Updating Diversity of Voice Arguments for Online News Media[1]

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Abstract

Since the 20th century introduction of laws to regulate diversity in control of influential media, the concept of 'voice' has become significant, referencing several discourses and industry meanings. Media ownership dispersal has been a preeminent conceptual framework, presuming that plurality in voice, or ownership/control of media publications, is the best way to promote diversity of opinions in various media outlets. Yet there are other important, related concepts in regulatory and policy discourses which underpin that framework, including public service media, independent or not-for-profit community/local media, and ethnic or gender minority media. Further the popular adoption of internet protocol distributed media, such as news discussion communities, blogs, podcasting and video sharing also suggests a less institutionalized, individual conception of voice, which has fuelled discussion of the internet as a site for increased news diversity and liberalized ownership regulation. This paper explores and problematises concepts of voice diversity in news media in light of the global growth in online publishing. It argues that regulation for media diversity continues to be a precondition of democratic and/or pluralistic polities, on the basis of emerging mainstream digital news production and distribution arrangements, including content reuse (licensing and syndication), reversioning of content across co-owned titles, and cross-media repurposing (for multiple delivery platforms).

Keywords: Voice, media ownership, news, media diversity, online media, Internet, cross media, convergence.

Australia has one of the highest, perhaps even the highest, level of media ownership concentration within comparable democratic nations. A 2006 estimate suggested 88 per cent of print media was in the hands of two organizations: Fairfax Media and News Corporation (Cunningham & Turner, 2006). When the country's 20-year-old cross-media ownership limits were lifted in 2007, media diversity contracted further with, for example, Fairfax buying Rural Press and Southern Cross Broadcasting radio licenses. The removal of Australia's cross media laws is consistent with international trend to relax ownership rules, but Australia now has gone further than other comparable nations. For example, in the UK cross-sector limits remain and in the US, new FCC rules (from December 2007) allow newspaper/broadcast combinations in the 20 biggest markets only, subject to certain conditions, and there has been ongoing opposition to these in the US Senate, the Court of Appeal for the Third Circuit, and now the FCC itself, which is currently reviewing all ownership rules.

The potential reduction of diversity in news voice through mergers and acquisitions raises important issues about how we maintain pluralism in political and social debate – particularly in concentrated markets. However we argue that regulators and citizens should be equally concerned about the fate of voice diversity in an increasingly internetworked news environment characterized by greater duplication and reuse of news across co-owned publications and multiple media platforms, and greater policing of digital rights.

Now one piece of news copy may be duplicated across co-owned print, web, mobile, radio or television outlets, and re-licensed to third party news sites or simply curated by news aggregators. A news agency story may be published verbatim in every subscriber news website across a nation, or the globe, and the increasing use of agency copy is exacerbating a decline in news source diversity (Paterson, 2006). Content farms use aggregate information which is then rewritten and republished as low quality, but search optimized and easily accessed (MacManus, 2009). Original, analytical journalism is under threat as companies cut production costs and jobs in order to service or compete with new, largely unregulated and proliferating digital channels.

Interestingly while it is commonplace to hear that the internet enables more unique voices to be heard in public than ever before, there is little research to indicate whether this proliferation of speech represents greater diversity in news commentary or original reporting. At the same time studies of online news sharing practices and their implications for information plurality are in their infancy.

In this paper we consider the context for re-examining diversity regulation in light of online publishing practices, starting with a case study of Australia's digital news media. We then assess concepts of 'voice diversity' as they may apply to online news environments and reflect on the possible implications of news sharing for policy and regulation. This is not an attempt to find a new way of measuring diversity as other scholars have pursued (De Bens et al, 2007), but rather a way to consider how ownership debates and regulatory proposals might be updated in the wake of cross media ownership reforms and shifts in digital news publishing.

Context for examining voice diversity in online news

It is ironic that Australia's cross-media liberalization supporters argued that the advent of new media services, such as internet and mobile news, justified legal reform when these platforms have not been included in the new diversity tests (Butler and Rodrick, 2007: 642). In fact online and mobile media services do not constitute 'voices' in the test – and neither do national newspapers, free local papers, the public broadcasters ABC and SBS, narrowcasters, subscription or community broadcasters. Nor do the new rules take into account the relative influence/market share of different outlets in a multichannel environment (Dwyer, 2008).

