

Pushback journalism: Twitter, user engagement and journalism students' responses to *The Australian*

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Abstract

This article examines journalism students' responses to claims in The Australian, made in October 2014, alleging some of Australia's top universities were indoctrinating rather than educating future journalists. It reports the findings of a case study of user engagement with the story, including social media network and sentiment analysis of the resulting Twitter conversation. We found evidence of what we term "pushback journalism", a new type of user engagement by younger people. Journalism students and other interested users converged to "rewrite" the indoctrination story – using wit, irony and humour as well as argument – with the aim of setting the record straight from their perspectives. In contrast to Australian social media research on adversarial relationships between professional and amateur journalists, we argue "pushback journalism" provides evidence of contiguous but critical relationships between the current generation of professional journalists and upcoming journalists-in-training, based on different if overlapping ideas about, and experiences of, journalism education, media careers and the future of news.

Introduction

News media interest in young people who aspire to become journalists peaked in October 2014 following controversial claims published in *The Australian* by Media editor Sharri Markson alleging that some of Australia's "most prestigious universities" were "indoctrinating students, not educating them" (Markson, 2014a).

Most of the mainstream media discussion of these allegations did not canvass what students had to say about their media degrees; instead they focused on the increasingly prickly relationship between journalists and academics over the best preparation for journalistic work (Henningham, 2014; McNair, 2014; Davey, 2014).

Journalism education research suggests it is not uncommon for news editors to worry aloud about the practical skills of journalism graduates, or to complain about theory-laden journalism education curricula (Ricketson, 2001; O'Donnell, 2014). The 2012 transition to digital-first news production, and a related shortage of digital media skills in major newsrooms, sparked further concerns about whether media education was adequately equipping students with cutting-edge skills and the right "mindset" to adapt the craft to the demands of online and mobile media (O'Donnell, 2014).

In the same year, *The Australian's* Cameron Stewart (2012) raised the spectre of a "generational clash" in newsrooms over the proper limits to press freedom in Australia. He indicated the clash might arise as a result of journalism academics passing onto students their favourable views of the Finkelstein media inquiry's proposed government-funded News Media Council to adjudicate media complaints, despite industry antipathy to the idea. Since then, the news media has singled out and questioned the role of individual journalism academics such as Wendy Bacon, Jenna Price, Matthew Ricketson and Margaret Simons, because of their perceived left-wing and anti-industry viewpoints. Penny O'Donnell, one of the authors of this article, and Bunty Avieson from the University of Sydney became the latest targets of this type of adverse media scrutiny in *The Australian's* 2014 indoctrination story. Public "naming and shaming" of this type seems to be directed at eradicating critical

stances on issues of concentrated media ownership, news reporting standards and industry self-regulation from university curricula because they are seen as somehow “wrong”, “biased” or simply “inappropriate” resources for student learning (for examples and analysis, see Bacon, 2012; Leys, 2012; Manne, 2012; Bolt, 2014; Pearson, 2014).

This article offers a different, more considered perspective on the journalism education experience; it dodges the “she-said-he said” dynamic of media debate in favour of a systematic analysis of when, how and why journalism students responded to newspaper claims they were being indoctrinated. The main finding is that journalism students contested *The Australian’s* claims of indoctrination in multiple ways, using online and social media, because they felt the media story unfairly criticised them and attacked their credentials as the next generation of journalists. It presents evidence that students’ “pushback journalism”, aimed at reframing the journalism education debate as a student-centred concern, provided an unexpected but powerful rebuttal to the claims of indoctrination.

A review of the literature indicates that student perspectives on journalism education, media careers and the future of news are under-researched and only rarely canvassed in either media reporting (Chalmers, 2014) or scholarly research (O’Donnell, 2006; Hanusch, 2013). This silence usually goes unremarked. Furthermore, as Flew et al. (2011, p. 100) suggested in a previous edition of this journal, one of the paradoxes of current media research is that more is known about how online news is reshaping journalism practices and cultures than about how younger people – potentially including journalism students – consume, engage or interact with online news sites. Indeed, the existing Australian research on younger media users has produced inconclusive findings (see, for example, Evans & Sternberg, 1999; Harrington, 2008). It suggests, on the one hand, that mainstream news has less appeal for younger online users than newer formats (such as blogs, citizen journalism, or what Steve Harrington calls “newstainment”), while acknowledging, on the other, that these users may not be uninterested but rather impatient with news coverage that does not offer them opportunities for interactivity and participation. As Flew et al. (2011, p. 101) note: “... it could be that mainstream news is of considerable interest to younger media users, but needs to be packaged and presented differently, in ways that are responsive both to high levels of digital literacy and to readerships that are more critical and less deferential towards the established codes and conventions of print journalism”.

