

1999

## Avenues of Communication : The Suburban Press and Globalisation

Shane Hewerdine  
*Edith Cowan University*

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**Avenues of Communication**  
**The Suburban Press and Globalisation**

**Shane Hewerdine**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Award of  
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Media Studies,  
At the Faculty of Arts, Department of Media Studies,  
Edith Cowan University**

**1999**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past two decades there has been an increasing amount of attention within academia, regarding the issue of globalisation, within all disciplines. Cultural studies in particular have speculated upon the effects of globalisation that will potentially affect all of the diverse cultures and societies throughout the world.

For the most part the consensus amongst cultural critiques is that globalisation will adversely affect localised communities and cultures. The principle argument has been that local cultural and societal tenets, that constitute unique identities and senses of community, will be subsumed by a homogenised global culture largely produced by American cultural and information conglomerates.

Arguably while this argument has merit it is problematical in that, paradoxically what is being presented as a threat is also, albeit inadvertently, as being in a sense a fait accompli, which subsequently privileges a global culture. Part of the problem lies within the focus of criticism. Most critiques have had their primary focus on the potential for globalisation to threaten the local. The potential for the local to resist such threats is largely ignored.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the affects of globalisation, further focus needs to be directed at the issue of the local. In essence the global cannot be fully understood unless it is juxtaposed with the local, and vice versa.

This dissertation will explore the relationship between the mass media and local community groups. Particular focus will be upon Perth community group, Cities For People and their campaign against the construction of the Northbridge Tunnel, in Perth, Western Australia. Given the increased attention to the globalisation of media ownership and the dissemination of information, along with the introduction of new communications technologies, it is perhaps timely to call into question the relevance of localised media and their relationship to the community's they serve. Despite having undertaken a detailed study of the coverage of the Northbridge Tunnel, by all facets of the main stream media, this study will not be focused on a content

analysis, rather it will be based upon theoretical concepts involving the following issues: News as a genre; the evolving of the so called 'global village'; relevancy of particular mediums to the coverage of local issues and, the notion of the 'public sphere'.

It will be contended that while the mainstream media will continue to play a significant role within local communities, current ideological stances within mainstream media need to be reassessed. On the surface, the mainstream media appear to be facilitating change in regard to their relationship with the community, however to what extent actual change is affected is problematical.

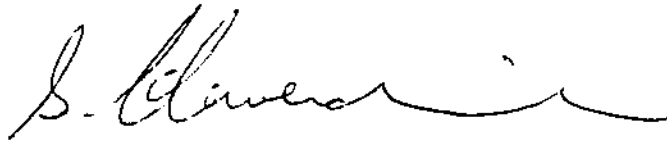
Despite the majority of contemporary critical practice which suggests that the mainstream media's coverage of localised issues is problematical, it will be demonstrated that there is evidence of an ideological shift in the way the media perceive the importance of community groups and the issues that they represent.



### **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Elmer", written in a cursive style.

Date

Nov 1999

## **Acknowledgments**

**I would like to thank the following for their assistance and support: Dr. Rod Giblett for his supervision and input; Associate Professor Brian Shoesmith and Dr. Alan McKee for their assistance; the support staff at Edith Cowan University for their much appreciated assistance; and, to employers, past and present, for their understanding and support.**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

For almost three centuries communications on a vast scale have been facilitated by the mass media, initially by the medium of print in the form of newspapers and journals, followed over the last half-century by the electronic mediums of radio and television, and recently by the introduction of digitalised media such as telecommunications and computers.

The mass media has both facilitated and shaped the notion of a sense of community. As the so called 'fourth estate' the media has presented itself as a champion of democracy by supposedly informing citizens with information deemed necessary for participating in, and facilitating the functioning of, a liberal democratic society - at least by Western standards.

Jurgen Habermas (1989) suggested that the press assumed the role as a public sphere, performing the same function as the Athenian Agora as a forum for society to discuss issues relevant to particular communities. Habermas suggests that the media assumed the role as the forum for what he termed the public sphere, as it was the ideal environment for the communicating of concerns that affected the wider community.

What is problematic however is that the press, and the mass media in general, is restrictive in terms of participation. In an ideal world, particularly a supposedly democratic one, each individual should have the ability to express their views without fear or favour. Ideally if the media were to serve as the arena for public debate then access should be available to all. However this is seldom the case.

Part of the problem lies within the fact that during this century there has been a significant decrease in the number and diversity of forums for debate, particularly in the area of television and the press, largely facilitated by the advent of the globalisation of the

media and communication sectors. Also it has been suggested, that there has been a concerted effort on the part of the media to depoliticise its content.

A key issue relating to the dynamic between communications and the notion of the media as public sphere concerns that of sense of community. A pertinent question in relation to the relationship of the media and a sense of community is, to what extent does globalisation erode a sense of community at the localised level, and will it subsequently lead to area-specific communities becoming redundant?

In addressing these questions a focus will be placed upon the role of the press in creating and sustaining a sense of community and the notion of a public sphere. Particular focus will be placed upon the Perth-based suburban press group, Community News. In 1985 the Community Newspaper group was established with the grouping of nine, previously independent, local newspapers within the Perth metropolitan region. The oldest of the nine, Comment News, had been in operation since 1970. Today the Community group is comprised of fifteen publications boasting a weekly circulation rate in excess of 612 000 papers. The publications have no cover price, being solely reliant upon advertising revenue, and the papers are circulated direct to homes and are available at local newsagents. The Community group is part owned by West Australian Newspaper holdings and News Limited.

Until recently little literature has been directed at the potential for community media to counter the increase of globalised media organisations and disseminators of news items. Lee (1992), Sreberny- Mohammadi et al (1997) and Herman & McChesney (1997) suggest that there has been a proliferation of media that both serve and are served by localised community groups. The former view these as continuing to grow and succeed in

spite of globalisation whereas the latter advocate a growing need for vigilance and a subsequent concerted effort to maintain survival of local media against what they see as annihilation of such media via globalisation. Lee states, "...what we see is the coeval emergence of different publics, public spheres, and public spaces, each with their own forms of communicative organization" (p.417) . Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1997, p.221) concur with Lee's assertion, suggesting that there exist many and varied communication channels each serving specific groups and issues. Herman and McChesney acknowledge a growth in community based media throughout the world, however they warn the aspect of globalisation has the potential to eradicate community-based media.

Through a hybrid of critical and content analysis it will be argued that, despite the notion that localised media are threatened by the advent of globalisation, localised media will continue to play a substantial, viable role for geographically-based communities. It will be contended that globalisation has indeed highlighted the importance of local media and its functions to serve respective communities. Despite the conclusion that localised media are as relevant as ever, it will also be contended that access to the public sphere is restricted, however at a local level it is comparatively more accessible than at a global level.

Issues covered will include the role of the press in a democratic society; the relationship between sense of community and news reporting; access and agency in the public sphere; and, the role of media advocacy.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE PUBLIC SPHERE

### 1.1 - The Emergence of a Public Sphere:

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) Jürgen Habermas presents an historical account of the emergence of what he terms the 'bourgeois public sphere'. He suggests that from the late seventeenth century, through to the late eighteenth century, the existence of a new forum for public debate had come to the fore throughout the larger part of Europe. Prior to this a sense of publicness was non-existent since the fall of the Roman empire.

Habermas suggested that the recognition of a public was inherently political in nature as it allowed for a shift in the power base of communities of that era. As Thompson (1995) points out, the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere signified the separation of the state from the agenda setting function of public discourse, effectively bringing about the potential for the state to be subjected to potential accountability (p.70).

Prior to the recognition of a public, the principal power bases were located with the absolute rule of the respective monarchs and courts throughout Europe. Having absolute rule meant that the monarchy of the day could, for the most part, implement whatever statutes s/he desired without having to engage in any discussion with the subjects.