In Australia, Fairfax Media and News Corporation now have popular web versions, 'brand variants', of all their offline, hard copy mastheads, as well as dedicated mobile news interfaces. These cloned products are all beyond the scope of existing diversity regulation, as are Fairfax's online-only metropolitan news sources, *brisbane times.com* and *watoday.com*, its video on demand content and its content licensing to news aggregators (Martin, 2008).

Yet as these companies are expanding their news channels, they are intensifying news sharing practices as they try to minimize production costs and exploit their content investment across more channels. Our preliminary definition of corporate news sharing includes:

- re-use of the same story across co-owned publications on the same platform,
- re-versioning, including updates and localization, for co-owned publications
- re-purposing for different platforms, eg. from radio to web, mobiles, personal digital assistants and e-readers.

- licensing and syndication, including to aggregator services like Yahoo News.
- archiving in digital repositories

News sharing also includes unlicensed news aggregation, such as *Google News*, and curation or content farming, such as *Answers.com* and *Demand Media*, and user excerpting and remix practices in blogs and wikis, although the latter uses are less standardized and predictable than the former two strategies.

Online distribution protocols now facilitate widespread news re-use within corporate publication networks via instantaneous, automated updating of news sites. *Fairfax Digital Media* has approximately 170 news websites in its regional network, including New Zealand regional daily media operations. A site template allows Fairfax to standardize content delivery and relations with regional media publications, their users and advertisers for greater economies of scale. All the Australian sites share link lists to the same top five national and world news stories and many share link lists of breaking news stories as well. On the other hand, these regional sites also have fields for the insertion of local news and information services, tailored to the needs and preferences of specific geographically located communities.

Fairfax's major metropolitan online mastheads share content, but in a more customized or re-versioned manner. Fairfax has four daily metro sites: The *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age, The Brisbane Times* and *WA Today* (the latter two online only publications). *The Canberra Times*, although the capital city metropolitan publication, uses the regional network template. In the main these sites share daily news stories according to editorial decision-making, rather than automated processes, although most viewed top five story lists, lifestyle sections and national advertising are common to all sites. News story content is sometimes re-versioned, with localized changes made to a breaking or original article. Each publication carries a similar story on its portal page, with minor editorial changes to headlines, stand first or precedes, link text and images providing an informational and aesthetic distinction between brands.

Other data feeds allow further re-use and re-purposing of content. Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds allow news users access to links and/or lead pars of selected story categories, and enable unlicensed republishing and re-versioning via data scraping and filtering software. Some re-purposing of news content can also be controlled for specific uses, such as mobile delivery, via the creation of an application program interface (API). An API allows programmers licensed access to the raw data comprising news stories, so that this information can be automatically queried and represented for different applications (Bailey, 2009).

All of these practices increase the scale and scope of news duplication and re-distribution. Research is clearly needed into the extent of news sharing practices, in order to understand their impact on reporting, editorial and consumption practices, and thus on aspects of voice diversity. In another project we are developing a preliminary model for investigating forms of automated re-use across co-owned publications, using an object-oriented database to index and search RSS feeds for duplicate or reworked stories.

First though we have sought to explore two theoretical concerns: how the conditions for diversity regulation have changed in online news systems and how notions of voice diversity used in legacy media systems can be re-conceptualised for digital media environments.

Transformations in digital news media systems

In the previous century, when publishing was restricted by spectrum scarcity and infrastructure costs, media regulators sought to ensure diversity of media sources and content through controls on ownership of publications and regulation to license public and third sector broadcasters. In the US, the UK and Australia for example there has been legislation to limit cross-media ownership and maximize the number of editorial 'voices' present in a national

political system. In those three jurisdictions legislators have also promoted, to differing degrees, alternatives to commercial media including public service, independent or not-for-profit community/local and ethnic or gender minority media.

Yet in recent decades the economic barriers to media production and distribution have been lowered. Cloud computing services and low or no cost production softwares have supported widespread user adoption of blogging, video sharing, social networking and other participatory formats. In turn self-publishing, alongside the growth of niche web publishing and news aggregation services, is having destabilizing impacts on legacy news media industries, particularly in the decoupling of advertising from journalism (Simons, 2008; Pew, 2008, 2009). Classified advertising, which once provided 'rivers of gold' for print businesses has migrated online threatening the viability of newspapers and their commitment to investigative and feature journalism, political and international coverage (Dwyer, 2007).