The idea that opportunities for interactivity and participation drive younger people’s engagement in the public sphere is extended in more recent research from the field of youth studies, to include engagement in politics (Delli, 2000; Hao et al., 2014; Vromen et al., 2015). Of particular interest is Vromen et al.’s (2015, pp. 94-96) argument that social media use has opened up new understandings of “communicative political action” among politically engaged younger people, resulting in the emergence of new, more personalised and self-actualising norms of citizenship, alongside more traditional notions of “the dutiful citizen”. Although some participants in this study expressed reservations about the quality of online information and debate, it found “social media organising and communicative practices are now providing a primary space for micro-political engagement and everyday political talk” for many younger people in Australia and elsewhere (Vromen et al., 2015, p. 95). Research of this kind encourages fresh thinking about the relationship between younger people and the news media, and reconsideration of news representations that position journalism students as passive learners, news media consumers, and citizens.

This article reports the results of a study of online users’ responses to *The Australian’s* indoctrination allegations. Specifically, it identifies and discusses journalism students’ efforts to re-position and assert themselves as engaged learners, news audiences and citizens, using

Twitter and other online media. It examines their interactions with Sharri Markson and other journalists on Twitter, and provides examples of what we term “pushback journalism”: that is, original news content created and published in order to make students’ voices heard in the debate about indoctrination.

To develop our concept of “pushback journalism”, we borrow ideas from Morrison and Gomez’s (2014) study of “pushback” reactions to the “vertime” of constant connectivity. In their analysis, “pushback” describes the behaviour of online users who deliberately reduce their media use in order to resist “vertime”, and “regain control” of their personal life/shared life balance. We use the notion of “pushback” slightly differently, to describe the behaviour of online users who deliberately and creatively engage in online content creation and conversation in order to resist traditional media power, and to regain some control of media narratives that speak for or about them without speaking to them. While the “pushback journalism” documented in this study was more spontaneous and episodic than the “pushback computer use” reported by Morrison and Gomez (2014), the two notions overlap in their shared concern to better understand user engagement with digital technologies, including patterns and practices of new media production and consumption.

Our study highlights the fact that interested online users not only monitored and evaluated the performance of the mainstream news media by disseminating and commenting on the indoctrination story, but also took on a more robust “fifth estate” or “watching the watchdogs” role (Cooper, 2006; Dutton, 2007; Jericho, 2012) by publishing news items that set the public record straight as they saw it. Moreover, in some cases, they did so with a speed, wit, competence and media-savvy that belied their unpaid amateur status. A key example of pushback journalism is University of Sydney media student and *Honi Soit* editor Lane Sainty’s op-ed post, “Bit rich for The Oz to cry indoctrination” (Sainty, 2014a), including the first of many memes on “undercover” reporters, and the follow-up version posted on the ABC’s news opinion website, *The Drum*, “Unis aren’t biased but maybe *The Australian* is” (Sainty, 2014b), which attracted 204 comments.

Interestingly, the pushback journalism produced by journalism students that is discussed in this case study tended to criticise or contest mainstream news stories without necessarily taking anti-professional or anti-mainstream media postures. Instead, younger people indicated they had their own ideas about journalism education, news work and the future of the profession. This points to a need to rethink the power dynamics between professional and amateur journalists to account for contiguous (if not collaborative) as well as the more commonly discussed adversarial relationships (see, for example, Jericho, 2012; Bruns, 2012).

The main contention of this article is that Markson’s allegations of indoctrination provoked substantial reaction and pushback journalism from online users because they were intent on not only resisting what they perceived to be outdated stereotypes of students, news media and politics, but also demonstrating more creative and diverse ways of doing journalism online.

New creative labour models for engaged citizens

We turn now to the literature on new creative labour models for engaged citizens, to provide a theoretical framework for our consideration of “pushback journalism”. Burgess and Crawford (2011) note that changing newsgathering and reporting roles of journalism in digital networks can be highlighted by studying how social media environments deal with what they term “acute events”, such as breaking news stories. In such instances, neither news media

companies nor individual professional journalists are necessarily the most relevant stakeholders. Rather, those who add to the conversation by endorsing authoritative voices, or writing substantial comments on the acute event, often turn out to play a more substantive role in the news coverage and debate (Bruns, 2012). In this regard, new forms of creativity and labour substantively contribute to the development of breaking news stories through online user practices such as user comments, blog posts, tweets or the production of memes. In addition, these emerging forms of spontaneous media labour, while often not remunerated, may have broader economic impact, as online users become authoritative voices that attract followers, direct traffic to mainstream news websites and thus influence advertising markets (Ewing & Thomas, 2012). In our view, pushback journalism is a further example of the new and influential forms of labour and creativity that are emerging in the “creative economy” (Potts et al., 2008).