Habermas points out that after the civil war in Britain in the 17th century, and the French revolution in the 18th century, a new power base came into existence, which was citizen based. This in turn led to a participatory, democratically based society.

Initially the bourgeois public sphere was evidenced within public spaces such as coffee houses and salons. It was within these establishments that the bourgeoisie of the day

would congregate to discuss issues deemed to be of 'common concern'. Issues of a literary nature were the fodder of debate and discussion, with journals and the periodical press facilitating a substantial amount of material.

As an arena for political agenda setting the bourgeois public sphere, while being more inclusive, was also like its monarchical predecessor and the Athenian Agora in that it excluded sectors of society from the decision-making process. Habermas points out that while this new forum was public in nature, it was largely controlled by literate, wealthy men. Shortly after the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, there appeared a plebian public sphere which sought to counter the bourgeois sphere.

One of the key criticisms of Habermas' work on the public sphere is that he is dismissive of disenfranchised groups. In relation to the issue of exclusion Dahlgren (1991, p.6) is critical of Habermas, suggesting that while Habermas identifies class bias he does not recognise the exclusion of women. As such Dahlgren accuses Habermas of "complicity in the subordination of women". Dahlgren also highlights the fact that Habermas avoids recognition that other public spheres were in opposition to the bourgeois one, (p.6). Yet as Thompson (1995, p.73) points out, the exclusion of both women, and other public areas of public discourse, was a product of the era in which the early bourgeois public sphere was established. Habermas clearly states in the preface to *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*: "Thus it refers to those features of a historical constellation that attained dominance and leaves aside the plebian public sphere as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process", (1989, p.xviii). Thompson also suggests that the bourgeois public sphere actively sought to contain other public spheres in order to contain

opposition (p.71). This is a criticism that is often aimed at contemporary media institutions.

## **1.2 - The emergence of the press as public sphere:**

Habermas (1989) suggests that after the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, the newly established press of the era soon assumed the role of public sphere. In doing so the press broadened the public base, no longer were the general public reliant upon word of mouth and physical locations, such as coffee houses and salons, to be informed of issues deemed to be of relevance to the wider community. Habermas suggested that newspapers, in particular, were historically the medium that citizens could be informed by, and interact with, in order to participate in a liberal democracy. However, as Poole (1989, p.15) points out, the notion of a public sphere was still very much an exclusive domain in that it inherently prevented the illiterate, women, minorities and the working class from participating within public debates. Marxist and feminist analysts of the media contend that the aspect of access and agency is still a problematical aspect regarding access to public debate through contemporary mainstream media.

Habermas realised that, while the press theoretically could serve as the ideal public sphere, in practice it did not because of its tendency to both govern what constituted the public agenda and selectively choose who takes part in public debate. This led Habermas to coin the term 'ideal speech position' (Poole, 1989, p.18). Habermas suggested that the ability for the media to facilitate public debate was eroded when the press forsook its role as a partisan based interest and adopted economics as the prime determinant in its function, with news becoming a commodity rather than a public service, (1989, p.188).



Arguably Habermas' notion of the media as the ideal democratic public sphere is more conducive to localised media than it is to national and global media. Localised media facilitate discussions about issues that are area specific and promote a replication of the public sphere based upon the Athenian Agora and the early bourgeois public sphere, in that they informed the general public of meetings relating to specific issues and community groups, thus promoting physical interaction.

While Habermas' work on the bourgeois public sphere is grounded in historical analysis it serves as a useful theoretical point for exploring the aspect of the relationship between contemporary media institutions and societies, in relation to the journalistic role of the media and issues considered to be of public importance or interest. Of particular relevance is the issue of globalisation, and the resultant effect that it has had upon geographically-based media.

### **1.3 - Globalisation and the public sphere:**

Since the early 1970s there has been a steady decline in both the number of companies, and number of publications produced within the commercial press. The primary reason for this has been the emergence of the 'press baron' followed by the 'media magnate'. With established global markets, vast amounts of capital and significantly entrenched infrastructure these conglomerates are well placed to subsume rival publications or compel them to close down through the monopolisation of the market. This has subsequently led to the decline in the diversity of viewpoints available within the public arena, is particularly applicable to the effects of globalisation upon geographically-based publications.

Curran (1978) in presenting an historical overview of the British press, concludes that diversity of viewpoints has progressively diminished. He suggests that this has led to the

eradication of alternative press and subsequently isolated and contained potential dissidence. He subscribes to the view that economics is the principle catalyst for the blocking of dissenting voices. Wilson (1989) concurs with this point of view suggesting that the erosion of the public sphere has been brought about by the increase in transnational capital which has subsequently adversely affected the public service function of national communications systems. Curran (1991) does, however, point out that there are exceptions to this, such as the Swedish press system. As a model of an inclusive public sphere the Swedish press is regulated so as to allow for societal groups to put forward their viewpoints. In Australia the potential for a viable alternative press to coexist with the mainstream press is problematic. The notion of a free market environment, with regulatory regimes to ensure media diversity, mask the actual potential for diversity. The absence of the potential for diversity within the Australian press is principally governed by economics. The cost of establishing and maintaining a viable newspaper effectively limits the number of players within the market place. This has been witnessed by the recent closure of the Daily Mail in Perth and the Sunday Sun in Brisbane, this has effectively monopolised these markets. Unlike the Swedish government, whose regulatory system privileges the social over the economic, Australia's regulatory regime places the market above the social.

With the decline in public forums there has come a diminishing of viewpoints for two reasons: firstly there has been a reduced number of available forums; secondly the perceived shift in focus from area-specific issues to that of issues of national, and later global issues, has made the local appear to be of less significance. Sparks (1988) argues that where the public sphere was formerly community and area-specific it has shifted its paradigmatic boundaries becoming increasingly internationalised, thus bringing into

question the relationship between the media and the collective sense of identity that it seeks to foster

Arguably in the light of the issue of globalisation it can be suggested that the press of earlier periods was far more inclusive of diverse viewpoints and issues than that of the contemporary press. Curran (1978) highlights the rise of what he terms the 'radical press' which he suggests catered for the British working class during the 17th and 18th centuries, serving as a forum for the articulation of issues largely ignored by the state sanctioned press. These publications, he suggests, were primarily concerned with issues of a localised nature. He states:

They published news that other papers did not carry, highlighting the common predicament of working people as a class and showing that purely local struggles - whether in setting up a trade union, resisting wage cutting, demonstrating for better working conditions or the fight against the new poor law - were part of a wider class struggle throughout the country, (p.66).

Likewise the suburban and regional press cater to specific markets and issues not covered by the mainstream press, despite its principal function being that of an advertising forum for localised businesses.

Dahlgren (1991) suggests that the bourgeois public sphere began to decline toward the end of the nineteenth century due to increasing industrialisation, urbanisation and literacy. He goes on to point out that the decline was further exacerbated by the advent of the popular press and 'the rise of the administrative and interventionist state' (p.4). What is problematic about Habermas's theory of the bourgeois public sphere is his assertion that it was short lived. Arguably given the fundamental role of economics in relation to the production of media products, along with the issues of equity and access, it could be

suggested that the bourgeois public sphere is still a force in play within contemporary western society. Sreberny-Mohammadi (1997) alludes to this aspect when she states, "the dynamics of recent movements and the role of small media suggest we have operated with a far too narrow definition of the 'political public sphere'" (p. 224).