In the US, which represents a test case for other national markets due to companies' early investment in online media, newspapers have seen ad revenues fall around 45% since 2000 (Federal Trade Commission, 2010) sparking concurrent reductions in editorial staff. Thus while online news provision in the US has nearly doubled since 2005 (Frijters & Velamuri, 2009), at the same time industry consolidation has had an impact on the potential for professional media content diversity.

Other significant trends are impacting on the conditions for voice diversity in online news media. One is the continued liberalization/deregulation of media ownership rules in support of a convergent, multichannel, environment. This has led to increased channel supply, structural concentration, cross-platform ownership and cross-media production (Deuze, 2008). Print and broadcast news media are moving aspects of their operations online to increase economies of scale, extend audiences, reduce distribution costs and capitalize on news sharing and licensing strategies.

Around the globe news business are trialling subscription, content bundling and other strategies to induce users to pay for online news (Myers, 2009). In 2009 Rupert Murdoch announced that News Corporation would move to a standard user pays online news model (Knight, 2009) – not surprisingly around the same time as the company also announced a 32% fall in its full year profits. Asking audiences to pay for content – which they have previously received for free – is not without risk. However, specialized high-quality subscription publications such as *The Economist* have increased their circulation figures in the past decade (Frijters & Velamuri, 2009).

News Corporation, like its competitors, is also reconfiguring its cross media relations with advertisers and audiences, with the latter increasingly using purpose-built pay platforms (such as the *iPad* and Amazon's *Kindle* readers) and mobile online devices to access news content. The CEO of News Corporation's Australian digital media operations, Richard Freudenstein, (and part of the global team looking at the move to paid content) is quoted as saying "News is platform agnostic – wherever consumers want to engage with us, we want to be" (Lee, 2009).

These industry shifts require monitoring and analysis to understand how they may affect voice diversity. Of critical concern is the extent to which horizontal integration and convergent media operations promote an 'echo chamber' – the iteration of reinforcing ideas, sources and opinions across multiple publications, platforms and social networks which has troubled political commentators (Lawrence, Sides & Farrell, 2010). It is likely that online markets require a rethinking of the diversity concepts that have applied in legacy media regulation and policy, along the lines proposed by Napoli (2008) in his ongoing project of deconstructing those principles. However, we propose that it is essential to first conduct empirical studies of the degree to which diversity may be impacting upon online news media production.

Internationally, governments are highly aware of online media trends, as political organizations now routinely mobilize online media for electioneering purposes (Flew, 2008a). Yet following two decades of neo-classical liberal economic support of competition policy only a minority had shown the desire to intervene in emerging digital media ecologies. Then in 2007, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers signalled its longer-term goal of renovating policy rationales expropriated from legacy media, by reasserting traditional measures for promoting pluralism and diversity. It recommended that member states should consider adopting rules for multiplatform digital distribution by:

- limiting the influence which a single person, company or group may have in one or more media sectors;

- introducing thresholds based on objective and realist criteria, such as audience share, circulation, turnover/revenue, the share capital or voting rights;

- using rules capable of being applied in horizontal integration phenomena or mergers in the same branch of activity and to vertical integration phenomena (e.g. controlling key elements of production, distribution and related activities such as advertising or telecommunications);

- having sufficient powers for agencies responsible for regulation to require divestiture of media assets where unacceptable levels of concentration are reached' (2007, CM/Rec 2.1- 2.6).

At the first meeting of EU Ministers for Media and New Communications services in Reykjavik, Iceland in May 2009, it was resolved that the risks arising from media concentration, forms of content aggregation, and uneven broadband connectivity require new measures including "recognition of the public service value of the Internet" (MCM, 2009, 011, Resolution 10).

Several nation-states have already introduced methods for testing media diversity in converging media markets – with limited success. In her recent review of these mechanisms, Just critiques four models: the US's 'diversity index' (subsequently abandoned), the UK's 'plurality test', Germany's Commission on Concentration in the Media (KEK) and Italy's *Sistema Integrato delle Communicazioni* (SIC). This author concludes that in the US the "DI neglects variations in the size of media companies," in the UK "the plurality test applies only to mergers that would have been covered by the rules prior to their removal by the 2003 Communications Act," Germany's "KEK's weighting approach arbitrarily assigns the equivalence of audience share in television to other media," and Italy's "SIC's market definition is too broad, thus rendering it unlikely that a company will have a dominant position under it" (Just, 2009: 113).