Building on Burgess and Crawford’s (2011) observation of the role of social media in the reporting of breaking news, we propose to examine the following tripartite pattern of social media user engagement during our selected acute event: first, the initial consumption and dissemination of the mainstream news coverage; second, individual reactions to that coverage including disagreement with and criticism of views expressed in the news story, and; third, more collaborative “pushback” responses to the event, aimed at “rewriting” the story from the perspectives of those who had been spoken about but wanted to speak for themselves. These clear and distinct moments present as micro-meso-macro forms of user engagement, each with their own dynamic and value (Dopfer et al., 2004). Dopfer, Foster and Potts (2004, p. 263) suggest that all economic systems can be analysed as “a population of rules, a structure of rules, and a process of rules”, and we borrow this approach to structure our analysis, asking about the unique economic as well as social characteristics of each of these junctures, as represented through the creation and implementation of rules.

Thus, online users’ reactions to the indoctrination allegations can be organised and differentiated according to the tripartite schema outlined above in the following way. In the first micro-stage, individual users read and disseminated the article, making observations about Markson’s views. This was the moment for acknowledging the set rules (Dopfer et al., 2004, p. 226) which, in this case, were the implicit rules of news discourse/reporting and news consumption, with user engagement largely confined to driving traffic to *The Australian*’s website via views, shares and comments.

In the second meso-stage, online users increasingly objected to elements of the story and what they perceived to be inaccuracies, distortions and outdated stereotypes. This was the “evolutionary moment” (Dopfer et al., 2004, p. 226), when users started constructing their own rules about news judgement, sources and storylines. In this stage, user engagement diversified and proliferated across a range of social media platforms and non-mainstream news websites hosting comment on or analysis of the indoctrination story, driving traffic in new directions as well as to the mainstream news sites.

In the third macro-stage, online users published news stories, opinion pieces, tweets, memes and comments designed to set the record straight on the indoctrination allegations from their perspectives. This was the moment of pushback journalism, or “aggregate consequences”, to use Dopfer et al.’s (2004) category, with those users who refused to be spoken for or about in the mainstream news media employing their new set of self-defined rules to publish and gain momentum for news items expressing their own views on media degrees, journalism education and the news media.

The pushback moment requires more consideration at the conceptual level because in this case study it emerges as a new and significant form of user engagement. From a media and communication perspective, pushback in the Twitter conversation involved the remediation of information from media institutions: that is, a process whereby users engaged in making meaning of media content in ways that related to their own lived experience (Long & Wall, 2009). However, remediation is not just a creative process; it has economic and social implications. At the social level, remediation includes establishing or qualifying what counts as media content and, specifically in this case, news. Bourdieu's (1984) work on contemporary patterns of cultural consumption points to the significant role "new cultural intermediaries" play in this qualification process, characterised by borrowing from high culture and remediating it into popular culture. In addition, Callon's (1998) work on cultural intermediaries extends the heuristic value of the concept by turning attention to the relationship between economic markets, market relations and social life, and arguing that social agents that perform a cultural framing process are engaged in economic activity. An illustrative example of how the concept of "new cultural intermediaries" provides a constructive way of bridging the gap between production and consumption, and better understanding remediation, is the advertiser who qualifies and promotes the arts to the broader population.

If we assume that the production of content is not completed until it is consumed (Marx, 1847), then it follows that "the qualities and characteristics of the goods need to be defined" (Nixon, 2014, p. 83). In our case, for example, commercial media, including newspapers such as *The Australian*, can be seen to produce and exchange social capital (such as credibility) as well as information, thereby creating non-financial but lucrative forms of value, including media influence, public opinion, public debate and a legitimate public record of events and issues in the public domain. In his work on the political economy of digital networks, Benkler (2006) argues the newspaper industry's success in social capital construction is demonstrated by business strategies that build an "information economy" by concentrating on niche content areas. He says: "We live our lives in diverse social frames, and money has a complex relationship with these – sometimes it adds to the motivation to participate, sometimes it detracts from it" (Benkler, 2006, p. 81). He further suggests news media are very much reliant on factors outside neoliberal supply and demand market models for their profitability.

Our case study draws on these ideas to frame the analysis of online users' reactions to Markson's allegations of indoctrination, and to identify some of the journalistic, economic and social implications of pushback journalism, as an emerging new form of creative labour. Before addressing these implications, we first present the research design and findings of our investigation.