The fact that media ownership has increasingly intensified on a global scale - to the point that multi-national companies are firmly in control of locally-based press - would suggest that the bourgeois public sphere is very much still dominant within contemporary western society. Yet this does not detract from the potential for the suburban and regional press to perform the same function as that of the periodical press of the early bourgeois public sphere - to inform area-specific communities.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE PRESS AS PUBLIC SPHERE**

#### **2.1 - 'Imagined communities' and 'phantom publics':**

While sense of community is a relative issue, one important factor relating to the establishment a sense of community is the ability to communicate. Prior to the inception of print sense of community was largely governed by the limitation of locale. Print media subsequently began to widen the concept of community, as it precipitated wholesale communication and the education of large numbers of disparate individuals, whose sole commonality was that of a shared language and legal jurisdiction. As Benedict Anderson (1983) points out, with the advent of print came the birth of the nation/city state, and the notion of an 'imagined community'. During the expansive European colonisation of the world, in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, print served to build and unite emergent empires, thus expanding the notion of a sense of community to a broader base. Subsequently the notion of locale, as the principal determinant of a community, had further lost currency.

Over the past decade the press in particular have attempted to establish globalised communities, this aspect being evidenced in publications such as *The Express* and *Il Globo*, to name but two. Sparks (1988, p.221) viewed such a scenario as having the potential to eradicate regional and localised press as advertisers would be inclined to utilise such media to maximise exposure. The advertising in such publications highlight the problematic issue of the press as serving to inform, as the advertising content seeks specific audiences and demographics through niche marketing. Subsequently news content

becomes subordinate to advertising, thus diminishing the journalistic role of the media within an ideal democratic society, which further exacerbates the divide between the information rich and poor.

Over the past two decades the relationship between locale and sense of community has been further eroded due to the emergence of the electronic media era and the subsequent age of digitalisation. Current means of communication have diminished the relationship between proximity and sense of community as is evidenced in terms such as 'global village' and 'virtual communities'. Green (1994, p. 163) suggests that sense of community has not diminished - it has been relocated stating: "Communications media return to us images of village-like encounters, but on a global scale; Bill Clinton more easily recognisable, than a neighbour, and Bart Simpson more endearing than any local child."

Whereas community entailed a sense of locale, as was the case with the coffee houses of the early bourgeois public sphere, contemporary communities can be constituted by arenas such as cybercafes. Paradoxically cybercafes facilitate co-presence yet foster isolation through the communicative tools such as 'chat rooms', 'bulletin boards' and 'e-mail'. Today people, who despite being from disparate ethnic and cultural backgrounds, are viewed as being communities by virtue of shared interests. As Giddens (cited in Sreberny-Mohammadi, Winseck, McKenna & Boyd-Barrett, 1997, p.xi) points out, global communications have 'radically transform(ed) social relations across time and space'. This transformation has subsequently led to fundamental changes to the notions of community and citizenship, particularly in relation to the notion of a participatory democracy.

While technology has been a principal component in the shift in what constitutes a community, also of significance is the issue of the ends to which technology has been deployed to facilitate communication between individuals and groups. Equally as important as this are the issues of access and agency - what differentiates the information rich from the information poor, why is it so, and to what extent? As Anderson (1983) points out, communities become constituted by both who is included as well as who is excluded.

For over a decade a large number of mass communication's critiques involving the relationship between the mass media and society have been focused on the issue of the globalisation of the information and cultural sectors. Much of the material has focused upon the issue of social, cultural and economic equity. Emphasis, for the most part, has focused on the macro level rather than on the micro, with the primary focus often involved with the potential for change between the mass media and sovereign national states. Little attention has been directed to the actual potential change that can affect the traditional role of the mainstream media in relation to their interaction with their respective localised communities. In terms of localised media the consensus appears to be that if it survives at all it will be irrelevant. Indeed most criticisms of: the symbiotic relationship between; the growing trend of globalization, emergent forms of communication; sense of community; and, changes to the notion of the public sphere suggest that the notion of geographically based communities are becoming redundant, being replaced with virtual communities.

While the notion of emergent virtual communities is significant, it is problematic to suggest that geographically-based communities, and the media that operate within such areas, are becoming redundant. One need only view news bulletins to see evidence of an

increase in a sense of community based on geography at both local, regional and national levels. In order to fully comprehend the dynamics between the flow of information between the global, regional and local, all three need to be recognised as separate, and, of equal importance, as they each serve distinct jurisdictions and purposes. Local, regional, national and global mediascapes do not operate within self contained vacuums, there exist no clear lines of demarcation, factors such as ownership, cultural tenets, economics and regulation foster interaction between all three. As Boyd-Barret (1997, p.143) points out, the globalised practice of news gathering and dissemination has incorporated the local within the global and the global with the local.

## **2.2 - The relevance of the suburban press:**

The increased globalisation of the information and communication sectors has introduced the term 'superhighway' into the lexicon of everyday speech. If the superhighway is indicative of global communications, then the aspect of localised communications can be conceived of as Avenues. Whereas the information superhighway connotes the ability to carry vast amounts of data traffic to no specific destination, the avenue is area specific. This analogy is useful as it serves to illustrate both a sense of interconnectedness, and, it highlights the connotative level of the relationship between the two, particularly within academic circles. Sreberny-Mohammadi et al (1997) highlight this when they state, "Thus local space and alternative media practices continue to be subordinate to and interconnected with the globalization of dominant media corporations." (p.xxv).

Yet as Angus and Shoesmith (cited in Green & Guinery, 1994, p.162) point out, the global is interdependent upon the peripheral. As such the localised can be seen to be as



significant as the global despite the perceived imbalance of power. Applying Derrida's theory of identity, as being constituted by the binary oppositions of absence/presence, the global is such only inasmuch as it is not local. Hence there exists a need to recognise the potential of localised media to operate with, and in spite of, increased global communication regimes.

Despite their misgivings on the potential for localised media to survive the ubiquity of global communication and media juggernauts, Herman and McChesney point to an increasing number of locally established community radio and television broadcasters throughout the world which were principally established in order to counteract global media institutions in order to foster a sense of community, (1997, p.201 & 202).

### **2.3 - Constructing a sense of community:**

One of the primary tenets of the mass media is the notion of its ability to mirror society and formulate supposed community identity. The media has widely been viewed as 'the glue that holds together much of ourselves as a society', (Cunningham & Turner, 1993, p.350). In particular the commercial sector attempt to create a sense of community by attempting to create a sense of belonging through the use of pronouns such as 'us', 'you', 'our', 'your'. In order to establish a sense of belonging there exists a need on the part of the media to create a mythical unity, a unity based upon shared interests, common goals, and notions of egalitarianism.

News, of a local nature, in particular, employs this method - due its necessity to maintain a limited audience, or consumer base, dependent upon your outlook. Localised news might be compared to the same function as that of a church sermon, with both being heavily dependent upon the aspect of proximity. Yet it is not solely through the use of

such inclusive terms that a sense of community is fostered, equally as imperative is the media's use of exclusive terminology such as 'them', 'they', 'theirs'. Paradoxically, in order to maintain a mythical unity, the media is compelled to construct an other, an opposition, in order to justify its self-appointed role, as watchdog for the common good of society.

Paletz and Entman (1981) suggest that the interaction between the media and the public consist of five functions: 'stabilise prevailing opinions, set priorities, elevate events and issues, sometimes change opinions, and ultimately limit options' (p.189). This is achieved within all mediums and genres, from the press through to feature films and soap operas, through to the news. There is however a hierarchy of representation within the diverse mediums and genres based upon both modality and aesthetics, for example the news is widely held to have more cultural currency than soap operas and the press is widely viewed as being of more significance than music.

What is problematic, however, is the issue of to what extent does the media re-present social reality and does this version of reality relate to society as a whole. Curran (1996) suggests that there primarily exist two schools of thought in relation to the media's ability to transpose the essence of a society. He suggests that the 'classical radical tradition' views the media as fostering a pseudo consciousness whereas the 'liberal tradition' subscribe to the notion that the media are representative of reality (p.124). In this so called post-modern era Curran's binary demarcation between left and right may be seen to be simplistic.