Clearly there are difficulties in developing diversity tests capable of satisfying a broad range of media stakeholders. Nevertheless, voice diversity remains a useful concept that needs re-conceptualization to take account of transformations in digital news media systems, and emerging relationships between information providers and system users.

Voice diversity in legacy media markets

The idea of a distinct news 'voice' is a construction of broadcast era media policies, formulated by national democratic governments that supported the distribution of diverse and antagonist sources of information in order to promote "informed decision making, cultural pluralism, citizen welfare, and a well-functioning democracy" (Napoli, 2001: 2). It was assumed that ownership diversity had the capacity to produce voice diversity (Price & Weinberg, 1996; Baker, 2007).

'Voice' in this context refers to a form of democratic proportional representation by the media,

via editorial proxy and through a publication that fairly reflects societal concerns, rather than approximating equal individual access to speech via the media. This is also the notion of voice invoked in market failure cases for public service media. A more deliberative conception of voice diversity is realized in the arguments for government licensing of ethnic and gender specific community broadcast media.

In these cases enabling access to the means of publication for minority group members is a primary objective. Voice diversity has also been invoked in the rhetoric of developing a pluralist, democratic global information 'order' or society, for example in the influential "Many voices, one world", MacBride Report, which continues to influence WSIS policy-oriented debates (UNESCO, 1980; Vincent, Nordenstreng & Traber, 1999). Couldry (2010) has undertaken an important review of the philosophical and sociological underpinnings of conceptions of 'voice' in relation to neoliberal rationalities, and the general conditions that constrain peoples' ability to narrate their own lives. He notes its "duality as a concept, its reference to both process *and* value, which in turn requires a sociological attention to the processes of valuing voice", arguing that a sociology of voice has as its reference-points "not just individuals but also the 'landscape' in which they speak and are, or are not, heard" (Couldry, 2010: 114). To us, the media are centrally constitutive of this landscape.

A policy modification to the editorial voice principle can be seen in the amended Australian cross media ownership laws, which were also designed to "encourage greater competition and allow media companies to achieve economies of scale and scope" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006) in light of technological convergence, realized in new online media systems. Here a 'voice' has a very specific ownership control-related meaning: It refers to a 'media group', or a group of two or more traditional media operations (a commercial radio broadcasting license, an associated newspaper or a commercial television broadcasting license). The new restrictions require a minimum number of five separately controlled media groups or voices operate in city areas and at least four in rural/regional areas. A new section of the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (as amended in 2006), establishes the concept of an "unacceptable media diversity situation", where transactions occur in breach of these media group or voice limits.

Interestingly this regime does not account for the presence of other diversity categories such as public sector or community news outlets in these markets. More significantly the legislation does not cover the operation of online news media services, which may republish the content of the regulated platforms, distribute this beyond the geographical constraints of legacy markets, allow time-shifting of consumption and redistribution of content. Nor does it consider the diversity impact of news blogs and discussion communities, which represent the actual voices of individuals operating outside the ethical and legal parameter of institutional media. They often 'gatewatch' mainstream media content (Bruns, 2005) that is, filter, select, evaluate, critique, republish or promote it, amplifying its reach in the process.

There is little research into the impact of online media practices on news diversity, which we will consider shortly. However there are many analyses of existing policies designed to enhance the diversity of media sources and the content they provide to audiences for democratic and economic purposes (Blumler, 1992; McQuail, 1992; Bagdikian, 1997: Napoli, 1999a). Napoli, who has analysed diversity as a principle guiding "policy makers and the courts" (1999a: 8) breaks the concept into constituent components of source diversity, content diversity and exposure diversity, all operating within the context of the "marketplace of ideas" (pp. 7-34). Source diversity relates to variations in ownership of both programming and outlet, as well as the socio-cultural composition of the editorial workforce. Content diversity embraces difference in program formats, representational demographics and the dissemination of ideas, while exposure diversity relates to the individual consumption of available content. Napoli's schema enables a close reading of the impacts government interventions such as ownership regulation

may have on voice diversity.

