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“The Distinctive Nature of Making News
Online: A Study of News Production at
latimes.com and *salon.com*”

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PhD Thesis

City University London

School of Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an inside, in-depth look at how journalists at *latimes.com* and *salon.com* came together to create content for their websites over a six month period. It vividly unveils the process of newsmaking by journalists working for organisations whose output is the world wide web. It uses mixed method case studies of two US-based news websites, *latimes.com* and *salon.com*, to show how both parentage and net native sites construct a news story. The case studies include direct observation, in-depth interviews and content analysis to deconstruct the process of covering the 2008 Presidential election. The thesis works around Brian McNair's cultural chaos paradigm (2006) which explains the emergent nature of news online and the lack of control by any environmental factors that seek to affect its outcome.

The thesis begins by outlining the four crucial changes which occur online that are redefining major tenets of journalism both practically and theoretically. It goes on to explain not only how online news has become a destination for many around the world but also why these two online news websites have found a niche for themselves on the Web.

The findings of this research outline not only how the newsmaking process exists in these two environments but also how they are creating a new type of convotelling journalism. The 2008 US Presidential election is used as a story to show the unstructured and chaotic network that now exists in how news is gathered, produced, and disseminated online. It goes on to explain the multitude of changing relationships journalists are grappling with as this convotelling newsmaking process occurs. The contrast between the net native and parentage website is dissected to show just how the two sites vary even though their goal is similar. The research concludes making an argument for a hybrid model of journalism being done online that is distinctive in nature.

Chapter 1-Introduction

Journalists have found themselves in the midst of extreme change as the Internet has altered many of the rules that guided their work for so long. The constant pressure of ‘the deadline’ that often defined news and dictated their day-to-day routine is now altered. The authoritative voice they held for so long in the geographic region or national arena they worked within has slowly disappeared. The way people communicate, use and share information has been redefined by the World Wide Web.

Above all, the journalist’s job has been eroded by the economic fabric that held it together in the United States for decades. According to the Pew Research Institute’s 2009 State of the News Media report:

The number of Americans who regularly go online for news, by one survey, jumped 19% in the last two years: in 2008 alone traffic to the top 50 news sites rose 27%. Yet it is now all but settled that advertising revenue—the model that financed journalism for the last century—will be inadequate to do so in this one. Growing by a third annually just two years ago, online ad revenue to news websites now appears to be flattening: in newspapers it is declining...Journalism, deluded by its profitability and fearful of technology, let others outside the industry steal chance after chance online. By 2008, the industry had finally begun to get serious. Now the global recession has made that harder. This is the sixth edition of our annual report on the State of the News Media in the United States. It is also the bleakest (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009).

Online journalism is not only changing the economic underpinnings of journalism it is also reshaping how large news gathering operations have created and disseminated information for decades. It was always a complicated process involving many actors and technical factors. Now, those are exemplified online with the addition of additional actors and technical features that never played into news construction in the past.

These changes have led to the rise of new voices in journalism who decided to make the World Wide Web their primary platform for distributing news. This thesis looks at two news gathering organisations trying to find a place in this new landscape which is being reshaped and redefined by a medium with few rules and many new journalists.

1.1 THE PROJECT

All of the challenges to journalistic professionalism discussed here would benefit from more rigorous documentation than can be found in the trade press, which is where much of the investigation and discussion of online journalism is currently being conducted. Also needed is an exploration of the workings of online newsrooms, including their organisational structures, work routines, staff interactions and ethical decision-making processes. In short, a thorough exploration of the sociology of online news work would be valuable not only because it would enhance our understanding of online journalism but also because it would enhance our understanding of the profession as a whole and its changing role in our changing society (Singer 2003: 157).

This study seeks to address the issues associated with journalists creating a news product in an online environment. As mentioned in the quote above by Jane Singer, there is a need to explore how online newsrooms work and how this is changing our understanding of what journalism is and will be in the future. This

research hopes to bridge this gap and also to make several distinctions about types of journalism and what is changing in the field of research.

The term ‘online journalism’ is a vague one and encompasses many different types of websites as well as different types of journalism. Thus, a clear set of definitions must be made before embarking on trying to understand what is happening. This thesis does not attempt to get into the blogger vs. journalist debate nor the citizen journalist vs. real journalist but simply aims to look at news organisations that are producing material for the Web.

Mark Deuze (2003) lays out four different types of news media that exist online. The first is the mainstream news sites. These sites, according to Deuze, are the more widespread form of production online and resemble much of what is found on television or in print. These sites (such as *cnn.com* or *bbcnews.com*) are the ones traditionally favoured by academics wanting to study what is occurring online such as the State of the News Media report from Pew Research Center and Goldsmith Media Group’s Spaces of the News Study¹.

The second is the index and category sites which essentially are a hub of links to existing journalism sites and rarely do their own journalism (Arora 2006).

Popular sites (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007) such as Google News, Yahoo News and even the Drudge Report are included in this category. Thirdly, the meta-comment and analysis sites are generally sites about news media and media issues in general. They are seen to be watchdogs for the media. These

¹ Details of these studies can be found at <http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2009/index.asp> AND <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-research-programme/project1.php>

include, but are not limited to sites such as Poynter Institute² and the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism³. Finally, there are the share and discussion sites. According to Deuze: 'Online journalism utilizes this potential of the internet in that it facilitates platforms for the exchange of ideas, stories and so forth' (2003:211).

These distinctions help when trying to sort through the massive amounts of information about online journalism. This study is primarily concerned with the first group of news media that exist online, the mainstream news website. There is another division to make however, within this category. This division is between what I deem to be the *parentage* newssite (Thurman 2007) and the *net native* newssite (MacGregor 2007). The parentage newssite is one that is operated by a newsroom and news organisation that exists in an offline form. These would include most of the websites that are currently being studied by researchers. The net native news site exists only online. It may be owned by a larger media company but is not run by a newsroom that exists in an offline capacity. This study aims to try and understand how both a parentage news site and net native news site are constructing news through highlighting the differences and similarities between the two.

The study will use the four key changes in journalism that have occurred online (see Chapter 2) to inform research questions and outline the project. The first is the redefined relationship between the journalist and the user which has created a new flow of information. The second is the actual process of making news which

² <http://www.poynter.org>

³ <http://www.journalism.org>

has been altered by the redefinition of deadlines, spatial problems that no longer exist, and even journalist's relationships with how they get information. The third change is the multi-platform nature of the Web that greatly transforms the format constraints of other forms of journalism. The final change is the loss of influence by journalists in terms of gatekeeping, agenda setting and defining what is 'news'.

Using these changes as a guide, the following research questions were applied to this project:

1. Does Brian McNair's Cultural Chaos theory apply to the environment created in online newsmaking?
2. How are the relationships in creating online journalism new or different from what came before?
3. Are there marked differences between parentage news websites and net native news websites in the construction of a news story and its output on the Web?
4. To what extent (and on what levels) can we conclude that the journalism that exists online is different from its offline counterparts?

1.2 THE NEWS WEBSITES STUDIED

The research tries to examine these issues through in-depth case studies of two US-based news websites. The goal is to show how a news operation works and exists when creating journalism for an online user. The two websites selected were *latimes.com*, which was born out of the Pulitzer Prize winning newspaper *The Los Angeles Times* and *salon.com*, which was created by former newspaper journalists as a net native source of news as the Web began to spread in the mid-90s. The two sites were chosen because of their prominence in the world of online journalism (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007), their geographic locations and because they both were willing to open their doors and let me observe the production of their news.

1.3 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before beginning to explore online journalism, one of the fundamental problems is defining exactly what journalism is. This definitional predicament has been one of the biggest drawbacks when studying journalism, journalists and others who make ‘news’. The definition was never agreed upon by the academic community (nor the popular culture) and is still being debated today (Deuze 2005). The most concise definition has been provided by Brian McNair in his ‘Sociology of Journalism’. According to McNair, journalism is ‘any authored text, in written, audio or visual form, which claims to be (i.e. presented to its audience as) a truthful statement about, or record of, some hitherto unknown (new) feature of the actual, social world’ (1998:4). This definition incorporates

many of the central tenets of journalism as it has been understood in western democracies: objectivity (truthfulness), newness, authorship and ideology as well as actuality.

This thesis seeks not only to understand these institutions through empirical findings but also to test the cultural chaos theory of media presented by Brian McNair (2003, 2006). McNair sees journalism as influenced by a variety of factors that move us away from the control paradigm that has dominated theoretical understandings of journalism for so long. In that, cultural chaos is a direct challenge to the dominant critical theories that have underpinned many of the studies of newswork.

McNair sees the current model of media as non-linear with constant feedback and adaptation as new cycles evolve. The chaos theory implies an ecological or environmental model of media production. In this way, causes of content are present somewhere in the ‘fog of events but difficult to separate and disentangle in specific cases’ (2006:48). This theory of chaos, as argued by McNair, is primarily demonstrated on a macro-level. He goes through several primary tenets that have altered the control paradigm and lead to a chaotic media environment. These tenets include: the expansion of technology, the erosion of political borders, the dissolution of long-established social and cultural boundaries as well as, the hybridization of the field of journalism.