One of the principal problematic points relating to the mainstream media's ability to mirror reality and represent communities concerns the issue of the homogenisation of readers/audiences, (Williams, 1997). This aspect is vividly illustrated by the inclusion of

material from the Christian bible in Australian newspapers. In doing so the mainstream press suggest that the majority of Australian society is comprised of practicing Christians, negating the diversity of spirituality evident within the wider community. Furthermore the issue of difference between Protestant and catholic is masked.

In a sense the media's treatment of the audience as an indiscriminate mass, alludes to a sense of democracy. Yet as a number of critiques from the left have pointed out, the relationship between the mass media and democracy is one that is equally mythical, particularly in respect to the issues of access and agency, despite the rhetoric about airwaves being a public asset. As Hartley (1993) points out: "the public is not made up of a mass of equal individuals, but of groups with unequal sources of power" (p.55). Despite the perceived imbalance of power, the potential for social change through media advocacy is achievable. It is largely due to the inability of individuals to effect social change that collectivisation is necessitated, in order to redress the imbalance of power held by entrenched power elites within society. The mass media being but one of these. Groups such as Balga Action Group and People Against Pyrtton have successfully utilised their local Community Newspaper to raise wider public awareness and support. When wider community support became established larger media interests began covering the respective issues.

As Lippman (cited in Schudson, 1996, p.207) points out, the notion of a public, like that of community, is a construction. He points out that publics are constituted through active participation of like-minded individuals who seek to present a view pertaining to particular issues. In choosing not to be involved with a particular issue, whether it be in the form of social action or public opinion, the individual Lippman contends, is not a

naturalised part of the public per se. The notion that publics are the result of a collective of like minded individuals, who seek to express a particular view, serves as a pivotal justification for the role of the suburban press, as the suburban press serve as the forum for publicly based groups to publicise their concerns to the wider community.

Unlike the early bourgeois public sphere, the contemporary public sphere is compelled to counteract a plurality of public spheres. The rise of media advocacy and 'movement media' has produced a veritable cacophony of issue based voices ranging from gender and sexual based politics through to environmental and social welfare concerns. As Dahlgren (1991) points out, these groups create "alternative public spheres, an inverse complement to the mainstream media's audience segmentations" (p.14). Dahlgren's assertion is equally valid for the suburban free press. Despite the blatant capitalistic ethos, and attempts at mass coverage, the localised press do offer avenues of communication not possible in other forums. It does so because it purports to target specific locales, thus creating a reliance upon media dependence from social groupings within the specified target areas. Community groups and the local press are mutually benefited by such an arrangement with the groups gaining publicity and the press gaining content and substantiation. Both parties achieve this at a considerably low cost.

All forms of communication are reliant upon the interaction between sender and recipient. Despite the effort by commercial media to gain mass market appeal it is still confined to particular demographics, based upon aspects such as language, lifestyle and financial status. Pursehouse (1997) in exploring the issue of audience reception, points out that a particular text is consumed by individuals of diverse outlooks and that as such the meaning derived from these texts are not unified. As Jensen (1990) points out, while the

news is an institution that is potentially a tool for political influence and change, audience reception is not institutionalised and as such there exists the potential for contradiction between the reception of a message and its intended preferred reading, (p.200). It is likely that this is the reason why the Community group places a disclaimer on the guest editorial segment, stating: "The views expressed here are not necessarily those of Community Newspapers".

Paletz and Entman (1981) contend that, like audiences and potential receptions, there exist several types of media: Specialised, Prestige and Popular, that cater to four types of audience: Elite, Attentive, Mass and Apolitical. These factors exemplify the diversity of humanity and highlight the need for diversity within communication sectors. Whereas an individual may utilise the local press to establish what took place within their respective council meetings, another may use the paper solely to find out the results of a particular sporting event. Each of these uses highlight the interaction between the suburban press, proximity and establishment of sense of community. The localised press have the potential to inform citizens at a localised level, as opposed to national or transnational based media institutions. Indeed it could be argued that the localised press have the potential to best fulfil the role of public sphere. The principal reasons for this are the issues of proximity and relevance, unlike regional, national or global media which have no set jurisdictions in terms of what is covered. Citing a Monash University survey the Australian Suburban Newspaper Association (1996) states that over seventy percent of recipients of local press utilise the paper, in order to buy goods and services, and to remain abreast of events within their immediate vicinity.

Indeed one of the key factors relating to the survival of localised media is the ability to construct a sense of communal identity based upon locale. As Franklin & Murphy (1991) point out local media mirror the 'rites of passage' of the individual and the community (p.1). In relation to the former they cover aspects such as - births, marriages and deaths. In relation to the latter - municipal elections, fundraising events and social groupings. Franklin & Murphy go on to point out that there exists a mutual dependency between local media and the community at large, with the media supplying coverage for local sports and community groups in order to create and sustain a readership or audience, (p.191). The aspect of communal identity is best epitomised by the adoption of a name, such as Wanneroo Times or Canning Community.

As a bulletin board for local community groups, to raise public awareness regarding their respective interests, local papers facilitate public social interaction. The local paper serves as a forum for civic groups, community action groups and recreational/sporting bodies to publicise meetings and events. However the prime function of the local press is to establish a market, not for news and information, but for local business advertising expenditure. It is not uncommon for suburban papers to have in excess of seventy percent of content as advertising. Along with business advertising, they also carry municipal, State government and government authority advertising. As such its potential to fully serve as a public sphere, via its journalistic function, is subordinated to the pursuit of profit making. A prime example of this concerned the Guardian Express. In 1996 it emphatically stated its opposition to the construction of the Northbridge Tunnel ("Tunnel Vision", 1996) yet it was not adverse to accepting paid advertising from the publicity department of Main Roads Western Australia extolling the said virtues of having the project.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE JOURNALISTIC ROLE OF THE PRESS**

#### **3.1 - Journalism as a function of the public sphere:**

Historically one of the principal functions of the media has been that of an informative nature. Through its journalistic capacity, the press in particular, have served as a public forum for the raising of issues considered relevant to the wider public. As Dahlgren (1991) states:

The public sphere is a concept which in the context of today's society points to the issues of how and to what extent the mass media, especially in their journalistic role, can help citizens learn about their world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions, (p.1).

Just as the emergent bourgeois public sphere relied upon journals and the periodical press as a reference point for the discussing and debating of issues, contemporary publics rely, primarily, upon newspapers to keep abreast with issues considered relevant to the public interest. Habermas (1989) suggests that following the establishment of the bourgeois public sphere the press assumed the role of public forum from the coffee houses and salons, stating: "This shift can be clearly documented with regard to the transformation of the public sphere's preeminent institution the press" ( p.181).

As a genre, the news, in particular, serves to create a sense of community. As Jensen (1990) points out 'the news offers a generalised sense of community', (p.69). This aspect emerges in the day-to-day discourse between individuals, with reference to news items seen or heard on news bulletins, formulating conversational topics. Jensen further suggests that proximity of news items to particular audiences promotes a sense of empowerment,

albeit if it creates a false sense of security, (p.68). This may partly account for the claims of large readership numbers of the local press. The Community group claims an estimated readership in excess of 750 000 (Community Newspaper Group, n.d.), about half the audience of the entire Perth metropolitan area.

While news is presented as reality, it, like all forms of communication, is a mediated message. In exploring the discursive aspects of the news Hartley (1993) suggests that the news serves to support the status quo by framing items in an ideological framework. It is a view that Cohen and Young (1974) subscribe to. They suggest that the news is a cultural construct which selectively allow voices that can take part in public debate. And Curran (1996) asserts that news passes through a filtration process resulting in a 'cleansed residue fit to print' (p.138). These 'successive filters', he contends, serve to attempt to set the parameters of 'discourse and interpretation'. As part of the process of containing meaning, Curran further suggests that the news contains a narrative structure that presents a world view based upon an 'individual-moral' outlook in opposition to a 'collective-political' one, (p.141).