From a historical perspective, it is widely accepted in ownership and control debates that policy objectives such as 'pluralism' and 'diversity' can at best only be targeted in an indirect way by somewhat blunt legal instruments. That is, determining the link between ownership diversity and different editorial voices is not an accurate science.

Collins and Murroni, in their influential 1990s UK study of these policy objectives, saw the value of using several different tools such as structural ownership regulation, more fine-grained ownership controls, including numerical limits, and competition policy to foster voice diversity. However, they also considered that some focus ought to be on editorial practices because "the behaviour of journalists and editors cannot be 'read-off' from the structure and ownership of firms" (Collins & Murroni, 1996: 73). For these reasons they suggested that cross-media ownership was not as significant a policy concern as concentration of ownership and they sought mechanisms for editorial independence to support regulatory measures for media diversity. The question is whether such mechanisms would be effective a decade later, when online publication systems enable more efficient content sharing between co-owned publications.

Links between ownership and voice diversity may vary and be difficult to illustrate, as they depend on the economic context and financial structuring of an outlet, the level of editorial control, the locus of power in the organization and the political system more generally (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Baker (2007) argues that although it is hard to establish any precise impact of shifting, say, from multiple to monopoly control, this is not a sufficient argument for abandoning diversity regulation because "the absence of a diversity of owners in the market may constrain voice" in subtle ways:

> … if the resources and outlets are under monopoly control, then there may be much less scope for different voices and ideas to be heard, even within an outlet, simply because there may be less incentive to explore other perspectives. Monopoly control is likely also to have a chilling effect on journalistic and editorial voices, because they will have few alternative employment opportunities. A diversity of outlets, even those all firmly placed within the commercial context, simply because they will utilize a different blend of resources and media professionals, will have the potential to throw up at least different shades of a voice (Baker, 2007).

Diversity regulation has not been a serious priority during the neo-liberal period, where economic efficiencies and competition rhetoric are privileged over social policy. It runs in background mode, waiting to be called on to justify specific policy interventions, which inevitably tended to be liberalizing. Even the chief proselytizers of market liberalization, such as Rupert Murdoch often appeared to sing the praises of pluralism and diversity. But as Freedman observes when media diversity and pluralism is conceptualized as only about consumer choice and competition, there is a "danger of neutering expansive concepts of diversity through neoliberal reforms" (2008: 77). The challenge for policy makers is to maintain the linkage of diversity concepts to their original objectives: promoting the maximal expression of divergent viewpoints and values, and the ability of citizens to equitably access informational resources.

Alternative frameworks for voice diversity

So far we have examined the dominant framework for regulating voice diversity, the liberal free market or 'North Atlantic' model of media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and questioned its application to an online news environment. However, voice diversity has also been fostered using a range of other legacy media interventions, including community and national

broadcasting.

Community radio has been seen as participatory mechanism for conveying "truly independent voices" (Forde et al, 2003: 315) excluded from mainstream channels, and demonstrating the operation of a public sphere (Couldry & Dreher, 2007). In Australia, the Community Broadcasting Codes of Practice variously constructs community radio as being 'inclusive' and representing: 'diversity', 'democracy', 'variety of viewpoints', and 'community involvement'. Community radio is held up as oppositional or 'alternative' to mainstream media – described as 'local', 'access', 'rural', 'non-profit', 'radical' (CBAA, 2008) and more recently as citizens media.

Public service broadcasting has also been regarded in recent decades as a means of promoting pluralism of ideas and a mechanism for addressing market failures in the provision of certain types of news and information for example, relevant to linguistic and ethnic groups or rural populations. News Corporation may disingenuously argue the expansion of PSB to online platforms is a threat to competition and thus "independent news production" and news plurality (Murdoch, 2009) but globally public broadcasters are providing free online news, which satisfies the access element of the diversity equation at a time when the introduction of pay per view models is increasingly likely.

Translating alternative voice strategies into an online context is not straightforward. Nor is the timing ideal, when legacy commercial players are struggling to develop viable online and mobile business models and new media players are concurrently establishing their niches. Recently the US Federal Trade Commission (2010) responded to concerns about the future of news journalism by internally workshopping policy ideas to support sustainable business models. The draft paper suggested direct and indirect government subsidies as well as strengthened copyright provisions. However, these preliminary models were widely criticized for supporting existing media institutions at the expense of new online news sources (Jarvis, 2010).