The research done in this thesis cannot test the entire theory developed by McNair. It rather provides a micro-analysis of one facet of this changing media

landscape, the work of the online journalist. It takes the chaos theory and tests to see if it explains what is going on in news organisations as journalists create online news. The larger implications of this theory related to media generally are left out of this argument in order to focus purely on the work of the journalist within these news organisations.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THESIS

This thesis provides not only a dissection of these two online news organisations but also, to a lesser extent, tries to touch on what is happening in the world of news and journalism due to the proliferation of the Internet. Chapter 2 begins with a look at how journalism has been theoretically framed and understood. The chapter then explains the paradigm of ‘Cultural Chaos’ presented by Brian McNair (2006), which this thesis is theoretically based upon. It goes on to take the theoretical premise of chaos to show what is changing at the micro-level of newsmaking. It highlights new literature and changes that are happening to journalism as it goes online. It contrasts the traditionally understood newsmaking process of journalism with the online one that exists now.

The methodology of this study is highlighted in Chapter 3. This chapter breaks down the reasons behind the ethnographic case studies and how the research was carried out. It draws heavily from Robert Yin’s book (1989) on case study design.

Chapter 4 begins with a historical look at how the proliferation of the World Wide Web throughout the United States and the United Kingdom coincided with particular news events that lead to the Web becoming a source of news and information for millions. It shows the simultaneous progress of Internet technology with news websites. It goes on to describe events including 9/11 and the Iraq war that gave online news organisations an audience that didn't exist twenty years ago. It sets up the importance of studying online journalism as one of the only platforms for journalism that is growing.

It will be shown in the subsequent data chapters the changes in the way journalists work in this new online environment through these two case studies. I first give a profile of each news organisation in Chapter 5 in order to understand the reasons behind why these websites were set up and how they are structured economically. The chapter argues that although both are online news organisations, the economic makeup is vastly different and the lack of financial success in both cases leaves a chaotic environment in which to create news.

Chapter 6 is a detailed analysis of 'making news' in both online environments. A new form of *convotelling* journalism is introduced to understand what the goal of the journalists is in creating a news product for an online audience. The chapter also provides an in-depth look at how news is created from its inception to dissemination on each website. Chapter 7 proceeds to show through ethnographic research how they both covered different elements of the 2008 Presidential race. I look at both specific storylines (*salon.com*) as well as events

(*latimes.com*) such as the party conventions, where official nominations for President are made, that occurred during the time I spent in these newsrooms.

The redefinition of relationships, both within the newsroom and outside of it, is the subject of Chapter 8. The chapter breaks down the relatively new two-way communication between the journalist and the ones consuming the journalism through looking at different platforms the sites provide. It looks at the way the different journalists now see their users and consumers of their online product. The section also highlights the redefined power relationships within the newsrooms, which not only change the makeup of the news-producing structure but also break down many strongly held notions of how journalism is made. The source/journalist relationship is also explored in this chapter. The relationship from the journalist perspective is still very similar to what has been found in older studies but the power of the source to appeal directly to the user online, changes the dynamics between the two quite a bit. Finally, the chapter analyzes the most significant change that has come with the advent of the blog.

The final data chapter (9) takes a comparative look at the net native site versus the parentage site. It breaks down the five areas that make the two types of news websites markedly different. These differences include size and communication style. The branding and political bent is the third thing that is a disparity between the two types of sites with one (*latimes.com*) trying to hold true to the traditionally understood newspaper journalistic style while the other (*salon.com*) giving their site a distinctive voice and style. The baggage issue of the *Los*

Angeles Times newspaper is the fourth area explored. Finally the chapter details the economic hurdles and makeup of these two contrasting sites.

The concluding chapter combines the preceding data to deduce that the type of journalism we are seeing online is in fact distinctive. It brings together the traditionally understood ideology of journalism with the reality of what is actually occurring in these newsrooms. It argues for redefinitions in terms relating to journalism and its practices in an online environment. The chapter also both affirms and challenges the cultural chaos theory of Brian McNair (2006) through analysis of all the factors that are competing to make up these news websites both within and outside of their walls.

The limitations of this project are many. Even though this study focuses on an election and how online news organisations are covering them, it does not deal exclusively with the relationship between politics and journalism. Instead the election is used as a news narrative to see how a story is covered that has huge worldwide interest and implications. I also do not go into extensive depth regarding economic background of these websites. The economic issues are dealt with but I seek to get away from fully defining journalism purely in economic terms. This study seeks to bring together all the factors that are shaping what journalists are doing and so although the economic climates are noted constantly throughout the data, this is not a study in how the business climate of the entities affects the journalism.

Finally, this research hopes to try and show the uniqueness of online news and highlight the features of journalism online. Those who work in these relatively new online environments are creating a product that is always changing and being updated as technology and people's embracing of that technology increases. It is a field full of potential and this study hopes to draw attention to its distinctiveness.

Chapter 2: Cultural Chaos and the Changes to Journalism Online

The academic dialogue surrounding journalism as it exists online is varied to say the least. It comes from professional journalists such as Wolff (2007) and Totty (2008) and established researchers alike who have been looking at the field of journalism for some years now. The depth of knowledge of online journalism is in fact quite shallow as the study of all things Internet are relatively new as well as the fact that the study of journalism is a relatively young field of study (Zelizer 2004, Schudson 2003). Most theory surrounding journalism looks at it in context of the larger field of media. Additionally, not much concession has been made for a difference between offline and online journalism.

In this chapter I will address many of the theoretical underpinnings which help us understand the sociology of news work. The problem with most theoretical paradigms up to this point is that they were put in place before the World Wide Web changed much of how news is constructed, distributed and even used. As Michael Schudson states: ‘We are in the midst of an epochal transformation of the news media. Even to say ‘news media’ or to say ‘journalism’ is to make use of a term whose content is unsettled and whose borders are unclear’ (2009b:369).

The debate will begin by explaining Brian McNair’s cultural chaos theory (2006), which is tested throughout this thesis. The macro-level understanding of

this thesis will first be explored and will addresses many of the external forces that have ultimately reshaped how we understand news control, or lack thereof. This chapter goes on to take those basic tenets and tries to repurpose them on a micro-level. In that, there are several features of online journalism that are not specifically addressed in McNair's cultural chaos but ultimately only add to the larger argument he is making.

It uses multiple authors who have begun to address the changing landscape of online news and brings it together with key empirical research that has been done thus far about online journalism and online journalists. The section summarizes the four key changes I have identified that have revolutionised how journalism is done and also break down many of the theoretical studies of the past. These changes are not only practical in nature but also reframe the theoretical argument of looking at media from a control perspective or only in light of the political economy perspective.

2.1 THE ROAD TO CHAOS

The idea that journalists are professionals (such as doctors and lawyers) and that journalism can be claimed as any other profession began in the 1930s (Tumber and Prentoulis 2005). However it has always been a highly contested moniker due to the fact that it has no professional training associated with it, nor an essential code of how to do the job (Schudson 1978). Gaye Tuchman rather than claiming journalists are professionals says that news is a product of professionalism '...and it claims the right to interpret everyday occurrences to

citizens and other professionals alike' (Tuchman 1978:5). Tuchman noted in her 1978 study that the 'search for facts' is what journalists are ultimately trying to achieve. Although facts in and of themselves are not news, the frame with which facts are put in make something such.

John Soloski goes a step further in his essay *News Reporting and Professionalism* (1989) arguing that in fact this idea of professionalism is actually an efficient and economic method by which news organisations control the behaviour of reporters and editors. His work showed how the norms, standards and reward system within the newsroom actually created guidelines for behaviour. He conceded that these norms did not entirely eliminate the problem of organisational autonomy but said it did create an environment that did not threaten either the economic position of the news organisation or the political system it found itself in.

This paradigm, which can be classified as the control or radical viewpoint, stresses the media's subjugation to authority (Curran 2002). The subjugation is achieved through economic means in liberal capitalist democracies: through political means often in political regimes which provide less freedoms to its citizens: and finally through cultural means (McNair 1998).

The radical tradition sees media as inextricable from society's dominant institutions and ideologies and sees media output as an articulation and legitimisation of the controlling interests in those institutions and ideologies (Gallagher 1982). Researchers have shown various conclusions related to the

opposing liberal pluralist idea of journalistic autonomy and freedom of the journalist through market competition. However most of the dominant literature done on journalistic institutions see journalists to varying degrees as simply an arm of the organisation or institution (be it political or economic) they work for.

Arguably, the most popularly known proponents of the radical theory are Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book 'Manufacturing Consent (1988)', a book which is still often referred to today both academically and in the larger popular culture. Their argument is that:

the societal purpose of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state. The media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premise (1988:298).

Todd Gitlin in his work *The Whole World is Watching* (1980) also picked up on this notion of hegemony, although his perspective was from a more Gramscian perspective (structural and historical in nature). According to Gitlin:

...hegemony is a ruling classes (or alliances) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and every day practice: it is the systematic (but not necessarily deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order (1980:268).

Gitlin went on to argue that media elite want to honour the political and economic systems within which they function. He noted that professional ideology is a potential threat to undermining the system but that normative news values keep hegemony unquestioned.

Liberal pluralists have continued to use more media centric approaches to studying journalism in an effort to explain how journalistic autonomy and professionalism work. According to James Curran:

The pluralists see society as a complex of competing groups and interests, none of them predominant all the time. Media organisations are seen as bounded organisational systems, enjoying an important degree of autonomy from the state, political parties and institutionalized pressure groups. Control of the media is said to be in the hands of an autonomous managerial elite who allow a considerable degree of flexibility to media professionals (Curran 2002: 108).