The privileging of the individual over the collective, it is suggested, serves as a tool of containment, in that it allows for the effacement of social ills through the absence of contextualisation by transposing underlying problems from political processes to that of individual choice. Subsequently this has the potential to diffuse threat to the status quo. As Curran (1996) points out, the lack of contextualisation serves to present the 'social world as natural and inevitable' (p.129) . Jensen (1990) concurs with this view suggesting that the news serves as an agent of legitimation, bolstering the status quo and legitimating the



social position of the citizen (p.68). This aspect is particularly evident in the coverage of perceived dissidence and crime.

In the global arena the Western media link foreign policy with heads of government. Mandella, Gaddafi, Yeltsin and Milosevich not only become representative of nations, they also become synonymous with their respective relationships with the United Nations and American foreign policy. In Australia Pauline Hanson becomes synonymous with national threat and Cathy Freeman with national pride. As Hartley (1993) points out, newsworthy items construct a sense of belonging in their mode of address which is directed at the notion of relevance to the 'national interest', yet addressed in terms of personal relevance (p.58). Yet notions of sense of belonging and relevancy are not exclusive aspects pertaining to the national or global, they are as relevant, if not more so, to the local due to the issue of immediacy.

The aspect of focusing upon the individual/moral as opposed to the collective/political is particularly evidenced within the local press' coverage of crime. The coverage often incorporates an identikit picture of the alleged perpetrator, with text outlining the alleged criminal act, thus entrenching the personal. While the coverage of crime is not problematic per se, what is problematic is the absence of interrogation as to the social causes of crime. Issues such as social equity, poverty and the effects of substance abuse are avoided. In doing so, local media: limit public debate; entrench dominant conservative views on criminality; promote insecurity, while simultaneously promoting the interests of private security firms; and, mask potential alternatives to addressing the issue of crime. To further entrench crime as an individual rather than a collective problem the local press actively encourage readers to take part in 'community policing' through the 'neighbourhood watch'

program. The media's penchant for inculcating collective values within individual personas serves to foster moral and social norms, simultaneously reinforcing the ethos of individualism. As an ideological tool the ethos of individualism diminishes the potential for collective action.

Golding (1986) points to another factor that highlights the news as an ideological, construct, as opposed to an apparent replication of reality. He refers to the hierarchy of news values employed in the construction of a news item. He suggests that dramatic qualities, visual attractiveness, importance ('as opposed to significance'), size, proximity, brevity, negativity and recency are the determinants that constitute newsworthiness (p.254).

Golding further suggests that global news agencies provide primary material to national gatekeepers who then select what they consider relevant to their respective markets. Just as it is argued that coverage of regional/local issues within the media were supplanted by a focus upon the national, so too it is argued, that there is an emergent 'embryonic international public sphere' that will effectively displace the significance of the nation/city state. His assertion contains considerable currency in relation to national and global mediascapes, as they aim for mass markets, yet in terms of local media it is unlikely as they are targeted at area-specific markets.

This is not to say that local issues or events do not attract international attention within the local press or that global issues do not directly impinge upon a particularly localised issue. For example, the issue of the future of the Kosovar refugees residing within Australia was discussed in the Community Newspapers ("Safe Haven", 1999). Pan-humanist issues can also feature in the local press, as was evidenced when the Community

News group editorialised the plight of Indonesians, due to the global economic situation at the time ("They Also", 1998). Given the increased globalisation of news gathering and dissemination, the role of community based media can be viewed as being imperative, as it serves to raise local issues pertinent to local communities, it may well begin to subsume the role of metropolitan and larger regional media interests if the trend to globalisation continues. Yet the potential for the local to compete against global interests appears to be highly unlikely.

The issue of the potential for global media interests to displace the local, was an issue that the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, raised with international news media companies recently. Annan was concerned that some coverage of the domestic affairs of countries was inadequate. Annan stated: "A typical American network that carried more than 1,000 international news reports in 1988, was down to less than 350 in 1996." He further suggested that CNN had gone as far as banning the word 'foreign' from their 'newsroom vocabulary', (United Nations, 1998).

The above lends credence to Golding's (1990) assertion that the news serves to sustain the status quo, in that the news actively avoid coverage of issues considered to be of lesser relevance and shun interrogation of potential alternatives to dominant discourses and ideologies, (p.259). Theoretically the journalistic role of the media should be the ideal forum to facilitate these roles. Yet aspects such as: the privileged position of the news; news conventions; agency and access; and, ownership of media and information institutions, further exacerbate the potential of news to serve as a forum for marginal or alternative viewpoints and issues to be represented. Above all, however, the prime determinant relating to the issue of newsworthiness is the issue of economics.

### **3.2 - News as Commodity:**

Due to the high modality that the news is presumed to have, it attracts a considerable amount of interest within the wider community. As such the potential for the news to generate advertising fits naturally with the profit motive of the commercial media sector. Such is the appeal of news that there has recently been a proliferation of broadcast channels dedicated to twenty-four hour news coverage, on a user-pays basis. This aspect, along with the current court action between the Seven and Nine networks in Australia, over who can lay claim to providing the best news service, succinctly highlight the increasing commodification of news presentation.

Whereas news may have once been considered as a form of public service, in that it supposedly informs the wider community of issues considered to be of relevance, increasingly it has become more concerned with marketing rather than informing, the informed citizen has become the commodified consumer. Ironically if the individual chooses not to be subjected to advertising then s/he is compelled to pay for the privilege by subscribing to a pay channel. Sreberny-Mohammadi et al (1997, p.xxi) assert, that entertainment-based content is increasingly being privileged over that of news and information-based programs. If this is correct then those with an interest in news may be compelled to utilise pay channels in order to gain a better depth of coverage.

Schudson (1996, p.197) suggests that the principal concern of commercial journalism is the establishment of a market, as opposed to the establishment of a community. This assertion is relevant to the journalistic role of the media, in particular the suburban press. As part of its marketing strategy the Community News group provides potential advertisers with a fact sheet outlining demographic details pertinent to the target area of

the advertiser. The fact sheet contains the following: audited circulation and readership numbers, by suburb; number of women and men for total area; number of home buyers and owners; number of grocery buyers; family dynamics; social status, blue/white collar workers; local government jurisdictions; ethnicity of populations; and, lifestyle statistics, for example sport and recreation pursuits ( Community Newspapers, n.d). Providing such detailed information takes the group's motto - 'Stay in touch with your Community' - to extremes. The individual's status is effectively displaced from citizen to consumer.

### **3.3 - The erosion of the political sphere:**

Despite the increased proliferation of news oriented services, critics have suggested that there appears to be a concerted effort by mainstream media outlets to depoliticize news content. Paletz and Entman (1981) suggest that institutional news values spectacle over substance and that there exists a concerted effort to avoid contextualisation of issues, which subsequently presents the status quo as the norm. Sparks (1988) suggests that news content is becoming questionable, in terms of perceived relevance and importance, and that as a result, this has led to a separation of the public from political processes.

The proliferation of tabloid journalism attests to this. These populist forums serve to exploit content of a sensationalist nature over content of substantive public importance. Often the content is comprised of the private actions of public figures who allegedly transgress social norms. Increasingly soft news is presented as hard news. An example of this is the wide coverage of US President, Bill Clinton's, marital infidelity. Such coverage detracts from issues of greater importance and has the potential to cause the wider public to view politics, politicians and political processes with contempt, which can subsequently lead to the resignation of the potential for change. At times the content of the tabloid

press, talkback radio, news bulletins and current affairs programs can make the local press appear to be an informative forum.

Dahlgren (1991) contends that mainstream media institutions actively supplant political content with entertainment based content. He states: "One can say that generally there is a weakening of the serious media which have attempted to serve as the national fora.", (p.13). What is problematic, however, is what constitutes serious content. Some would suggest that suburban papers 'are a very light read' (Franklin & Murphy, 1991, p.99), whereas others would contend that they are a significant part of the community, providing a forum that would allow for the voicing of issues that may not otherwise be canvassed.