The need for national diversity interventions is less easy to argue in light of the growth of self-publishing and news personalisation, where bloggers and niche publishers can form the news locus for distinct local or diasporic interest groups and users can construct their own news streams from RSS feeds and personal aggregation tools. These trends offer prima facie forms of media choice, yet demand systematic empirical investigation.

At this point the notion of a "marketplace of ideas", an important metaphor for voice diversity during the de-regulationist 1980s (Napoli, 1999b), needs a brief discussion. Where Winseck has argued this trope works as a key myth in US media policymaking (2005), Peters' (2004) historical analysis traces its rhetorical uses in ways useful to this paper because he puts to rest the kind of rubbery pluralism that is often evident digital media policy in general, and media ownership policy in particular. First, he demonstrates that US media policy incorrectly infers the "marketplace of ideas" has a lineage from liberal giants such as Mill and Milton through to latter day US legal liberals like Oliver Wendall Holmes Jr. (1841-1935). He then argues it offers at best an imprecise notion of a free, unfettered media that "fudges profits and democracy, the freedoms to debate and to acquire" and is used in politics as a form of expedient "public sphere lite" which:

> stacks the conceptual deck against rival terms accounting for communication in
> public such as ideology, hegemony, Offenlichkeit (public sphere), patriarchy,
> revelation, solidarity, or objective truth (Peters, 2004: 80).

In contra-distinction to orthodox liberal-pluralist understandings of a marketplace where we have the freedom to choose between the best of competing ideas, radical pluralists contend "that spaces in which differences may constitute themselves as contending identities are today

most efficiently established by political means" (Mouffe, 2000: 37). Mouffe's work suggests democratic pluralism involves a social commitment to inclusive conditions for self-expression and determination – that is policy which ensures online media choices (in outlets, platforms, programs, and genres) represent existing social differences, and that resources be made available to sustain these voices.

Certainly, for governments to continue to rely on notions of 'voice' in online media policy, as they do in existing regulation, they need to recognize and understand the new ways in which economic and political power structure online media markets and mediate expression in internetworked social relationships.

Voice diversity in online media markets

The proliferation of online or internet protocol distributed media, such as websites, streaming, on demand and peer to peer media, has played into another neo-liberal discourse of voice plurality: that of information plenty. This asserts that citizen access to a burgeoning range of online information sources weakens the case for traditional diversity measures. In *Reno v. ACLU* (1997) the US Supreme Court overturned the Communications Decency Act (which prohibited indecent speech on the net), echoing an earlier Supreme Court opinion that: "the content on the internet is as diverse as human thought" and as such, should not be restricted in the same way as broadcast media (Halavais, 2009). A similar conception of transcendent voice diversity online was put forward in 2001 by Australia's then Federal Communications minister Richard Alston to support proposed changes to foreign and cross media ownership laws. In light of internet and satellite services he said:

> There is absolutely no shortage of information sources and obviously that's going to increase and we want to facilitate that. In that very rapidly changing technological environment I think there is a very broad recognition that you are now starting to not need anything like the rigidity that were supposedly the foundations of the cross-media rules (Henderson, 2001).

Such early celebrations of digital pluralism overlook structural and cultural constraints to publication, actual online information consumption patterns and specific exposure diversity. As Halavais (2009:58) notes in *Search Engine Society*: "One of the justifications for regulating broadcast media is that, since only a limited number of voices can be heard, they naturally favour certain viewpoints over others. Implicit in the Supreme Court's argument is that the web gives a voice to everyone."

In the self-publishing era, individual authorship is an important new consideration in diversity investigations. Bloggers can and do act as alternative, critical counterpoints to dominant media frames and agendas. Yet there are economic and social constraints to getting your ideas read online that make one-on-one correlations between authorship and voice diversity possibly unworkable. US studies would suggest online news readership is likely to be concentrated on a small group of publications (Hindman, 2009).