Alastair Hetherington argued for journalist's autonomy against 'Marxists tendency in some work' in his 1985 book *News, Newspapers and Television*. He says: 'Journalists generally want to tell a 'story' as simply, clearly and accurately as they can. That is what they are trained to do. Consequently it appears professionally insulting to them when anyone suggests that they are producing fictitious stories, encoding their messages obscurely or secretively, or creating false myths' (1985:18). He goes on to say that because journalists work within their existing knowledge and interests of their audience there is an amount of reinforcement of status quo. However, he argues, that sociocentrism and consensus or conformity are not the same thing. Rather it implies: 'a concern

for maintaining continuity and harmony of the established society...but within that...there is room for reporting argument, debate, minority views and reform' (1985:113).

Herbert Gans (1980) also argues for journalistic autonomy, although he says it is restrained by efficiency and power. According to Gans, '[J]ournalists are free to apply importance considerations, for example, but these respect the power hierarchy among sources. They can bring in their enduring values, but only when these are supported by other considerations and fall within the limits set by value exclusion, which respects the power of pressure' (1980:284).

Mark Deuze puts forward the notion of journalism as an occupational ideology, rather than a profession. He argues that journalists are those holding to that ideology. He defines ideology as 'a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular group, including—but not limited to—the general process of the production of meanings and ideas (within the group)' (2005: 445). There are five key tenets to journalism according to Deuze: (1) public service: journalists provide a public service (as watchdogs or 'newshounds', active collectors and disseminators of information): (2) objectivity: journalists are impartial, neutral, objective, fair and (thus) credible: (3) autonomy: journalists must be autonomous, free and independent in their work: (4) immediacy: journalists have a sense of immediacy, actuality and speed (inherent in the concept of news): (5) ethics: journalists have a sense of ethics, validity and legitimacy. Deuze recognizes that some of these tenets may be contradictory to each other but notes that journalists do not seem to have trouble with that fact.

A recent study by Mike Gasher (2007) made use of the idea of cartology or map making and used that to describe what journalists and journalism does today.

we argue that journalists make maps which outline the contours of community, establish that community's borders and membership criteria, identify sites of power, explain the extent and nature of the community's relations to the larger world, in sum, sketch a picture of who and where "we" are. In so doing, journalists put particular events, people, institutions, concerns and solutions "on the map," marginalizing, even excluding, others. They define the ways in which events are newsworthy—i.e., as things that matter to "us"—and thereby create categories of inclusion and exclusion, relevant and irrelevant, we and they. Journalists, in other words, produce a news geography, a representational space in which they situate their community and its people (2007:299).

This idea of journalists as a type of 'sense' maker in a society drowning with information is echoed by Jo Bardoel (1996). The emphasis now goes from content to context. According to Bardoel: 'More than ever, the task of journalism will lie in filtering relevant issues from an increasing supply of information in a crowded public domain and its fragmented segments. Journalism evolves from the provision of facts to the provision of meaning. In the ocean of information, "navigation" is desperately needed' (1996:297).

Jane Singer sees big problems with looking at journalism as a profession or ideology and puts forward the notion of journalists as socially responsible

existentialists (2006). Her argument is that definitions grounded in process are no longer valid, as the processes of creating journalism are so varied and constantly changing. In this definition she marries the roles of autonomy and accountability that journalists have been trying to bring together for years. According to Singer being this type of journalist means: 'freely choosing to be responsible in order to fulfil a social role based on trust' (12). She distinguishes journalists from other types of information providers by saying: 'ethical commitment to these normative goals is the only thing that distinguishes the journalist from other information providers' (13).

However, while these arguments provide strong evidence for the liberal pluralist position, they are all primarily journalist centric. The claims by many radical scholars often undermine the role of the individual journalist. The strength of radical theorists lies in the cohesiveness in explaining all of the factors that go into the newsmaking process at a news organization rather than simply the goal of the journalist.

2.2 CULTURAL CHAOS

These two ways of looking at news output and production have been debated back and forth for decades (Ampuja 2004) and their apparent strengths and weaknesses have led many to produce different theoretical approaches to looking at news. The idea that news could be fully explained by economic or political structures or the full autonomy and legitimate professionalization of journalists left out many prevailing influences such as (but not limited to) cultural identities,

globalisation, as well as organisation and technological constraints. Niklas Luhmann used his social systems theory to try and understand how this reality construction emerged and how the system of mass media differentiates itself from its environment (Gorke and Scholl 2006). Giddens (1999) and Castells (2000) have looked at mass media through the paradigm of globalization and tried to understand the implications of technology on the ever changing field.

Most media researchers have now been calling for a more cross-disciplinary approach when explaining journalism and its function in society. According to Deuze et al:

This theoretical problem of the role and function of journalism in society does not even begin to address the complexities involved when studying, analyzing and theorizing journalism—especially if we consider the sweeping trends of commercialization, digitization, globalization (and localization), all of which have profound implications for the profession (2007:334).

Most studies done today try to understand how news and journalism is created, taking into account that there are many factors that influence news and how it gets made (McQuail 2005). Michael Schudson (2005) critiques both sides of the debate saying that the exclusion of the professionalism of journalists by the Marxist tradition has not been helpful nor has the underemphasizing of the social constraints on news workers from the liberal pluralist tradition. According to Schudson: ‘It is simply not true that social, cultural, political and economic factors separately or together can explain why news is the way it is’ (2005:172).

All of this becomes even more relevant when looking at what has happened to journalism and its role in society within the past fifteen years. As this study will show, journalism production has become fragmented, decentralized, digitized, democratized and globalized to an extent that a new framework for studying journalism is needed. My sentiments are echoed by Mark Deuze in his new book 'Media Work' (2007). He asks the question many are afraid to ask or even to define.

Journalism as it is, is coming to an end. The boundaries between journalism and other forms of public communication— ranging from public relations or advertorials to weblogs and podcasts – are vanishing, the internet makes all other types of newsmedia rather obsolete (especially for young adults and teenagers), commercialization and cross-media mergers have gradually eroded the distinct professional identities of newsrooms and their publications (whether in print or broadcast), and by insisting on its traditional orientation on the nation, journalists are losing touch with a society that is global as well as local, yet anything but national. Such are the key lamentations on the fate of journalism today. Is this indeed the end of journalism (2007:141)?

Ringling the gong of the end of journalism might be a bit premature. Millions of people all over the world still get news and information in a traditional way from journalists in the form of newspapers, television, radio and even the Internet.

What these questions do highlight however is the problem with trying to encapsulate what journalism is, particularly with reference to the news as it exists online. Defining journalism, whether economically, politically, culturally or technologically, is a hard thing to do at this moment in time as all of these things are shifting. Theorists are constantly trying to re-frame and re-purpose the

role of journalism in society but ultimately without qualifying the types and formats of journalism one is talking about.

In the midst of this critique of prevailing theoretical premises, emerges the concept put forth by Brian McNair of *Cultural Chaos* (2006). McNair attempts to address all of the issues mentioned above by saying that we are beyond an era of control and ideologies. He thus seeks to end the grip the control theorists have had over explaining journalistic production by using a paradigm based in the natural sciences. It abandons reliance on a machine model and the entire idea of cause and effect which is used to explain most media production today. McNair states: 'more media, moving more information further and faster, means a more chaotic communication environment, with corresponding implications for the acquisition and management of power in society (2006:xx).

This therefore, makes the frameworks from which we understand journalism outdated and in need of a shift. Increasingly, people are stratifying the way in which they consume news and information (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). They are getting it from different platforms (cable news and the web are the two biggest gainers) which is changing the news landscape. It is also narrow to say that the only way people get news is through journalistic outlets (Schudson 1995). In addition, with the rise of social networking sites such as Bebo and Facebook the information sharing landscape continues to grow. Add to this the decrease in the amount of young people deciding to consume news at all (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009) and you have a different model for news consumption than what previously existed.

Another new dimension of this ever expanding field is the fact that the basic nature of the Internet is not limited within the confines of liberal democratic, capitalistic nation-states. The World Wide Web can be accessed virtually anywhere around the globe. The capitalistic nature of online journalism organisations who are based in the United States is definitely relevant to theoretical understanding, as is its increasing commodification, but looking at it purely from a control perspective does not fully encapsulate its nature. The Internet is global and therefore in trying to understand what is happening online, one cannot simply limit the framework of online journalism within countries, there has to be a consideration of what is going on in a larger context. The fact is not lost on many media scholars: ‘It is extraordinary that you and I, whether living in New York or London or Wasilla, Alaska, can read legitimate news websites from across the globe at any moment through the web’ (Schudson 2009b:370).

There are four main arguments for the cultural chaos theory put forward by Brian McNair (2003, 2006). The theory is a major critique of the control paradigm and extends the liberal pluralist debate, which has often failed to explain many of the new dynamics that go into making journalism what it is today. It deals with the political, ideological, economic and technological changes the Internet has brought to the field while still retaining some of the cohesiveness of earlier theories. The paradigm addresses both the new facets of news production and the constraints that go into making news in this environment.