Curran, along with Edward and McChesney (1997), point out that from the early 20th century, partisan press publications increasingly declined, largely due to lack of advertising revenue. Curran suggests that this led to a decline in the number of overall publications and subsequently heralded the advent of the popular press. He further suggests that the rise of the populist press promoted the notion of the 'national interest', along with the promotion of individualist ideology (1978, p.72). This is an aspect that still pervades the mainstream commercial media sector. In regard to the suburban press it is less evident, due to its ethos of focusing upon the communal rather than on the individual.

Schudson (1996) suggests that the mass media are increasingly more inclined to present entertainment as news, (p.179). Schudson's assertion carries considerable weight in light of the mass media's increased focus on celebrity status as a substantive newsworthiness determinant. Lee (1992) concurs with this view suggesting that Habermas viewed the erosion of the bourgeois public sphere as, "the invasion of the lifeworld by the systemworld; the lost historical unity is replaced by a unity of vision" (p.414). Lee's point

highlights the pivotal role of community-based media, in particular the press, as these media are tied to the immediacy of locale and day-to-day relevancy.

Habermas (1989) suggests that the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere principally came about as a forum for the debating of political issues within the wider community, however he further suggests that this was short lived due to the approbation of the public sphere by the commercial press, with editorial content becoming subject to the pursuit of profit (p.222). This assertion is given added currency in light of the controversy surrounding the Australian broadcasting sector regarding the alleged acceptance of money, by radio broadcasters, from business interests in return for favourable publicity and avoidance of adverse publicity. Connell (1991) suggests that one of the primary differences between the early bourgeois public sphere and the contemporary model has been a shift in focus from matters of public relevance to that of matters of a private nature. He further suggests that as a result of this, matters of political relevance are being diminished, which subsequently has the potential 'to lock people into the private sphere and blocks a transition to the public one' (p.236). While Connell's assertion has merit, particularly in relation to a large segment of the mainstream commercial media, arguably there are forums that it does not apply to - for example freelance journalists such as John Pilger, community radio and television outlets, internet sites and, to a lesser degree local press. These forums, with the exception of the Internet, are not compelled to be all encompassing and as such maintain a sense of focus, in essence they construct a sense of publicness that is lacking in the larger media operators.

Price (1995) contends that globalisation is synonymous with the depoliticisation of the public sphere, as it effectively bypasses the statutory and regulatory functions of nation

states. He suggests that the State actively seeks to counteract media institutions from destabilising the status quo through the implementation of regulatory constraints (p.17). This assertion can be viewed as simplistic, as often governments and media interests enter into agreements of mutual interest, the arrangement between the Chinese government and News Corporation, whereby News Corporation gave an undertaking not to include the BBC's world service as part of its Star satellite broadcasting is a case in point. However as Wilson (1989) points out transnational capital has served to eradicate area specific public spheres by threatening State communication systems that operate on a public service charter. Increasingly, on a global scale, there has been evidenced a decline in the public broadcasting sector. Public service criteria has become secondary to the ethos of a free market economy, this has led to a large number of public broadcasters establishing themselves as corporations. Wilson further points out that the diminishing number of global agencies that provide news and information has further exacerbated the potential for the diversification of public input. This, it is argued, has subsequently led to an erosion of democratic principles in that it has limited the number of potential viewpoints and consequently serves to maintain the social order of the day. This aspect is best encapsulated by the differences in opinion between some influential Western countries and UNESCO over the flow of news and information on a global scale, with UNESCO arguing for more equity for developing countries, a suggestion that the Western interests find difficult to contemplate.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ACCESSING THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

#### **4.1 - Access and Agency:**

While the mainstream media is seen to be highly problematical, in terms of access, agency and representation, other forms of communication are viewed as being more akin to Habermas's notion of the role of communication within a participatory democracy, ie. the 'public sphere'. McQuail (cited in Golding, Murdock & Schlesinger, 1986) points to the potential of the 'new media' to offer, "diversity ... {and} allow more space to emerging interest groups and issues and offer audiences more opportunities for choice and participation", (p.11).

Curran (1977) points out that when the 'voice of dissent' is articulated it is within a predetermined discursive paradigm that has 'little or no opportunity to substitute one of its own' ( p.111). Cirino (1974) suggests that the contemporary communication system inherently prevents ideas outside of the mainstream from being articulated due to the social power structures that dominate communication channels (p.53). In the twenty-five years since he stated this, his assertion has gained further credence, particularly in light of the fact that on the global scale there has been increased growth within the communications sector, though the number of companies involved in the sector has diminished, (Franklin & Murphy, 1991).

The issues of access and agency are a key component of academic media analysis, particularly in relation to the institutionalised discursive aspect of the public sphere. One of the fundamental arguments of critics of the mainstream media is the lack of potential for

subordinate groups to have access to voice their views within the mainstream media.

Dahlgren and Sparks (1991) suggest that Habermas' theory of the public sphere is problematical in that accessibility is restricted to those who hold the economic and political power within society. This, they contend, effectively silences marginalised voices. While this is a valid point in terms of institutionalised global media interests it does not take into account the effectiveness of localised commercial media and community based media in terms of access for issue-based groups. The two are interdependent with both being reliant upon an audience and avenues of communication.

One of the principal critiques of the mass media is that while it espouses the ideals of a participatory democracy it establishes the discursive paradigms relating to issues of public interest and importance. In short the media largely determine what content will constitute the public interest then selectively scrutinises participants, hence the term 'gatekeepers'. In so doing a majority of the populace are effectively politically excommunicated. As Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1997) point out, there exists a symbiotic relationship between participation in the political process and participation in the communication process (p.228).

Contemporary western society has become an increasingly mediated world, a site of contestation, of the construction of consent, this has largely established a traffic in communication that is for the most part one way. While the infrastructure - the airwaves - are supposedly public property, the flow of communication is policed by private interests. Schiller (1986) suggests that it is not just the mass media that has obstructed access to public debate, he states that both private industry and national governments have fostered news and information as a commodity that is accessible on a user-pays basis. The

information superhighway has become a toll road, thus making the term 'fourth estate' problematic. Citing Habermas Thompson (1995) points out that contemporary public discourse has experienced a colonisation by privatised interests which seek to speak on behalf of the wider community (p.132). Thompson (1995, p.73) points out that the very nature of the early bourgeois public sphere excluded matters of a private nature, as the public was privileged over the private. Thompson further asserts that it was the western social and political discursive aspects of the public and private dichotomy that set the two apart as separate entities, with the public being associated with transparency or 'openness' and 'visibility', and the private as being associated with concealment or 'secrecy' and 'invisibility', (p.123). The provision of mediated messages within the mainstream media has become the vehicle whereby private interests drive public debate and where public policy is formulated in the privacy of cabinet meetings, caucuses and boardrooms, thus limiting public input.

Curran (1996) asserts that the active use of institutionalised voices serves as an ideological tool that reinforces a lack of equity in the market place of ideas. Citing Hall, Curran states:

News media ... accord accredited status to the 'powerful' as news sources, and allow them to dictate the 'primary' interpretation of an event or topic. This interpretation then 'commands the field' in subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference within which all further coverage of debate takes place. This then exerts pressure on subordinate groups to situate themselves within this, (p.133).

Despite this there are occasions when alternative viewpoints do successfully utilise the media to bring about change. A prime example of this was the successful campaign

undertaken by the Tasmanian Wilderness Society's blockade of the Franklin River. As part of the campaign, boats were chartered by the Wilderness Society to transport journalists to the protest site in order to ensure maximum exposure (Wilson, 1989, p.179).