Research design

This study explores the research question of how we might characterise and explain the significance of journalism students' responses to a particular social media "acute event", that is, to *The Australian's* claims universities were indoctrinating, not educating, future journalists. We focused particularly on the Twitter conversation around @SharriMarkson from October 13 to 15, 2014, and developed our analysis by counting, classifying and interpreting (Deacon et al., 2007) online users' contributions to that conversation.

To background the case study, it should be noted that the story headlined “Uni degrees in indoctrination” alleged students at the University of Sydney and the University of Technology, Sydney were getting an anti-Murdoch message, and being led “to form a critical view of News Corp” (Markson, 2014a). A lecture by Penny O’Donnell to first-year students at the University of Sydney on the Australian newspaper industry was showcased as the strongest example of indoctrination, and *The Australian*’s story featured images of course slides, leaked to Markson after she attended some lectures “undercover” in order to investigate journalism education. An un-named student’s perspective on “left-wing bias in the media course” was published as part of the report (Markson, 2014a). An audio recording of the lecture was added to the online edition. Markson’s story discussed perceived inaccuracies and biases in the lecture, and argued that there was a gap between how journalism is taught and how it is practised, that the teaching was indoctrinating students rather than educating them, and that the journalism academic had expressed overly critical views of a media company that was a large employer of journalists (Markson, 2014s). Markson also sought comment on the teaching material from University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor Michael Spence, who responded by issuing a statement defending academic freedom, and from O’Donnell, who told *The Australian* she had “no axe to grind against any media company” but discussed all of them “without fear or favour” (Markson, 2014a).

Markson subsequently published two follow-up articles, “Warning to unis on media studies” (Markson, 2014b) and “Retired Uni of Sydney media lecturer tells all about bias” (Markson, 2014c), featuring the views of Education Minister Christopher Pyne, and retired academic Dr Richard Stanton and a second-year media student from the University of Sydney. In addition, *The Australian* editorialised against the “elitist and troubling posture” of some journalism academics, called for better “trade-based” training for journalists, and, in an unexpected rhetorical escalation of the controversy, suggested it might be time for Minister Pyne to “review the state of journalism education” (Better training for journalists, 2014).

These mainstream news stories generated a significant amount of user engagement across print, broadcast, online and social media platforms. This ranged from views, shares and likes to comments, interviews, blog posts, op-ed pieces, memes and pushback news items. It was evident, almost immediately, that Sydney University and UTS journalism students were among the most engaged and prolific online users. While O’Donnell, one of the authors of this article, and her departmental colleagues were occupied with fielding media inquiries and telephone calls from concerned parents, the students moved directly into the online media debate. Their reactions are the focus of this study because we wanted to examine and test the perception, shared by Sydney University academics and university administrators alike, that students had decisively influenced that debate.

On Twitter, the conversation was kick-started on the Sunday before publication, when journalist Miranda Devine interviewed Sharri Markson about the story live on Sydney’s Radio 2GB, with listeners then taking to Twitter to spruik Markson’s exposé of “bias in lefty Journo Schools” (see, for example, @chickybird949, 2014). Research for this case study found a total of 2282 tweets containing the @SharriMarkson handle and published between October 13 and 15, 2014. This Twitter conversation provides the main data-set used to investigate the nature of journalism students’ reactions to Markson’s story in more detail and, more broadly, to reflect on changing patterns of online user engagement with news.

In the online space, one of the most read pushback journalism pieces was an article posted by *Junkee* editor Steph Harmon, entitled, “The Australian’s Media editor goes to Uni

‘undercover’; is outraged that Media degrees are teaching Media students about the media”, which gained over 122,000 views, 12,500 Post shares, and 11,000 Facebook Likes. A typology of the three main types of pushback journalism identified in the research for this case study provides a supplementary data-set used to characterise and illustrate what we propose is a distinct and significant new form of online user engagement with news. These types are: rejecting mainstream news judgement, disputing source selection and taking control of the storyline. This classification emerged from a thematic content analysis (Deacon et al., 2007) of examples of user-generated content, focusing on claims and counter-claims about media degrees and student learning, younger people and the news, and the future of the journalism profession.

The research is primarily concerned with social media network analysis of Twitter. There are two reasons for this: first, it was a productive site for examining patterns of user engagement given the flurry of activity on this platform in response to the indoctrination story; and, second, because it is a social media platform that provides public data, which is easily accessible through its Application Programming Interface (API). As such, we collected tweets containing the “@ SharriMarkson” Twitter handle for a month, in an attempt to understand who was conversing with and about the journalist. We found the majority of the tweets related to the indoctrination story were published in the first three days (October 13-15, 2014). We then decided to exclude all the tweets after October 15, 2014, as Markson had published an unrelated story on the following day that shifted the social media conversation to a different theme. It should also be noted that the conversation about the indoctrination story was taking place across a couple of other #hashtags, which were not captured in this analysis.