2.2.1 THE FOUR SHIFTS

This new era of cultural chaos was brought on by four key changes, according to McNair. The first is technology which has diminished time and geographic space. This suppression of time and space has been notably raised by Manuel Castells (2000). For Castells, the modern space is one of flows, where the traffic between different kinds of networks constitutes a new relation between social practices and geography. Likewise, the experience of time is changed from a biological and chronological order, and instead, the sense of time is annihilated by the ever-faster communication technology used to compress and de-sequence it.

The second shift is in political borders. According to McNair there has been an erosion of traditional powers that have historically defined much of how media is understood. He does not deny that national sovereignty is ‘alive and kicking’ but simply that national identity is less potent than it once was. This erosion in the relevance of political borders is due to the expansion of new information and communication technologies. According to the author: ‘[T]he new global ideological divides...are those between secularism and religion, modernity and medievalism, democracy and authoritarianism’ (2006:9). Simon Cottle argues for a more global perspective in media studies. He notes: ‘the need for a theoretical reorientation that deliberately moves beyond the confines of the nation state and “methodological nationalism”’. This is warranted both by the global nature of many of the threats that now confront us and by their

elaboration and engagement within the formations and flows of today's global media ecology' (2009:310).

The third shift is in the dissolution of long-established social and cultural boundaries. This has happened in four ways. McNair notes the news is increasingly irreverent and lacking in reserve toward elites. 'So routine has journalistic criticism of political elites on both sides of the Atlantic become that within the ranks of established journalistic commentators, as well as many academics...the most vocal criticisms of the media in recent times have concerned their negativism and wilfully destructive attitude towards authority' (2006:71).

Second, within the dissolution of boundaries, he argues that the distinction between the public and private has eroded. McNair uses the example of then President Bill Clinton's affair with his intern Monica Lewinsky. One of the primary examples of this during the 2008 Presidential campaign was that of Democratic contender John Edwards. He was forced to admit to an affair after a weekly tabloid relentlessly pursued the story. Edwards' political career has not recovered since.

McNair goes on to make the point that there has been an erosion in the high and low of journalistic culture that once existed. The ruling ideology has normally defined tabloid journalism as trash and broadsheet journalism and its television equivalents as quality but that line is no longer clear: '...taste hierarchies used to police cultural consumption are eroding' (McNair 2006:10), according to

McNair. Finally, he points out that on a larger societal level there has been a challenge to the stratification associated with class, race, sexual orientation and gender identities. Story subjects that were once taboo or highly constrained within very hierarchical organisations are now often front and centre in the new media climate.

The final shift is more specific to the field of journalism. McNair terms this change the hybridization of journalism. He says: 'Dissolving too, are the boundaries between journalism and not-journalism, between information and entertainment, objectivity and subjectivity, truth and lies' (2006:11). There is now more focus on personalized, confessional journalism that is voice driven. The new technologies (namely the World Wide Web) have created an expanding universe of journalism especially through web-logs. He also challenges the central claim of objectivity which is now under crisis because of all these factors.

In this new paradigm, news is a product of the interaction of all environmental factors within which it is formed. News is not manufactured or constructed but rather *emerges* from the interacting elements of the communication environment which prevails in any given media space. McNair explains further stating:

A chaos paradigm recognizes that media messages do not impact on reality as an external influence in isolation, but become part of what reality is, and that the two elements are inseparable for analytic purposes. Journalism, from this perspective, is not just an account of reality, but an essential component of it...As opposed to the linear model of top-down cause-and-effect, the chaos

paradigm implies a non-linear model of constant feedback and adaptation as news cycle evolves, each iteration of cycle determined by what has gone before, the future of the system contingent on its past, and the evolution of other, interacting cycles (2006:50).

This theoretical framework best captures and tries to address all the competing influences on news and journalists that exist in the globalized online environment. It is from this paradigm that this study seeks to gain understanding of one type of journalism—online journalism. The goal is to fully comprehend how this type of journalism emerges and how we can better try to define what journalism is and how it is understood through the chaos paradigm.

2.3 FOUR MICRO-LEVEL CHANGES

The four large shifts that McNair argues have lead to cultural chaos do not specifically explain what is happening in the newsmaking process (although it is alluded to in the final shift). However, this emergent process of feedbacks and loops can be applied when looking at what has shifted in an environment where journalists are working to create news for an online user. Much of the research has chosen to frame the changes in different ways but there is a cohesive nature to the major transformations they propose are occurring. I will outline each of these changes and discuss why they are crucial in re-structuring our understanding of journalism as it exists online as well as the chaotic nature of constructing news.

2.3.1 INTERACTIVITY BETWEEN ACTORS

The relationship between those who produce journalism and those who consume news has traditionally been a fairly one-way street (Gunter 2003). The journalist delivers the news and the viewer or reader takes what they can get whether they agree with it or not. Beyond the odd letter to the editor or message on an answering machine call line there has not been much for the reader/viewer to contribute (Pavlik 2004).

Two of the key ethnographic studies on television newsrooms spent entire chapters of their books lamenting this relationship. Herbert Gans in *Deciding What's News* described the journalists' thoughts about the audience this way: 'they had little knowledge about the actual audience and rejected feedback from it. Although they had a vague image of the audience, they paid little attention to it: instead, they filmed and wrote for their superiors and for themselves, assuming that what interested them would interest the audience' (1980:230).

In Philip Schlesinger's study of the BBC (1978) he devotes an entire chapter to the 'Missing Link: Professionalism and the Audience.' It is not so much that journalists do not know who their audience are (they have media marketing tools to figure that out) it is more that they do not understand how the audience reacts to news or indeed even what specifically they want. According to Schlesinger (seconding Gans' audience findings):

When it comes to thinking about the kind of news most relevant to 'the audience' newsmen exercise their news judgment rather than going out and seeking specific

information about the composition, wants or tastes of those with whom they are communicating. In this context making a news judgment is thinking about the audience because the presumption is that the professional's selections are those which meet the desires of those who are being addressed (1978:116).

These studies are echoed further by other studies done about newsrooms and journalists (Rock 1973, Fishman 1980, Epstein 1974).

The image of the audience, in this case, is mostly created by the journalist but often does not mesh with reality. Tuchman (1978) noted that assumptions about readers were made by journalists about which specific stories they would like. She says that it was assumed readers were 'interested in occurrences at specific localities: concerned with activities of specific organisations: and interested in specific topics' (1978:25). However, none of the journalists were able to say with much certainty who the audience was and what it was they wanted.

Stuart Allan (2006) began this debate about what was happening for online journalists this way: '[T]he realization that the 'information super highway is a two-way street', where journalists could expect to encounter the viewpoints of their readers on a regular basis, brought with it a growing awareness that traditional rules and conventions were being rapidly rewritten' (2006:15). Indeed this sentiment has been echoed by countless numbers of scholars (Bardoel 1996, Pavlik 1999, 2000, 2001, Arora 2006, Glocer 2006, Boczkowski 2004). No doubt that this change in the way journalism is done is a fundamental one that shapes news as it exists online (Quandt et. al 2006, Deuze and Dimoudi 2002, MacGregor 2007).

Users of online journalism can determine in many ways how journalists decide to cover the news. There is now a direct line of feedback to the source of the news. Users can email, comment, post on bulletin boards, send stories to friends which increases its viewership and even add to the content themselves. Almost all news websites in this day have a feature allowing the user to send in their view, their comment etc... It is now an active rather than passive media for consumers of news (Deuze 2003).

One of the most interesting studies done of online journalists looked at their relationship to tracking software and how it shaped the creation of online news (MacGregor 2007). The software, which can be purchased from any number of providers, can track anything from the simple number of hits on the website to time spent by each user to demographic background of the user. The research by MacGregor found that journalists widely adopted the use of tracking software but that it was an exception that this information would alter daily practices of news construction. There were three positives of the software: can see most popularly accessed stories: assess trends over time and across site: regard tracking data as supplying 'objectivity' compared to interactive human feedback (2007:288). However, there were some defined negatives as well: stronger need to adhere to brand and news values: shortcomings in data-cold statistics: indirect message on how to attract traffic: too laborious to retrieve data constantly (2007:290-91). The last negative has now changed as technology is much quicker. However, what we get a sense of with this information is that tracking

software does not necessarily provide all the answers on how to cover stories but it is a good tool in gaining a better understanding of the user.

USAToday.com (a parentage site of the US national newspaper *USA Today*) took extreme care when redesigning their website in order to make sure the user was involved. According to an article about the redesign: ‘One theme that emerged was that redesigning their site was an ongoing process that relies more and more on taking readers’ opinions into effect and making the process more of a conversation than ever before’ (Hirschman 2007). The editor of *latimes.com* echoed this sentiment saying: ‘Readers are coming to us for the journalism we are producing, and we wanted to make maybe a subliminal statement that interactivity with our readers is going to be a huge priority going forward’ (ibid).

Many are doing this by having their reporters post blogs on the site⁴. These blogs often give additional insight into a story but also create an environment where the reporter can have more meaningful interactivity with their users.

Occasionally news websites will pay their reporters more if their blogs are able to generate a buzz within the ‘blogosphere’ and bring a lot of hits to the website (Palser 2007). However, there is debate as to whether or not this is actually a successful route to new users. There is not debate however, as to whether or not blogs are an essential part of a news website, as almost all contain a blog or several blogs in one form or another (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007, Nielsen/NetRatings 2006, Singer 2005).