Sylow (1994) points out that the Franklin river issue significantly impacted upon the way that the Tasmanian media covered environmental issues. She suggests that the relationship between the press and environmental groups has progressed from one of hegemony, then to one of a parasitic nature, and finally to one of symbiosis. Each stage being the result of increased public awareness and concern, for the environment. Sylow contends that as a result of this the press was compelled to reassess the importance of environmental issues due to the decline in circulation, (p.209).

Paradoxically, while the majority of the mainstream media operate within the capitalist/consumerist ethos, it is heavily reliant upon public consensus in relation to the message that they disseminate. If public opinion does not equate with the preferred meaning espoused by a media outlet, economics will dictate that in order to maintain a readership or audience the message be reassessed to address public consensus.

Golding et al (1986) point out that the media are in an ideal position to accommodate dissenting voices. They suggest that dissenting voices are portrayed as disparate and not unified, as such they are not perceived as a threat. Paletz and Entman (1981) point out that the notion of journalistic objectivity works against dissenting voices. They suggest that there exists an inherent need within the media for contending voices, and that as such, to not provide contending voices would have the potential for calls of lack of balance or blatant media advocacy.

Downing (1990) notes that the vertical structure of the mass media, with its top-down flow, prevents potential for the citizen to participate with the mainstream media regarding matters of importance within the community, with the exception of writing letters to the editor. Arguably talkback radio is one other forum. Ericson et al (1989) while also suggesting that the media limits participation, point out that there exists a symbiotic relationship between the mainstream media and dissenting voices, as does Dennis McQuail (1989). They suggest that the media provide limited access to public debate through forums such as letters to the Editor. This they assert serves to legitimate the role of the press as a fourth estate. Yet as Ericson (1989) points out letters to the editor, and talkback radio for that matter, only offer a token involvement for the wider community. Without contentious issues, individuals and groups, the mass media may be compelled to cover issues of greater relevance, abandoning sensationalism and cheque book journalism. Yet as much as the media rely upon dissension and diversion to construct and sustain their view of the world, opponents of the mainstream depend upon the media to relay their views to a wider audience.

As part of the construction of an idealised world, the media establish a form of social Darwinism, through the establishment of social ranking. As an example of this Ericson (1989) points out, a 'hierarchy of credibility' is established through the selection of letters based upon the perceived status of the writer (p.342). For example a Bishop would be preferred over a Priest or a Matron over that of a nurse. Ericson suggests that this further legitimates the role of the media as it has the potential to present them as the idealised forum for those with authority. Likewise those in a position of authority with a message to impart would be more inclined to gain access to outlets with the largest popularity, further

entrenching the aspect of legitimation. Yet it also highlights the imbalance of access to communicative outlets. Whereas persons of perceived importance actively seek, and are sought by, populist media personalities those of lesser community standing or obscurity find the same access to the above difficult, if not impossible. As Golding (1986) suggests mainstream media organisations actively seek material from prominent institutionalised corporate and government sources.

Schulman (1990) points out that the media actively limit the number of players who take part in public discussion. He suggests that public debate usually mirrors the two party political system in that debate usually consists of two opposing arguments which subsequently dismiss other varying viewpoints, and simplifies issues. At the global level this is particularly evident in the coverage of armed conflict with one side being portrayed as aggressor and the other as defender of idealistic values. What the media often neglect is the inclusion of viewpoints of third countries, particularly those who support the perceived aggressor. Paletz and Entman (1981) concur with this view, however they state that this is fostered in order to establish instability. They suggest that in doing so this often effectively benefits the dominant power by presenting them as the norm. This is further achieved through concerted efforts on the part of the media to highlight differences in opinion between coalitions of groups who, while they share opposition to a particular view, have differing outlooks on how to achieve their goals. The current debate regarding Australia becoming a republic is a prime example of this.

Within Australia when reference is made to the federal or state 'opposition' by mainstream Australian media institutions, almost without exception, invariably they refer to either the Australian Labor Party or the Liberal National coalition - whichever the case

may be. In doing so the media institutions efface the fact that, within the contemporary Australian political sphere, the 'opposition' can be constituted by several political parties and independent politicians. While the suburban press do likewise it does to a lesser extent, primarily because its content is not as contentious as that of larger commercial interests. Given that the rationale of the suburban press is to market local business and maintain a sense of community, in that order, its content is principally governed by its relevance to the immediate community it serves. To a degree this serves to allow for the avoidance of issues that have the potential to cause substantial division within the wider community. The lack of coverage of issues such as the implementation of a Goods and Services tax within Australia elicited little coverage within the Community group of newspapers, despite the affect it would have upon small business and individuals alike. However at times the suburban press is compelled to cover divisive issues due to the importance of the issue to the community in question. The Northbridge Tunnel is one such issue, however it is more an exception rather than the rule. Despite this the suburban press is ideally suited to serve as a forum for groups within the wider community to gain access to publicity. As such it is more inclusive than the metropolitan, national and international press sectors. As Garnham (cited in Green & Guinery, 1994, p. 114) asserts, there exists an inherent need for equitable access for members of a society to both public communication and debate in order to facilitate a democratically based society.

#### **4.2 - Sources for causes:**

Throughout the latter half of this century there has been a phenomenal rate of growth within the Public Relations industry. Increasingly this industry is involved in the dissemination of messages for public consumption, on behalf of private interests. One of

the primary tools employed in undertaking this task has been the use of press releases, both in written and electronic forms. The use of such material has made problematic the role of the media as an impartial arbiter that functions as an institutional watchdog for and on behalf of the wider community. As Schiller (1986, p.31) points out, the journalistic role of the media has become increasingly problematical due to the 'avalanche of managed material'. He further suggests, that as a result, the ability to interrogate this information is often lacking, subsequently leading to a lack of accountability, (p.35). Thompson (1995) (p.74) equates the issue of 'public relations management' with the 'refeudalization' of the public sphere by, and on behalf of, powerful elites within society. Of equal concern is the aspect of the blurring of the boundary between actual news and manufactured news in the form of public relations material.

Zawawi (1994) cites former President of Public Relations Industry of Australia, Bill Sherman, as suggesting that up to thirty per cent of the content in the daily press is sourced from press releases. Furthermore, it is suggested that the business section is comprised of sixty to ninety per cent of Public Relations material on any given day (p.67). In an empirical study of the uses of press releases by the print media Zawawi further noted that a large proportion of press releases presented only one view in relation to a particular issue, despite this they were still utilised by the press, (p.70).

Franklin and Murphy (1991) point out that the free local press is particularly receptive to the use of public relations material, with a great deal of material being provided by local government sources (p.18). The extent of the use of such information led to Franklin and Murphy to refer to public relations personnel as a 'fifth estate'. They further suggest that economics is the prime determinant relating to the take up rate of public relations material



by the local press as the local press does not have the same journalistic resources as the larger mainstream publications. However they point out that the same applies to local radio, with local authorities supplying pre-packaged cassettes including interviews relating to topical issues, which provide a 'free filler', (p.20). Franklin and Murphy refer to the use of material supplied by local authorities to the local press as 'information subsidies' as the cost of preparing such material is borne by the public, (p.100).

While Franklin and Murphy justifiably view the dependence of the suburban press upon press releases as being problematic, it is worth acknowledging that community based action groups utilise the same avenues of communication to gain wider public awareness. Arguably without such access both community based groups and the suburban press would find their respective roles diminished. The groups would be hard pressed to find another suitable forum for disseminating their message and the press' role as a viable community based informational conduit would be substantially depleted.

Unlike its larger counterparts the suburban and regional press sectors can be viewed as being similar to the partisan press that preceded the increased commercialisation of the mainstream press. Whereas the commercialisation of the mainstream press facilitated the element of journalistic objectivity (Herman & McChesney, 1997, p.192), the suburban and regional sectors primarily are subjective by nature due to its large dependence upon press releases which do not mask their origins. With the advent of journalistic objectivity came the potential to avoid the differentiation between journalistic practice and the advancement of personal agendas. At least in the suburban and regional papers there is more possibility for the recognition of vested interest.