Further, as Havalais suggests, the 'plenty' conception underplays the directive function of search engines as navigational and filtering tools, as well as the hierarchical "economy of links" (Walker, 2000). The success of Google's Page Rank relevance feature has seen search engines move to privilege popular, heavily cited sites above less well-linked information:

> The assumption that computer networks are more democratic, and necessarily provide a greater voice to everyone, is probably misguided …[and]...Any careful examination of the web today shows that it is anything but a level, unvariegated network …search engines both contribute to the selection of the more prominent

sites, and in turn are more influenced by them (Halavais, 2009: 58-9).

Halavais describes a new 'attention economy' where:

> The web increases the amount of information available to a person, but it does not increase the capacity for consuming that information. We are even less likely to read through the entire web than we would be to read through an entire library. The most important change the web brings us is not this increase of information of various sorts…nor is it the fact that this information is accessible to a much more dispersed audience than ever before. The real change on the web is in the technologies of attention, the ways in which individuals come to attend to particular content (2009: 69).

News aggregation services are increasingly popular attention technologies. Alongside search engines and portal pages, aggregators are leading sources of traffic to news websites (Hitwise, 2007). *Google News* says it encourages readers to "get a broader perspective by digging deeper into the news – reading ten articles instead of one, perhaps – and then gain a better understanding of the issues, which could ultimately benefit society" (Bharat, 2006: n.p.). It also claims to serve the public objectively by indexing many news sites simultaneously and presenting the results without political bias and as determined by algorithms "devoid of human influence" (*Google News*, 2009a). This apparently random selection recalls Rosen's critique of the news provider who provides nothing but that which is available, claiming to deliver news without an investment in the audience's emotions, and rather just "hands [them] the facts" (Rosen, 1993: 3).

There are many flaws in the claim, not the least that *Google News* aggregates a limited number of sources, which are included in the search engine on suggestion by a third party (*Google News*, 2009b, n.p.) and excludes those results behind paywalls or on government blacklists. As Google's search algorithms are not transparent, it is impossible to determine precisely how any results might reflect its relationships with news providers (Rampal, 2007:83).

Where individuals use such aggregation tools to self-select and compile composite news feeds they may seek out only reinforcing perspectives (Garrett, 2006). Similarly in collating and re-presenting existing news sources, aggregators and curation services such as the *Huffington Post* and *Drudge Report*, may simply reproduce, consolidate or amplify information hierarchies (Finkelstein, 2008). In these ways increased user reliance on major search engines and aggregation processes may signal a move away from, rather than towards greater access to content diversity, and a deliberate choice of lowered vertical exposure diversity. In this scenario, consumer sovereignty, another major trope of neo-liberal policy discourses, could work against, rather than in favour of, voice diversity principles.

Karppinen (2008) usefully provides a philosophical critique of what he refers to as "naïve pluralism" in media policy discourses. In his account the term pluralism is too often used in an inexact way to invoke heterogeneity and content choice diversity in media. The trouble with these conceptions, he argues, is that they echo "the postmodern antipathy towards all kinds of social centralism and planning and [lead] to a more general critique of all kinds of 'cultural policing'"(p. 36). Such postmodern renderings, as many others have noted, convey an antipaternalistic stance that then is reread as praising individualist cultural autonomy and choice (cf. Hartley, 1999 on DIY media citizenship). It is little wonder, says Karppinen, that:

> … the current stress on popular consumption, active audiences and individual creation of meaning is mistaken for the neoliberal idea of consumer sovereignty. It can be argued that the discussion of pluralism in media studies and media policy has often taken a form of naïve celebration of all multiplicity, which all too easily

converges with the neoliberal illusion of free choice (2008: 36).

The participatory and social activities of 'active audiences' do deserve some consideration in our account of online voice, for the ways in which these interactions organize and maintain different concepts of public expression, social cohesion and community than those that drive legacy media policy.

For Benedict Anderson, print capitalism was responsible for the constructing the imagined communities of nation-states, constituting its body politic and cultural life. Newspapers, in particular, informed the collective understanding that there was a "steady, anonymous, simultaneous experience" of a newspaper reading community (Anderson, 1983: 31). It could be argued that the personalized news experience dismantles this older media-centric sense of collectivity. However participants in the 'social' media experience – in chat rooms, messaging systems, forums, blog and moblog networks – are shaping new forms of dialogic communities, that understand, value and produce news diversity in ways we have yet to fully explore, for example in sharing, recommendation and commenting practices that traverse local and global spaces.