⁴ See <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/index.html> for one of the best examples of this being done today

These forms of communication of course do not even begin to take into account the numerous amounts of self-created websites or blogs. These sites, often used by frequent consumers of news, voice their opinions and bring up issues they feel are not being dealt with in the media (Drudge 1998). They can often become successful themselves and thus creating another news organisation or source of news for users⁵.

Additionally, these potential users of online journalism are not limited by spatial boundaries of print or broadcast but rather can be from anywhere in the world. The audience for these online journalism sites are simultaneously hyper local and global (Boczkowski 2004). And this is not simply unexplored potential, as a majority of UK parentage news websites get their users/audience from abroad (Thurman 2007, Christensen 2004) and are seeking more of them (Pfanner 2007). The study by Thurman (2007) concluded that a huge proportion of British-based news website users are from America. There was no consensus by the editors of these sites that it was either good or bad but the potential global audience online is something those working in the medium have to deal with.

This globalization of news content gives journalists who work online an unprecedented opportunity to move across state imposed boundaries to disperse their output around the globe to a potential audience of millions. McNair (2006) noted this when talking about the Internet as the first truly global medium: ‘From the perspective of news consumption, the reader of an online newspaper in Sydney is in precisely the same position as one in Toronto or Dublin—part of

⁵ Prime examples of this are The Huffington Post <http://www.huffingtonpost.com> and Daily Kos <http://www.dailykos.com>

a global community of readers, existing physically in different time zones but, in this aspect of their lives at least, unconstrained by the separations of time and space' (2006:104).

2.3.2 PROCESSES CREATED AROUND SOURCES, DEADLINES AND SPACE

A 1922 essay, later republished in 1965, by Walter Lippman entitled 'Public Opinion' is often noted as the first scholarly work to attribute much of what we understand as news down to routines. In looking at the way a strike is reported in the press Lippman remarks that several routines end up shaping the news rather than the issue itself. These include: the economy of noting only the stereotyped phase of a situation, difficulty in finding journalists who can see what they have not learned to see, difficulty in finding space, the economic necessity of interesting a reader and the economic risk of not interesting or offending him (Lippman 1965). The idea of routine in newsmaking was furthered by Molotch and Lester (1974) in their analysis of news as a purposive behaviour full of organisational constraints and routines.

One of the most noted early studies done about the complexities of the news making process was Warren Breed's, *Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis* (1955). Breed tried to understand how news policy (both overt and through norms) affected journalists and ways they could subvert this policy. He clearly laid out the idea that much of what journalists do is controlled by the environment and norms they find themselves in. Breed put forth six key

reasons for journalists conforming to these environments and norms. These six key reasons include: institutional authority and sanctions: feelings of obligation and esteem for superiors: mobility aspirations: absence of conflicting group allegiance: pleasant nature of activity: and the fact that news becomes a value (1955).

Lasswell (1971) and DeFleur (1971) were key scholars in beginning this debate about the structure and function of mass media bringing to light such issues as political environment and cultural norms. Further studies led us to understand what journalists do in terms of news values they create and normative behaviours in the newsroom. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987) in their study of news organisations looked at the physical and personnel breakdown of the newsroom as well as the daily routine journalists go through. Golding and Elliott (1979) break down the daily news cycle into four stages: planning, gathering, selection and production. They note the importance of news values in selecting news stories, harking back to the seminal study on this issue by Galtung and Ruge (1965).

The idea of news values is central to most of these studies in seeking to understand what does and does not constitute 'news'. The study by Galtung and Ruge noted that stories were selected for coverage based on factors such as frequency, unambiguity, consonance and negativity among others. The premise that only certain stories within a society are deemed worthy of coverage led many to understand the process as highly hierarchical, routinised and ultimately controlled by the dominant elites within that society (Hartley 1982).

News values were central in explaining how crime is socially constructed by the powerful and privileged according to Hall et. al. in *Policing the Crisis* (1978a). According to the authors, news values are a core element in the socialization, practice and ideology of newsmen which overall is systematically structured over accessing of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions. They put forth the notion of primary and secondary definers. Primary definers are those media sources that are in power, secondary definers being the media themselves who merely reproduce those primary definitions to the masses.

Edward Epstein (1974) countered some of the radical stance in his lengthy ethnographic study of US network news. He put his position on how news got made and the process itself this way:

Network news is shaped and constrained by certain structures imposed from without, such as government regulation of broadcasting and economic realities of networks: certain uniform procedures for filtering and evaluating information and reaching decisions: and certain practices of recruiting newsmen and producers who hold, or accept, values that are consistent with organisational need, and reject others-all of which are open to analysis (43).

Epstein says that news is ultimately a consensus between producers at varying levels. He argues that news consensus can predetermine news only in a trivial sense in that it is about information available.

Herbert Gans sought to capture a picture of the national news in his 1980 study of both print and broadcast news organisations in the United States. He chose the *CBS Evening News* and the *NBC Nightly News* to study the national television programs. In the print arena, he chose *Newsweek* and *Time* weekly magazines. According to Gans the purpose of his study was: ‘...studying journalists in these four news organisations to discover how they selected the news and what they left out: how they reported the stories they selected: why they chose as they did: and what kinds of people they were’ (1980:xxii).

Gans echoes the sentiments of Epstein in his findings from both print and broadcast news organisations. He concluded that news determines news organisations much more than the organisation determines the news. However, Gans did note the output of most of American news is centred on the values and ideology of the nation itself as well as the stories within it. So even within this more liberal pluralist tradition of Gans and Epstein, there was a sense that because of the focus on news values and ruling political ideology even the most autonomous journalists worked within a constrained framework.

The control held by editors and those higher up within a news organisation is a main focus of Phillip Schlesinger’s ethnographic study of the BBC (1978).

Schlesinger focused on the story narrative of the conflict in Northern Ireland to show how news is ‘put together’. He argued that based on the way a story is assembled the results will contain only specific versions of reality.

His argument gives power both to the news event and the journalist but ultimately says that control is achieved at the BBC through the editorial system and corporate ideology. According to Schlesinger, 'The diffusion of guidance and the attraction of a well-remunerated job tend to ensure conformity in the newsrooms' (1978:150). He goes on to add: '...on the whole you discuss whether a story has done well or badly in the context of the system. You rarely discuss whether the organization is good or bad, or what its global view is' (1978:166).

Gaye Tuchman (1978) is much more radical in her interpretation of news production. Tuchman's study was different from Gans and Epstein's in that her goal was to try and see how news media set the frame in which citizens discuss public events. She sought to make larger extrapolations about what these types of news making processes were doing to society and its culture as a whole. She deems news to be more of a 'constructed reality' in which those working in a news organisation frame and interpret based on social norms and institutional processes. Tuchman concluded that in the process of describing an event, news (as it is produced) helps define and shape it.

Mark Fishman (1980) echoed the idea of a socially constructed reality in his work. Fishman used a story narrative of a supposed crime wave in Northern California to show how the journalists create a story. He did participant observation and interviews with journalists in one central newsroom the *Purissima Record*. He was concerned with the process by which reality is

socially constructed. Fishman was interested not only in story selection but rather how news was created through work routines.

One of the central points Fishman made in his study was that of the interlinking between bureaucracy and news. According to his study: ‘...news is a practical organisational accomplishment and that newswriters heavily rely on the bureaucratic definition of phenomena they report. These observations are interrelated: the practicalities of news production tie news organisations to governmental agencies and corporate bureaucracies’ (1980:140). He goes on to say that: ‘public events have never been known apart from the institutionalized means of mass communication which formulate those events in society’ (1980:12).

The theories behind how we have historically understood news is changing as the environment around which news is made changes. In describing this production through the lens of chaos it is important to understand that newsmaking is ultimately the ‘product of the interaction of all the environmental factors within which it is formed. If the environment changes, so does content, irrespective of the desires of dominant groups’ (McNair 2006:48). In this way news is not manufactured, not constructed and it does not just happen...news emerges.

Within our understanding of newsmaking (which is fully explored throughout this thesis) three of the fundamental factors in shaping news construction have changed. The first is the relationship of the source with the journalist (Pavlik

2004). The second and third are the time and space limitations of the finite medium in which the journalism previously existed (Sparks 2005) which has now been broken down and reshaped.

The first change mentioned here, the one between journalist and the source of the news is central to understanding how journalists construct news (Tunstall 1971). Journalists are unique from any regular citizen writing often because they have access to important sources of information. This relationship is of utmost importance to the journalist because it can make or break their career.⁶ The source has historically needed the journalist to disseminate their story to the public: while the news media have traditionally needed sources to provide information to the public.

Tuchman (1978) said that it was crucial for a journalist to know enough sources in order to file a story and demonstrate competence but also to be aware that some sources are more valuable than others. According to Tuchman's findings reporters and newswriters make three generalizations when it comes to 'truth claims' by sources: (1) Most individuals (as sources) have an axe to grind: (2) Some individuals, such as committee heads, are in a position to know more than other people: and (3) Institutions and organisations have procedures designed to protect both the institution and people who come into contact with it which the news worker must understand.

⁶ Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward at the Washington Post in uncovering the Watergate scandal is a an example of the source/journalist relationship in a more ideal form. The Robert Novak outing of Valerie Plame as a CIA operative based on 'sources' inside the Bush Administration is an example of sourcing gone wrong.