### **4.3 - The global/local dichotomy:**

Paradoxically, with the advent of globalised media outlets there has been a proliferation of localised media in the form of localised press and community television and radio stations. Sreberni-Mohammadi & Mohammadi (1997) suggest that these mediascapes serve as forums for the disenfranchised within society offering arenas for the voicing of opinions not usually catered for by the mainstream media, thus highlighting 'the vibrancy of a democratic society', (p.221). For the most part these forums operate outside of the global-centrist axis, expounded by transnational companies (TNC's).

The issues of centralisation and globalisation are key issues within contemporary communication analysis. One theoretical aspect is the notion of cores and peripheries which tends to place mediascapes within hierarchal parameters. One of the key problems of this theoretical tenet is that it is governed by the subjectivity of the individual, what may be seen as central by one person may not equate with assessment of marginality by another. The consensus, amongst communication and social analysts, appears to be that global media constitute the central aspect of the communication sector with regional and localised media comprising the marginal. Focus upon the dichotomous relationship between the centre/periphery dynamic has produced a widely accepted view that the periphery is subordinate to the centre.

The majority of academics view the relationship between local and global communications as problematic, suggesting that there exists the potential to eradicate regional diversity, just as it was argued that centralisation within the Australian media sector served to eradicate urban differentiation. Whereas the global primarily addresses international issues, and the national state issues, the regional and local - for the most part

- focus upon their respective demographics. Unless it is extraordinary, the global and the national mediascapes view local incidents and issues as of little, if any significance. However this has not prevented global media companies from increasingly buying a controlling interest in local press companies.

Evidence of the privileging of the national over the regional, within the Australian mediascape, became evident with the spread of networking across the whole of the mainstream media industries. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, closed its state-based current affairs programs replacing them with a national program, broadcast from Sydney; the TEN network broadcasts its weekend news bulletins from Melbourne to the rest of the country; newspaper content is compiled from a centralised location before being digitally transferred to regional areas where local content is then inserted. Indeed since the early eighties there has been a progressive move toward centralisation on a global scale. Satellites have provided the technology that has changed the relationship between sense of community and locale. As Barr (1994) points out, satellites make it possible for Australian broadcasters to broadcast from offshore, inserting localised news, current affairs and advertising to suit (p.96).

The trend to centralisation has also substantially altered Australia's suburban press sector. The trend for collectivisation of independent free papers, and regional papers, by multi-nationals is being undertaken on a global scale. Franklin and Murphy (1991, p.12) point out that in excess of fifty percent of all free papers within Britain are published by ten companies. They further point out that increasingly large companies are buying out independent titles creating stables of free papers that formerly operated as small entities. By way of illustration they point out that British media giant, Thompson Regional

Newspapers, grew from 13 titles in 1983 to over 100 titles in 1989, expanding their distribution by over four million copies, (p.87).

It is perhaps the press sector, of all media institutions, that is cause for the greatest alarm, due to its perceived role as the primary agenda-setting forum. It is often to the press that other mediums refer to, to gauge what newsworthy. Also of significance is the potential for greater contextualisation in the press due to economic and time constraints that effect content. With aspects such as - economics, ownership, demographics and the issue of the supply of news items - the dynamic between centralisation, the press and notions of public interest is cause for concern. Distance has the potential to diminish focus.

In Australia News Corporation has a controlling interest in the majority of the regional and free local press throughout Australia. In 1998 News Corporation's interest in the regional and local free press involved 84 publications: New South Wales - Eighteen; Victoria - thirty; Queensland - twenty-five; and, South Australia - eleven. In 1999 News Corporation took a controlling interest in the Community Newspapers group in Western Australia, in partnership with WA Newspapers. The 51 per cent interest in the Community Newspaper group gave Murdoch's News Corporation a controlling interest in 99 regional and local press titles throughout Australia. While the 99 publications are aimed at specific areas, the notion of the fostering of a sense of community by the respective papers, is not without question, due to centralisation and collectivisation.

Despite the contention that the thirteen publications of Community newspapers serve to promote a sense of community, a substantial amount of content - in particular advertising copy - is produced at the head office of the Community group in Northbridge, for all

thirteen publications. The same office produces all of the photographs for the group through the use of digital scanners (Community News Group, n.d.). This brings into question the extent to which the respective publications actually connect with citizens. Likewise the aspect of collectivisation calls into question the aspect of commitment on the part of the suburban and regional press. With each title directed at a collective of suburbs/towns one questions the potential for an equitable amount of substantial coverage for each suburb. It can also inversely prevent wider debate.

An example of the potential to limit wider public debate concerned the issue of the Northern Freeway Bypass in Perth. Each local paper centred its coverage based upon perceived public opinion, within their respective areas of coverage. By way of example, in Northbridge there was widespread opposition to the project and the respective local paper, *Guardian Express*, adopted an oppositional stance. In Belmont, however, there appeared to be widespread support for the project and the local paper, *Southern Gazette*, subsequently undertook a less objectionable stance. Indeed by way of comparison the *Guardian Express* provided a substantial greater amount of coverage of the issue than the *Southern Gazette*, however this was possibly due to the fact that the issue was of more news value for the former, rather than the avoiding of the contentious by the latter.

The aspects of collectivisation, centralisation and lack of contextualisation are indicative of the general element of centricity inherent in the globalisation of the media sector. Prior to the interest in regional and community based press News Corporation was principally interested in the global mediascape, as is evidenced in the transnational group's interest in: nationally based newspapers in Australia, Britain and America; interests in satellite and broadcast television in America, Europe and Australasia; and, companies involved in the

global dissemination of data and information services. While News Corporation controls a substantial proportion of the global media, communication and information sectors there still exists a substantive room for expansion within the global arena.

In light of this, a pertinent question would be why would News Corporation tie up a significant amount of resources in pursuing smaller media concerns? The answer to this is simply that it is a concerted effort to monopolise the news and information market, which allows for; greater market share, less competition for the advertising dollar and the potential for further centralisation of the media product. Inasmuch as corporate concerns override any notion of community philanthropy, the journalistic role of the mainstream media cannot be viewed as a public service but as a cultural commodity, along with all other media products. Consumerism takes precedence over citizenship, collectivisation over diversity. As such there is a need for viable alternative media to serve as forums for a more inclusive arena for public debate.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Until recently much academic analysis has suggested that localised media is under threat of becoming displaced by globalised mediascapes. In terms of ownership this aspect has currency, yet to suggest that localised media would cease to exist as a public sphere altogether would be misleading, as Hannerz (1997) points out, to assume that there will not be a market for local media would be somewhat misguided, despite the decreasing number of media companies in the global arena, ( p.15). As Herman & McChesney (1997) and Sreberny- Mohammadi (1997) have pointed out, there still exists a continuing growing community media sector with the suburban and regional press constituting a viable part of this sector. The potential for the suburban and regional presses to continue to serve localised communities will continue because of the especial relationship that is governed by immediacy, what is questionable however, is to what extent content will be affected by global interests. It is due to this scenario that critiques of the media, (Wilson, 1989) (Ericson et al, 1989), advocate the need for channels of communication that allow access for the diversification of media outlets. The suburban press has the capacity to be one such channel, allowing for the opportunity for groups to gain access to wider publicity that may not otherwise be available.

While the suburban press may not be perceived as being as important as *The Australian* or *The West Australian*, it serves as an important forum for community based groups and issues. In terms of relevancy its ability to generate considerable advertising from local business can be seen to be indicative of its demographic reach. The viability of the suburban press, as an avenue of communication, is also evident in the interest shown by TNC's. As such the suburban press can be seen to be of significant importance.

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