The data collected for analysis were processed through a series of open source data-wrangling programs (see Hutchinson, 2015, for more detail on the methodology), which produced three visualisations that were then interpreted to provide research results. The following outline of the key processes followed in the social media network analysis performed using the software, Gephi, explains and provides insights into our method. The visualisations are available from the researchers on request, but are not included in the article because of their cumbersome size and information density.

The Gephi analysis uses a combination of the Force Atlas 2 and Fruchterman Reingold spatialisation algorithms. This combination of algorithms provides a suitable spatialisation to visualise connections between network nodes by their edges, where a node represents either a topic or a user and an edge represents how the nodes are connected. The Fruchterman Reingold algorithm locates the significant nodes at the centre of the visualisation, while Force Atlas 2 highlights clusters of nodes, or congregations of online communities. In the visualisation graphs, nodes were replaced with labels to indicate clearly who was involved in the conversation. The label size was processed to highlight the popular users and topics within the network by “degree”, a term which refers to the quantity of edges or connections emanating from its centre. In other words, the larger the label size, the more connected and, accordingly, the more significant the label appeared within the network. This combination of spatialisation and degree adjustment provided a means of representing the connections between users and topics according to their location and size within the network.

An additional layer of analysis was made possible by adding colour to the labels to reveal two more important measures within this research: the presence of online communities, and influencers within the network. The modularity and network diameter algorithms are the two statistical algorithms that enable analysts to identify communities and influential

individuals. The modularity algorithm processes the community detection by measuring the strength of division in a network by modules (communities). Reichardt and Bornholdt (2006) suggest when detecting communities within a complex network, “one generally understands subsets of nodes that are more densely interconnected among each other than with the rest of the network”. They also developed the modularity algorithm, noting it should: a) reward internal edges between nodes of the same group (in the same spin state) and b) penalize missing edges (non-links) between nodes in the same group. Further, it should c) penalize existing edges between different groups (nodes in the different spin state) and d) reward non-links between different groups (Reichardt & Bornholdt, 2006, p. 1).

The network diameter produces the “betweenness centrality” measure, useful not only to signify how often labels are referenced, but also to measure their significance within the network, where “a point in a communication network is central to the extent that it falls in the shortest path between pairs of other points” (Freeman, 1977, p. 35). In other words, labels with increased “betweenness centrality” indicate they are popular users or topics within the network, due to the combinations of other labels connected to them.

We acknowledge there are limitations in our approach and method arising, in part, because we are relative newcomers to “big data” analysis. Three key limitations of this study were: first, results that cannot be generalised because of the use of a non-probability sample of Twitter conversations; second, data patterns that answered basic research questions because our limited computational skills affected our capacity to “read the numbers” in more sophisticated ways; and third, interpretations of the Twitter conversations and data patterns that might be deemed subjective by some readers because they are informed by our dual perspectives as both interested online media users and academic researchers. Nonetheless, drawing on Boyd and Crawford’s (2012) analysis of key questions in “big data” research, our approach to data analytics has been critical and self-reflexive and we are confident the method and results have productively enhanced our understanding of user engagement in relation to the indoctrination controversy.

Results

The case study of users’ responses to the Sharri Markson story produced two types of results that assist us in characterising and explaining the significance of journalism students’ responses to the indoctrination story and, more broadly, changing patterns of online user engagement with the news: first, the social media network and sentiment analysis of the resulting Twitter conversation; and second, a typology of pushback journalism.

Our social media network analysis found that online users followed a tripartite micro-meso- macro pattern of user engagement on Twitter for the three days that the story ran; but, as indicated in the results below, there was a different accent to the Twitter conversation on each of the three days.

Following the newspaper publication of Markson’s story, the Twitter conversation showed users viewing, sharing, liking or disliking, blogging, commenting on, creating memes and writing their own stories or op-ed pieces about the indoctrination allegations. On day one, October 13, 2014, the most mentioned users¹ were @SuzanneCarbone (59), AhMcCann (55), @mirandadevine (39), @crikey_news (28), @CeeJudd (26), @Wendy_Bacon (24), @PatsKarvelas (23) and @leighsales (23). The most influential communicators were @SuzanneCarbone, @EricHardcastle, @marygarden, @alias_steven, @CeeJudd,

@onceaparnatime and @wendy_bacon. While there were various examples of pushback journalism-style news articles and memes published by journalism students and other online users, the main accent of the Twitter conversation on this day was on users following the habitual patterns or “rules” of news consumption and feedback, with the expected positive-push from those users who were associated with the story’s author (Sharri Markson), her article or the newspaper. Overall, on this day, there was an almost even distribution of tweets expressing favourable and unfavourable sentiments about Markson’s article.