Gans (1980) likened the relationship to a dance. He concluded that while sources were attempting to manage their information, journalists were simultaneously trying to manage the sources in order to get the information they wanted. Gans did not however conclude that the source ever got the upper hand in the relationship saying: 'Sources alone do not determine the values in the news, but their values are implicit in the information they provide. Journalists do not, by any means, parrot these values, but being objective and detached, they don't rebut them either' (1980:145).

According to the Goldsmiths Media Group, journalists are losing control in this so-called 'dance'. They note that those in power are strengthening their position of source power at a time when journalistic power is seriously under threat due to commercial and political interests (2000).

Robert McChesney in his book *Problem of the Media* (2004) says that there are three deep seeded biases that have made their way into professional journalism in the United States. First, professional journalism regards anything done by official sources as the basis for legitimate news. Second, there is an avoidance of contextualization. Finally, far from being politically neutral, journalism smuggles in values conducive to the commercial aims of owners and advertisers to the political aims of big business.

Fishman (1980) tried to understand the relationship between journalists and sources in his study when it came to stories of crime. He found that most bureaucratic events and accounts were not heavily investigated while those

individuals providing information were weighed more before being taken into account. Fishman said that the bureaucracy the journalists dealt with defined such things as their movement within a beat, their exposure to news sources and often the meaning and relevance of what they were being exposed to. Ultimately he concluded: ‘...News is a practical organisational accomplishment and that newswriters heavily rely on the bureaucratic definition of the phenomena they report. These observations are interrelated: the practicalities of news production tie news organisations to governmental agencies and corporate bureaucracies’ (1980:140).

This relationship has changed in two ways. To begin with, online journalism has provided a means (via hypertexting) for the journalist to send the user to the source material themselves (Deuze 2003). Hypertexting is a special type of database system developed by Ted Nelson in the 1960s. Hypertext is a way in which objects (text, pictures, music, programs etc...) can be linked to each other. When you select an object you can see all the others that are linked to it.⁷ For example, if *cnn.com* uses a photo from an outside source they can hypertext to that source’s website, allowing users to go to the originator of the information, in this case a picture. Or if an *msnbc.com* reporter refers to a Supreme Court case decision they can hypertext, sending people to the original document to read for themselves. This makes the nature of journalism much more transparent and allows the user of online journalism to be made aware of just how a story came into being. It also gives the journalist more authority as they are instantly able to show if some controversial statement they are making is true or false.

⁷ <http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/h/hypertext.html>

The second way the source/journalist relationship has changed with online journalism (because of its transparent nature and the interconnectedness of the Web) is that the source of much of the journalist's information has more means of disseminating their information. This takes form in two ways. Due to the quick dissemination of information in the online environment the source can publish directly on the Web themselves having to rely much less on news websites to get their message across (Pavlik 1999). The infamous Starr Report⁸ was a prime example of this and a multitude of celebrities also use their own websites or blogs to post information directly to the public instead of going through journalists who they feel may distort the information. According to Graeme Turner: 'The media...is no longer required to mediate any more: they [the audience] can now choose to get their news directly from the sources they choose to consult—or else they simply make it themselves' (2009:391).

The second way the source gains power is due to the fact that online a journalist can more easily be caught if their story is wrong or if they misquote a source (Pavlik 2001). The sources can post counterarguments more quickly and have access to the same potential audience as those in the news business on the World Wide Web. The blogosphere and multitude of worldwide journalistic outlets are also quick to catch errors made by journalists (Allan 2006). According to McNair, 'one consequence of the blogging revolution has been to make much more transparent the imperfections of established media' (2006:132).

⁸ <http://icreport.loc.gov/icreport/>

When talking about making news it is impossible to understand how it is constructed without taking into account two additional fundamentals that have shaped much of journalism up until now: the space available (Rock 1973) and the deadline (Tuchman 1978). The famous *New York Times* headline has always been ‘All the news that’s fit to print.’⁹ Those confines no longer hold in an online world.

The almighty deadline that exists in news produced offline is a main point in many of the key ethnographic texts. In fact one could say that it is not merely ‘one’ of the central figures but ‘the’ central figure. According to Herbert Gans’ study:

Ultimately, the divisions of power in news organisations are overshadowed, and the divisions of labour determined by the deadline. That deadline, furthermore, leads to story selection and produce processes that become routinized and remain virtually unchanged over the years—which is one reason why journalists describe their organisations as assembly lines (1980:109).

Philip Schlesinger (1978) called the newsroom a ‘stop-watch’ culture. He said that newsmen oscillate between victim and controller. One key point that Schlesinger makes about the importance of immediacy and time is its potential conflict with the value of news accuracy. Tuchman goes even further in her assessment of time, saying that it often influences the assessment of occurrences as news events (1978:41). Tuchman says that news workers try and organize

⁹http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/29/opinion/29pubed.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=all+the+news+that%27s+fit+to+print&st=nyt&oref=slogin

typifications of news in order to overcome this perceived problem of time and create an imposed order.

In studying journalists, both Fishman (1980) and Epstein (1974) noted that one of the key findings was that they all defined news in terms of time. Deadlines were vital when journalists composed or crafted stories. When evaluating United States national news and its coverage of the highly populated state of California, Epstein found that the state was under-represented in the news when it came to number of stories covered on a nightly basis. He also said the types of stories from the state were often related to Hollywood or 'the bizarre.' Epstein, in his interviews, was able to ascertain that most of this was due to the East Coast deadline of network news that prevented much of what was happening in California to be reported because it was too late (1974:245). Ultimately it is one of the organisational structures that form much of offline news work.

The most exceptional work to come out of the study of journalists and journalism as it is practiced online is 'Digitizing the News' by Pablo Boczkowski (2004). He looked at three different types of news operations online and combined elements of content analysis, interviews and participant observation to give a very complete picture of the changing online environment. Two things, according to Boczkowski, that have changed online are 'An entity in which content and form have been partly predicated upon the spatial limitations of newsprint has turned into one of verticals with unlimited newshole...An artifact produced in mostly fixed cycles has been made more complex by featuring constant updates' (2004:64).

In the world of online journalism there are endless amounts of stories and news to cover from all around the globe to a potential worldwide audience. There is no longer twenty two minutes of time to fill in an evening broadcast or twelve pages to fill in a Metro section of the newspaper. The editor of an online publication can have two stories or eighty stories. Additionally, these stories don't have to wait to be put out into the public domain until the 11 o'clock broadcast or morning news sheet, they can go out now. One of the biggest reason's people go to the Web is its convenience and constant updating (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007).

Not everyone is so thrilled by this development however and its implications to the field of journalism, particularly print journalists. Journalist/Silicon Valley CEO Alan Mutter wrote a blog stating:

Quickie Web coverage seriously imperils the print product, because these down-and-dirty stories deprive reporters and editors of the time they need to consider -- and report on -- the major issues affecting their communities. If news staffs thinned by continuing economic cutbacks are stretched even thinner with busy work, who will write the compelling stories that merit the continued patronage of the print product by readers and advertisers (Bielak, 2006)?

Although there is no doubt that news staffs (particularly in parentage print sites) are being cut back, it has not been proven that the journalism done online is any less deep than the offline offerings. In fact, the State of the News Media report in 2007 found that online journalism often provided the most depth to a story. At

the beginning of the 2008 Presidential primaries the Pew Research Center for People and the Press found that over a quarter of Americans were going online to get in-depth news information about the candidates and a lot of those were young people (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2008b).

2.3.3 MULTI-PLATFORM NATURE OF ONLINE JOURNALISM

When a big news story breaks in a print format there is only one way to cover the story: send your best writer to find out what is going on, write a piece, and if there are time and resources available, take pictures. When a big news story breaks in an online format there are endless ways to cover the story. Deuze (2004) explains multimedia journalism in two ways:

first as the presentation of a news story package on a website using two or more media formats, such as (but not limited to) spoken and written word, music, moving and still images, graphic animations, including interactive and hypertextual elements: secondly, as the integrated (although not necessarily simultaneous) presentation of a news story package through different media, such as (but not limited to) a website, a Usenet newsgroup, e-mail, SMS, MMS, radio, television, print newspapers and magazines (2004:140).

To put it in simpler terms: the way a story is covered and how it is distributed has an exponential multimedia potential online.

Indeed as broadband access continues to increase (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2006) and news websites continue to embrace the technology

(Hirschman 2007) these forms of multimedia journalism will only increase. Already if you survey most of the largest mainstream news websites¹⁰ you can see all forms of media being used. Many of these parentage sites have a great advantage technologically speaking as they have more financial resources to acquire technology and human resources to execute these many forms of multimedia. However, money does not necessarily guarantee successful application of multimedia on the Web. Some of the most innovative users of the web's multimedia are net native newssites or even niche content sites (Deuze et.al 2007).

One of the most heralded examples of using Web technologies to its fullest extent is *Glam.com*. The website was originally a niche fashion site that then decided to utilize a network of knowledgeable players to branch out and create an entire women's network. According to the site:

Glam Media leverages the increasing fragmentation of the Internet —bringing together owned-and-operated websites, including flagship Glam.com, with the Glam Publisher Network of more than 400 popular lifestyle websites and blogs and syndicated content from leading media companies. Glam Media's distributed media network model effectively bridges hundreds of unique digital "voices" representing the best content in each category relevant to women.'¹¹

The site has been praised by new media enthusiast Jeff Jarvis in his blog *Buzz Machine*. Jarvis says:

¹⁰ <http://www.bbcnews.com> or <http://www.cnn.com>

¹¹ http://www.glammedia.com/about_glam/our_story/index.php

So Glam is a content network. But they don't create all the content. They curate it. So we should curate more as we create less. That's another way to say what I've said other ways: Do what we do best and link to the rest. Also: We need to gather more and produce less, so we also need to encourage others to produce more so we can gather it (2007).