Social networking and peer-to-peer applications have facilitated the formation of relationships that fundamentally transform political, economic and cultural fields of mediated communications – both via non-proprietorial, commons or gift economy exchanges and fan or subculture communities which are deeply integrated into media value chains and commodification processes. They can be conceived as forms of "networked individualism" (Wellman, 2001) and "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2007). Yet this focus on the individual, empowered user distracts us from analysis of the ways in which the political and social operations of dialogic communities may (or may not) contribute to the informational aims of diversity regulation, and may interact with existing legacy media content, which becomes the foundation for comment and debate.

We propose a critical analysis of voice diversity in online news systems, which investigates both the operation of internet media relations and the articulation of old and new media practices. It would avoid naïve celebrations of participation and multiplicity used to legitimate deregulatory media policy discourses and rather applies radical-pluralist democratic theory to diversity analysis, where constructions of difference are based on antagonistic understandings of the limits of pluralism. To assist such an analysis we have schematically mapped voice diversity policy articulations in legacy media systems and any shifts we perceive in the online environment.

	Legacy Media Systems	Online Media Systems
Policy Concepts Concerning Voice	Public Service or State broadcasting	Public Service or State Media
	Market/Commercial	Market/Commercial
	Community/Not for Profit	Community/Not for Profit

Independent/Alternative	Independent/Alternative
Minority Ownership (Women, Race/Ethnicity)	Race/Ethnicity/Linguistic Sites
Local	Local/Global
National Communities	Dialogic Communities
Ownership diversity	Authorship/Participatory diversity
Licensing	Linking, Aggregation and Search

This table indicates how voice concepts have tended to be applied (in a structural sense) to traditional media policy and regulation. Many of the categories can also be used to describe online media systems, but there are significant differences. Foremost among these departure points are:

- The need to include news bloggers and gatewatching communities in the Independent/Alternative and Dialogic Community categories. Their roles, of course, vary internationally – as do their relations to traditional news media. However, both specialist blogs and political discussion communities can attract a strong following, can be linked to commercial brands and drive traffic to news stories.

- Although there are many minority publications online there is a marginalization of minority language communities. It is estimated there are 6000 languages in the world but 90 percent of these languages are not represented on the internet. Around 50 languages represent 99 percent of the content on-line, and only a handful dominate (Napoli, 2008).

- Nationally formed notions of voice are problematised when the users of a system can be anywhere. However, in this sense diversities are more diasporic and less constrained by any one national geography.

- Isomorphic relations cannot be drawn between traditional conceptions of ownership diversity and those of authorial or participatory diversity. It is probable that the majority of users experience expressive determination as forms of choice between pre-determined outcomes.

- Whereas government licensing acted to regulate ownership diversity in the case of limited spectrum, under the conditions of information abundance but attention and bandwidth constraints linking, aggregation and search work together to reinforce the dominance of 'popular' publishers.

In each case, where intervention debates are emerging, the concept of 'voice' retains a primarily political meaning. Even in those categories where economic meanings are strongly coded (e.g. in competitive concerns about the impact of linking, aggregation and search) we

can legitimately interpret these through Hirschman's participatory notion of 'voice' as an implicit politicized counterpoint to the consumerist notion of 'exit', or specific instances of individual consumer behaviour (Flew, 2009; Hirschman, 1970).

Where we can identify and articulate the power relations and discourses that structure hegemonic orders in news distribution, the process of democratizing any institutions, including media, becomes a political rather than individual task. This is why it is critical to begin to unpack how diversity is re-conceptualized online in light of critical internet media studies.

Conclusion

The expansion of online news media forms and practices, including commentary and aggregation, has complicated existing debates about appropriate frameworks for regulating news production and distribution in industrialized economies. Yet there are few accounts of the ways in which voice diversity can be conceptualized in online media systems, and little empirical understanding of how internetworked news distribution might impact on existing intervention strategies such as ownership regulation.

This paper has reviewed legacy conceptions of voice diversity and has put forward a radical pluralist approach to re-conceptualising voice in light of critical internet media studies.

It argues that naïve pluralism and invocations of choice or participatory media are often a distraction from first principle discussions of planning for democratic media systems. These are the first steps towards analysing and evaluating the significance of news sharing practices like re-use and re-versioning, in order to further explore the ways in which they illustrate the complex political and economic relations emerging from online publishing.

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Notes

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