On the second day, October 14, 2014, there were significantly more users engaging in this Twitter conversation. The most mentioned users were @AhMcCann (83), @mirandadevine (79), @australian (63), @SuzanneCarbone (58), @WendyBacon (57), @CeeJudd (42), @jeremysear (35), @TheMurdochTimes (35), @crikey_news (29) and @marygarden (29). Several distinct users emerged as network influencers, with the size of their labels suggesting they were either writing tweets that were being retweeted or were the focus of multiple conversations. These network influencers included @WendyBacon, @StephenMcDonell, @hijessicayun, @nihilon45 and @dragonaunty7. These users predominately opposed Markson’s allegations. Interestingly, on the second day, evidence emerged of the power of network influencers to amplify their perspectives and transform themselves into online community influencers by drawing more and more of their large communities of followers into the conversation. It is fair to argue that Twitter users are likely to have like-minded followers because of their past interactions, and that these communities will act to extend any Twitter-based public debate/conversation, as it is widely accepted that social media users who like particular topics of interest will attract followers with similar interests. These networks of networks become increasingly powerful in moments of acute events. In the Markson case, there is evidence that five online community influencers – @JennaPrice, @RMIT!, @mirandadevine, @UTSEngage and @callirachel – swayed the Twitter conversation on the second day. Four out of five of these influential users opposed Markson’s perspective on journalism student indoctrination. They significantly influenced the Twitter conversation by increasing the number of users objecting to Markson’s story, disputing the prevailing news judgement or commenting on pushback journalism-style storylines and sources. This phenomenon of the amplification power of online community influencers shaped the “evolutionary” accent of the second day of the Twitter conversation by galvanising the evolution of an alternative set of “rules” or premises for debating journalism education. Overall, on the second day, there was a shift to a more unfavourable sentiment about the Markson article.

On the third day, there was another noticeable shift in accent within the micro-meso-macro pattern of user engagement on Twitter. New network leaders appeared, including @Volvo_of_Doom, @gobbledeegook, @Dokto_Uber and @MikeySlezak, even though the online community leaders mostly remained the same: @Sydney_Uni, @RMIT!, @mirandadevine and @UTSEngage, with @jkalbrechtsen as a newcomer. Additionally, there is evidence of increased activity from users speaking out against and even attacking those supporting Markson’s views, particularly online community influencers expressing favourable views on her article. So, for example, @mirandadevine was the focus of many conversations. In terms of the patterns of user engagement, these challenges to the communicative power of particular network and online community leaders redefined once again the accent of the Twitter conversation, whereby the “aggregate consequences” of Markson’s indoctrination story revealed themselves at the journalistic, social and economic levels. Journalistically, audience members re-positioned themselves as cultural intermediaries, qualifying and disseminating those news items about journalism students, higher education

and media companies that gave voice to student and other stakeholders' perspectives, especially memes, and, in effect, re-writing the mainstream news story to set the record straight from their perspective. This productive remediation of news content presented a new challenge to the social capital (for example, credibility) of mainstream news journalists, particularly @SharriMarkson and @mirandadevine, in the form of alternative items of news that had wide appeal to online audiences. Moreover, the potential economic value of pushback journalism revealed itself on the third day in the form of a surge in the volume of tweets and, hence, online users' engagement. There were more unfavourable sentiments about both @SharriMarkson and @mirandadevine in the conversation on the third day.

Beyond understanding the topics and the users within the network, it is also useful to explore the sentiment within the conversation to highlight the pushback of information from social media networks contesting the mainstream news. For this part of the data-analysis, we used Leximancer, "a text analytics tool that can be used to analyse the content of collections of textual documents and to display the extracted information visually" (Leximancer, 2011, p. 4). Leximancer has useful computational processing that reads large amounts of text, breaks it into concepts, and then groups those concepts into themes. Analysts can then apply a sentiment lens, which "automatically generates insight into positive and negative sentiment in your text" (Leximancer, 2011, p. 88), to interpret those themes or concepts by how they are related to pre-determined positive and negative terms. Leximancer presents this sentiment as a Z-score, where the Z-score is a representation of "the numbers of terms having Z-score value of more than three for each class positive, negative and neutral" (Hamdan, Bellot & Béchet, 2014, p. 637). From the Twitter corpus used in this case study, Leximancer unsurprisingly determined @SharriMarkson to be the most popular concept in the collection. On day one, the term @SharriMarkson had a Z-score of 11.74, which represents positive tweets supporting her views or sharing the link to her article. By day two, however, the term @SharriMarkson had swung around 180 degrees to a Z-score of negative 11.74, representing a dramatic shift in the conversation from support to opposition for that term/ user. On day three, the term @SharriMarkson settled on a final Z-score of negative 11.49, securing the term as significantly unfavourable within the conversation and the social media network.