The biggest critique of mainstream news sites (particularly parentage sites owned by large media corporations) is their lack of embracing Web 2.0, which is what sites such as Glam.com have done best. This term is thrown around a lot but essentially is:

Given to describe a second generation of the World Wide Web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. Web 2.0 basically refers to the transition from static HTML Web pages to a more dynamic Web that is more organized and is based on serving Web applications to users. Blogs, wikis, and Web services are all seen as components of Web 2.0 (Internet.com 2009).

Most websites, as mentioned above, are beginning to embrace all that the Web has to offer but there is some scepticism, largely to do with the perceived lack of money making attached to participatory journalism and media (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007). However, as more people head to the Web every year for news across the globe and as broadband technology catches up this scepticism will surely be misplaced with ways to take advantage of these new media platforms.

In analysing the newest studies of online journalism the technology of the medium becomes a central issue for how the journalists do their work (Deuze and Dimoudi 2002, Wilson 2008, Chung 2007). Online journalists in these studies are framing much more of what they do around the technology that is available to them to create different types of journalism and tell stories in much different ways. This focus led many converged newsrooms to create a Web first, print/broadcast second rule (Wilby 2006, Sessions Step 2007, Ahrens 2006). It was also concluded, in converged newsroom, that there was a struggle between the old and new mediums (Boczkowski 2004, Singer 2004, Ahrens 2006, Sessions Stepp 2007).

There is no consensus within much of these studies about whether this proliferation of technology available in the online medium is a good thing or bad thing (Quandt et. al. 2006, Wilson 2008, MacGregor 2007, Chung 2007). Those involved in the creation of online journalism particularly in the study of United States newspaper parentage websites were quite sceptical about the changes but many were also optimistic about the potential they might bring.

2.3.4 GATEWATCHING AND LOSS OF AGENDA CONTROL

The final practical change that occurs in online journalism takes away one of the key claims to authority that journalists have: the idea that they are experts in the dissemination information (Tumber 2006). News organisations have always been able to set agendas and decide what they think others need to know (i.e., what is the news of the day) (Singer 2006). In an online environment a lot of

these walls are being broken down. Due to low barrier entries, a multitude of choices for the audience and the immediacy with which news is filtered through the Web, control is much harder to come by.

The definition of 'gatekeeper' was first introduced by David Manning White (1950), who studied one news editor to try and find out why certain stories were chosen and others discarded. He noted that he 'began to understand how highly subjective, how reliant on value-judgments...news really is' (White 1950:68). Pamela Shoemaker (1991) continued this study of gatekeeping, trying to understand all the forces that led to the gatekeeper making the decisions that ultimately determined the news. Her study analysed the complex amount of issues the gatekeeper faces which ultimately shape the message that is produced.

Researcher Axel Bruns (2005) likens the journalist's role online to a gatewatcher instead of a gatekeeper. According to Bruns: '...gatekeeping at the input stage has become ineffectual since what information is rejected by one news organisation may now be accepted by another of the increasing number of publishers, or made available directly by the news source without entering the journalistic processes at all' (2005:13). In the new role of gatewatcher journalists 'observe what material is available and interesting, and identify useful new information with a view to channelling this material into structured and up-to-date news reports which may include guides to relevant content and excerpts from the selected material' (18).

The idea of a journalist's job shifting from content sender to context giver is echoed by researcher Jo Bardoel. 'More than ever, the task of journalism will lie in filtering relevant issues from an increasing supply of information in a crowded public domain and its fragmented segments. Journalism evolves from the provision of facts to the provision of meaning. In the new ocean of information navigation is desperately needed' (1996:297). Online news done by both parentage sites and net native sites are increasingly becoming navigational as most of the traffic to the news stories comes from other websites and not the home page of the website (Totty 2008).

The purpose of journalism, from the perspective of some online journalists, appears to be shifting (Brannon 2008). In a study of German and American online journalists (Quandt et. al 2006) their self-perceived role was one of 'neutral disseminator of news and interpreter' rather than watch dog or public service (180). Similarly, in a study of online journalists in the Netherlands (Deuze and Dimoudi 2002), online journalists saw themselves as having two key roles: that of disseminating information quickly as possible and focusing that news on the widest possible audience (93). This study also found that seventy eight percent of journalists surveyed felt strongly that online journalism is a new, distinct professional type of journalism (95).

One of the most recent telling studies (Robinson 2007) interviewed those involved in online journalism (mostly parentage sites) in the United States. The premise of the research began by stating that journalism is an authoritative political institution (a fourth estate) and those interviewed seemed to agree with

this statement. The author then went on to deconstruct the online newsmaking process. She found four key things: (1) purpose of news stories are different online-people need to experience news: (2) the online processes of news production have fundamentally changed the creation of news narrative: (3) creates a new relationship with the audience: (4) journalists claimed a better authenticity, transparency and audience experience. This led Robinson to conclude that ‘in producing news the way they are the industry is undermining its own role as a societal institution’ (2007:317). It is in essence, sharing its authoritative space.

2.4 CONCLUSION

The strength of the radical theory in journalism research for many years was due to its recognition of external elements that went into explaining how news was made. The focus on the power relationship between sources and journalists provided a strong case for much of journalistic output being held by those who wanted to define it. Additionally, the economic and political situations under which these news organizations existed constrained and shaped much of what journalists did, giving further strength to the radical theorists studies. The claim by liberal pluralists to journalistic autonomy had strength when looking at individual journalists but lacked a cohesive body of strong research when it came to looking at news gathering organisations as a whole.

Ultimately, this thesis is seeking to not only move beyond the control versus liberal pluralism debate that has been a pervasive feature of much of journalism

theory to date but also to test the cultural chaos paradigm of Brian McNair (2006) on a micro-level. The cultural chaos approach brings into the fold much of the practical changes that have affected journalism in its online form. These changes will be described in detail in the next chapter and ultimately shape much of what we see constructed and disseminated online.

Much has now shifted in an online environment including the above processes that defined journalism for so long and theorists must take that into account. Cultural chaos brings together all of these competing interests online and argues for news *emerging* rather than being controlled or constructed.

The newly found interactivity between the user and producer of news creates a feedback loop that rarely existed in pre-Internet days. It brings a new voice into the construction of the news that adds another layer to those competing for control of the news agenda. The reconfigured process of making news has changed as sources now have much more power and access to the public. The once privileged place journalism had in societies does not hold as much weight online. Additionally the journalist no longer has to take into account the deadline or space limitations that exist offline. The selection of news stories was always seen as a primary means of controlling the news agenda but online there is no limitation therefore, many more actors are competing for a voice in the unlimited media space.

The multi-platform nature of the Web creates a new space for numerous types of journalistic content. The way this is approached by newsmaking organisations

varies not only with different levels of technical skills but also with different levels of enthusiasm for the technology. Finally, the lack of control for newsmakers is all part of a new landscape that is being created around journalism. There is less ability for journalists to be gatekeepers and their role is now shifting to gatewatcher. The lack of control over the agenda and the sharing of authoritative space clearly show the decline of the control paradigm in looking at news production and ultimately the idea of control itself.

How these changes look in actuality within a news organisation is one of the things this study seeks to highlight and is weaved throughout the various data chapters. These changes also highlight how the chaos paradigm (McNair 2006) is the best way to explain the inner workings of the field.

Chapter 3-Methodology

The journalistic environment, far from being controlled by dominant elites, is more like the weather (McNair 2006). Although we can discern patterns and make predictions it is rare that we can fully predict which stories will blow through and which will have legs. In coming to an understanding of the cultural chaos model, the complete environmental factors that go into news production are crucial to understanding how news is produced. The central question this thesis is trying to answer is how creating online news has changed the job of the journalist. As the cultural chaos theory is rooted in the natural sciences, a qualitative approach to understanding the entire natural setting is going to provide the most descriptive results (Jankowski and Wester 1991).

The mixed methods case study gives the most complete picture how this shift in journalism is occurring. A case study gives ‘prominence to what is and what is not the case. What is happening and deemed important within those boundaries is considered vital and usually determines what the study is about...’(Stake 2000:23). The two case studies will provide these boundaries and as well as a contrast in two ways of going about doing online journalism. The *latimes.com* is part of one of the largest United States news gathering operations and has seen one of the biggest growths of any newspaper parentage site for 2008 (Saba 2009). *Salon.com* is an established net native news website that has survived the dot com bust of the late nineties and continued to see its audience and influence grow in 2008 as well. If the goal is trying to see how journalists work together to create online news then the case study provides the best example available and

looking at two established web organisations brings a further validity to the study.

Most research done on the topic of online journalists and journalism thus far has done either across the board surveys or in-depth interviews with journalists whose work, at least partially, rests online but little in analysis of production with the exception of a collection of online ethnographic research from Chris Paterson and David Domingo (2008). Some newer studies of journalists have begun to look at the newsroom or news centre of online operation in an ethnographic manor although these types of studies are more the exception than the rule. The most referenced work to come out of the study of journalists and journalism as it is practiced online is 'Digitizing the News' by Pablo Boczkowski (2004). He looked at three different types of news operations online and combined elements of content analysis, interviews and participant observation to give a very complete picture of the changing online environment.

