agenda setting role as journalists and editors.

Several aspects have contributed to the progressively more simplistic agenda featured in Australian news reports since Port Arthur. Diminishing print revenues, the 24 hour news cycle, and the rise of the PR (public relations) industry, have been found to substantively contribute to the lack of diversity of agenda identified in reports of the Lindt café siege. Declining print revenues have caused mass news room redundancies. Consequently, with fewer journalists, a narrower diversity of perspectives is thus represented in news reports, and subsequently there are more time pressures on those who remain. As a result of dwindling profits syndicated reports are now more prevalent in Australian newspapers than at the time of Port Arthur – reflected in the finding that during the seven week data collection period almost 40 per cent of Lindt café siege

reports were syndicated across several publications. An increase in PR professionals over the past two decades has also resulted in a much narrower agenda being presented to journalists from corporations and the authorities, a factor which bears substantial impact on media agenda setting practices.

Despite journalists' assertions to the contrary, this research contends that increased public participation has had little impact on the Australian media's agenda setting role in the discussion of nationally significant events. This finding is in line with broader international research such as McCombs (2014), which also casts doubt on the ability of digital public participation to challenge existing media agenda setting practices. Taking a historical perspective, it is evident that the object and attribute salience featured in Lindt café siege reports is more simplistic than at the time of Port Arthur, and thus reflects minimal input from the digital public. While greater opportunities for public participation exist than ever before, this study advances the argument that initial hopes that technological developments would enable digital publics to challenge established media agenda setting practices have not been realised in Australia to date.

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