The results from the sentiment analysis confirm the patterns of user engagement we identified in the social media network analysis, and support our claim that distinct accents characterised the Twitter conversation on each of the three days that the story ran. On the first day, users were mainly talking about the indoctrination news story in supportive terms, or merely sharing the link among their networks. On the second day, users increasingly questioned the validity of the story, and began to talk negatively about the article, those who agreed with the journalist's views – and even the journalist herself. On the third day, those users who continued to talk negatively drew more and more of their followers into the conversation, and increasingly talked about pushback news items rather than the mainstream news.

We move on now to examples of pushback journalism. We propose this as a newly identifiable form of online user engagement with the news, which takes the form of original online news content directed specifically at setting the public record straight via self-representation, that is, "rewriting" stories from the perspectives of those who had been spoken about or for in mainstream news media, when they felt capable of speaking for themselves.

Our sample of 20 original pushback journalism items was primarily identified via the Twitter conversation around @SharriMarkson because this was the platform where the

content was talked about, sometimes published, and undoubtedly extended to a wider audience in myriad pushback tweets, comments and memes. These items were produced by two groups of stakeholders in the indoctrination story – journalism academics and journalism students (including former students and online Gen Y journalists) – with around the same number of items produced by each group in the three days the story ran. The journalism academics mostly wrote op-ed pieces for major online news sites (*The Australian*, *The Conversation*, *Crikey*, *Independent Australia* and *The Guardian*), while the journalism students typically published their views in different formats across a wider range of online media spaces, including *Junkee*, *Birdee*, *Honi Soit*, *Hijacked* and *City Journal*, as well as *Crikey* and *The Drum*. Interestingly, most of the key student pushback items were published on the first day of the controversy (see, for example, Sainty, 2014a; Caldwell, 2014; Walsh, 2014; Harmon, 2014; Chalmers, 2014; Gleeson, 2014; McKinnon, 2014). They have been classified after content analysis (Deacon et al., 2007) of three themes: media degrees and student learning, younger people and the news, and the future of the journalism profession. This analysis produced three types of pushback: rejection of *The Australian's* news judgement, dispute over source selection and efforts to take back control of the storyline.

In the first instance, pushback journalism was characterised by students' rejection of both the indoctrination claim *and* the newspaper's editorial backing for an "undercover" exposé of a university lecture. These critical responses, often laden with wit, irony and humour, are exemplified in the following two headlines and a tweet: Max Chalmers' (2014) "Note to Sharri: students aren't passive information sponges"; Alex McKinnon's (2014) "Looking for some 'media bias'? Here's the Premier of New South Wales starring in an ad for *The Daily Telegraph*"; and Nick Stoll's tweet, "@JennaPrice Have put in a request for Markson to do my essays for me as an 'undercover student'. You know, because I'm brainwashed". In the three examples, students criticised what they perceived to be inaccurate news claims that cast them in the role of passive and unworldly learners, an outdated stereotype that they moved quickly to kill off, using both text and images.

Second, disagreement with Markson's use of only one anonymous student source in the indoctrination story appears to have triggered much of the pushback journalism. While journalism academics reacted with sarcasm (for example, Wendy Bacon's tweeted query, "was she/he only student with view?"), students' responses were emotionally charged. Many felt misrepresented. These feelings prompted them to examine journalist-source relations, news coverage of younger people and other issues such as media distortion. Some students immediately began re-positioning themselves in the public conversation about media degrees and indoctrination by making their own voices and views heard. Highly popular and funny memes expressed disbelief: "She doesn't even go here!" (Sainty, 2014). Tweets conveyed anger and outrage: "This makes me so angry. Just how dumb do they think students are?" Some comments to reporters were hilarious and scathing: "It's not like we're burning Murdoch effigies and praising Fairfax" (in Walsh, 2014).

The third type of pushback response was, perhaps, the most interesting. Finding themselves positioned on the sidelines of a media story they felt was all about them, journalism students re-acted journalistically and sought to take control of the storyline by reframing it, from a new angle, as an attack on the credentials of the next generation of journalists. Pushback turned into fight back. For example, *Honi Soit* editor Lane Sainty systematically refuted Markson's claims, saying they were "at best, ill-thought-out, and, at worst, truly bizarre"; named critical thinking and questioning power (not indoctrination) as core journalism skills; and made it clear that because critical thinking about media power is

not the same as bias against News Corp, she would readily take a job, if offered, at either *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Australian*. What's more, as journalism academic Bunty Avieson noted in her *Junkee* article, "What my Sydney Uni media students actually learned from Sharri Markson's 'sting'", there was evidence on Twitter and other online sites that first-year media students were energised by the media focus on their learning experiences, and "felt empowered, and uniquely qualified" to express their own perspectives on the indoctrination question, whether in comments, memes or pushback journalism items.

Taken together, these results provide evidence of interesting and unexpected new micro-meso-macro patterns of user engagement with the news. In particular, we claim they provide evidence of a new type of user engagement by younger people, which we term "pushback journalism", a new news practice that exemplifies the "fifth estate" role of social media (Jericho, 2012; see also Posetti, 2009).

Conclusion

The pushback journalism identified in this case study has journalistic, economic and social implications. We conclude by outlining three new and important insights it provides into debates about the ways digital journalism is driving change in online user engagement, particularly by younger people.

In the first instance, at the journalistic level, we suggest perhaps counter-intuitively that the commercial mainstream news environment fostered pushback journalism, as one of many types of online user engagement. Publishing controversial news stories that provoke audience interest, comment and debate is a stock-standard way of increasing news consumption and website traffic. It is an integral part of the everyday business of news. The unexpected twist in this instance was that the indoctrination story activated an audience that has been mostly overlooked by the mainstream news media: younger people, who showed themselves to be both engaged and engaging. The pushback began immediately. Journalism students who are readers of *The Australian* alerted their classmates to the story, prompting some to buy a hard copy of the newspaper for the first time, and others to access the story by finding ways to bypass *The Australian's* paywall. Within hours, they had started responding to Markson in humorous and creative ways that had a dramatic impact on other audiences.

Second, at the economic level, although pushback journalism entered this commercial news environment as a distinct form of unpaid creative labour or media work, it has obvious money-making potential. Acting as cultural intermediaries between mainstream news media and online reading publics, pushback journalists drew on their own social capital (for example, as journalists in the making or non-mainstream digital journalists) to demonstrate their capacity both to "rewrite" stories that set the record straight from their perspectives and to publish news items that reached and engaged a wider audience. Their ambition may have been to purposively contest both the information and the social capital, or credibility, produced and exchanged by the mainstream news media, but arguably their practices had potentially contradictory outcomes because this work of challenging the news media's non-financial forms of value creation (for example, media influence) involved boosting the market value of the news media's products (for example, increasing page views). Either way, we argue their pushback journalism represents a new form of public sphere engagement by younger people, which disrupts and challenges the usual rhetoric of younger people as passive news readers and citizens. Instead, there is evidence to confirm previous research showing

younger people involved in “new, more self-actualising forms of citizenship” expressed via Twitter in “micro-political engagement and everyday political talk” (Vromen et al., 2015)

Finally, because pushback journalism was linked to debates about journalism students and their education, it can be seen as an expression of intergenerational change in journalism. This development raises the question of whether mainstream news media and professional journalists are adapting fast enough to the new conditions of digital news production, online distribution and user engagement. Mainstream news organisations and professional journalists were put on notice in an unexpected way in October 2014 as journalism students used pushback journalism to send a clear and unambiguous message: “We’re coming into your newsrooms, ready or not!” In conclusion, we suggest journalism education has to do more than simply reproduce the existing workforce, newsroom routines and news standards if it wants to offer the best preparation for journalistic work in a news environment that has been seriously recast and destabilised by the growth of digital networks, ubiquitous communication and proliferating amounts of news and information produced by non-journalists.

Note

1. The Twitter users listed in the results on pp. 112-114 include high-profile mainstream journalists (Suzanne Carbone, Sharri Markson, Miranda Devine, Janet Albrechtsen, Patricia Karvelas, Leigh Sales, Calliste Weitenberg and Stephen McDonell) and journalism educators (Wendy Bacon, Jenna Price), as well as journalism students using nicknames (for example, @onceaparnatime or @hijessicayun) or generic usernames (@sydney_uni or @UTSEngage).

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The authors wish to thank 2015 MECO6936 Social Media Communication students for their help in completing the sentiment analysis for this research.