Additionally, most of the work done has been on websites that are parentage in nature. These sites and consequently journalists working for these sites deal with trying to appease two different types of journalism output. Looking at these sites is a great way to understand what is changing in journalism but does not provide a complete picture of the constraints and capabilities of working on the Web that this study will show.

Of the over twenty online journalism studies analysed for this study, most either looked at journalists who worked at parentage sites or profiled websites that

existed offline as well. Some of these studies also looked at net native journalists and websites, however the majority focus was on the parentage. The net native site is rarely looked at solely by itself or in contrast to the parentage site. Some of the problem may be due to the fact that there are fewer examples of successful net native websites to pool from¹² but researchers' lack of clarification between the two leaves a hole in the literature.

The best exception to this was a study by David Domingo of four Catalan newsrooms (2008). He made a clear distinction between the two newspaper parentage sites, the broadcast parentage site and the net native site. Throughout the text he points out the distinct differences between the net native and parentage sites which provided an excellent contrast to what and how things were being done differently.

For the purposes of this study there are four research questions that I am seeking answers to. The framework of the mixed methods case studies as well as the interview questions specifically are all designed to answer them.

1. Does Brian McNair's Cultural Chaos theory apply to the environment created in online newsmaking?
2. How are the relationships in creating online journalism new or different from what came before?

¹² The most successful online news sites by far are parentage sites with a strong offline presence and name recognition. Nielsen/Net Ratings provides the best numbers for comparison.

3. Are there marked differences between parentage news websites and net native news websites in the construction of a news story and its output on the Web?

4. To what extent (and on what levels) can we conclude that the journalism that exists online is different from its offline counterparts?

3.1 THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY MODEL

The research design for this thesis is based around models using ethnographic case studies to best understand social meanings and activities of people within a given field or setting (Brewer 2000, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

Ethnography is defined as: ‘the study of people in naturally occurring settings or fields by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally’ (Brewer 2000: 6). In this understanding society is not fixed and unchanging but rather fluid and constructed by those within it. It is through this method that this study seeks to try and bring out the emergent patterns and themes that inform how journalists do their work and ultimately how they put together news.

Past research has shown full ethnographic case studies with participant or direct observation elements provide the best means of understanding what actually goes in to making news (Gans 1980, Schlesinger 1978, Tuchman 1978, Epstein 1974). This direct observation will be the centrepiece of my case studies and will inform much of the results. However as Yin (1989) noted in his book, multiple sources of evidence provide the best construct for case studies. Thus, there are three other elements that inform these case studies. They include documentation from and about the news gathering operations, in-depth interviews with key players from these sites and finally qualitative analysis of their websites during the election.

The net native case study is the US based *salon.com*. This site provides an excellent look at how journalism functions online. It began publishing on the Web early on (1995) and is now considered one of the highly successful examples of net native journalism, which is respected by those in the offline and online industry (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008). It is also unique because it is owned by a group of independent investors, not a big corporation, as most media outlets currently are in the United States.

The case study of a parentage site is *latimes.com*. This website is an offshoot of the most read West Coast newspaper the *Los Angeles Times*. The site has a lot of online clout and has been gaining users in the past couple of years. This site provides a nice contrast to *salon.com* and highlights the advantages and disadvantages of the parentage sites who are trying to do two forms of journalism in a single news gathering operation.

The case studies were done through the lens of the 2008 US Presidential Election. This provided not only a time frame to look at, observe, and learn about these sites but it also brought a narrative to the evolving story of these newsrooms. The election provided a nice way to understand how institutions and practices of news making interact with a big news event (Schudson 2005).

David Machin summarized the benefits of ethnographic research for mass media best in saying:

Ethnography allows us to examine how intelligent human beings use these creatively to live in and make culture. It allows us to get to the heart of the way that as people do this they are routinely interdependent upon each other and deeply engaged with what everyone else thinks in the mutual enterprise of social life. It seems natural to me that if we are to understand the mass media, then it will have to be so in this very context (2002:170).

3.2 CASE STUDY DESIGN

The design for this study relied heavily on three past ethnographic case studies. Tuchman (1978) and Gans' (1980) studies from the later part of the 20th century and Boczkowski's (2005) study which was built around news websites as we went from the 20th to the 21st century. Gans' decision in particular to include a content analysis (1980:5) influenced a decision to include it in this study as well.

Boczkowski stated that the purpose of his study was, ‘to capture in the notion that new media emerge by merging existing sociomaterial infrastructures with novel technical capabilities and in the notion that this evolution is influenced by a combination of historical conditions, local contingencies and process dynamics’ (2005:12). This goal is something this study strives for as well through the descriptive analysis of the production of news as well as the testing of cultural chaos.

The four different methods used to complete these case studies all help in ultimately answering the four research questions this study undertakes. The first seeks to test the cultural chaos theory of Brian McNair (2006) in that, it was necessary to use all the various methods to try and ascertain if the theoretical stance was best. The term ‘chaos’ implies no patterns or organisational norms. I am thus creating a methodology to test something that is in its very essence, not testable. The ethnographic element of direct observation thus becomes prominent because observing in itself does not try and create patterns but rather observes the reality.

In seeking to understand the relationships within the newsroom and whether it was new or different from what came before, the ethnographic element of direct observation was central in finding the answer. The second research question was also heavily reliant on my study of other newsrooms and understanding of the newsmaking process (Chapter 2) coupled with the in-depth interviews. These applications also applied to my final research question in understanding the implications of online versus offline journalism.

The third question was to see if there were marked differences between the net native and the parentage. The ideal was to have a mirror of the research in each area through copious note taking, almost identical interview scenarios and questions as well as a content analysis of both websites occurring at the same time. The design and execution of this is described below but the design was set up in an effort to make the results of this comparison valid.

Each qualitative methodological element to these case studies was executed in different ways. The following is how each method in this mixed methods case study methodology was done.

3.2.1 DIRECT OBSERVATION

The direct observation element of the research was the most challenging to undertake. It required not only a location move but also extreme cooperation on the part of those news organisations who decided to let me through their doors which is a salient feature of much ethnographic research (Puijk 2008). The degree to which I was able to observe in each organisation was different however a fairly accurate picture of both organisations was received.

The *salon.com* news gathering organisation is divided into three bureaus. Their central office is in San Francisco, CA, the second in New York City, NY and the final, much smaller bureau is in Washington DC. I tried to spend an equal amount of time in the San Francisco and New York offices, three days each but due to a last minute change by one of the editors I spent only two days in the San Francisco office. Although, this is a minimal amount of time, due to the smaller

nature of the operation and the communication style, it provided a fairly complete picture of what was going on. Additionally, I was given full access to both sites, which are contained in very small offices so it was not that difficult to ascertain how it all worked. The days of observation in the San Francisco office were Wednesday, June 11, 2008 and Thursday, June 12, 2008. The days of observation in the New York office were Friday, August 8, 2008, Tuesday, August 12, 2008 and Wednesday, August 13, 2008.

The *latimes.com* is much more centrally located however they have bureaus throughout the state, nation and world. The main building and newsroom hub is located in downtown Los Angeles. I was based in Los Angeles for the duration of my research and was therefore able to access the newsroom more frequently than that of *salon.com* and also over a longer period of time. *The Los Angeles Times* occupies a historic building that it also owns. In total eleven different days were spent in different parts of the building but all of them within the larger editorial news gathering department. Some days many hours were spent there, particularly during the conventions and debates, and other times the purpose was solely to observe a specific meeting or meet with someone to see how a particular department was run. The days of observation were Wednesday, June 4, 2008: Monday, June 16, 2008: Monday, July 21, 2008: Monday, July 28, 2008: Thursday, August 21, 2008: Thursday, August 28, 2008: Friday, August 29, 2008: Thursday, September 4, 2008: Thursday, September 25, 2008: Tuesday, October 7, 2008: Wednesday, October 25, 2008.

I decided to take notes of my observation as I went along, instead of at the end of the day (Yin 1989). The notebooks (one for each organisation) went with me

wherever I went and also contain pre and post observation notes. The goal was to write down everything from what was airing on the television in the background to what was being said between colleagues about upcoming layoffs.

In going into each day of observation I was looking for several things: (1) basic layout and structure of the working spaces; (2) the interaction between journalists working for the subsequent websites; (3) how decisions were being made in regards to stories they were choosing to cover or not cover in relation to the election; (4) if there were any routines or patterns to how work was being done; (5) use of technology both as a means of communication and in terms of platforms of creating news.

There was no affiliation with any of the individuals in either organisation before entering. This gave me an advantage as I was able to come to both news organisations with fresh eyes and no allegiance or bias toward or against how they were going about their news gathering process. The reason for approaching it this way was to avoid one of the key criticisms of ethnographic research: the question of partiality in being overly familiar or sympathetic to subjects being studied. According to Hammersley & Atkinson (1995): 'While ethnographers may adopt a variety of roles, the usual aim throughout is to maintain a more or less marginal position, thereby providing access to participant perspectives but at the same time minimizing danger of over-rapport' (112).

3.2.2 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

‘Interviews can be an extremely important source of data: it may allow one to generate information that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain otherwise—both about events described and about perspectives and discursive strategies’ (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:131).

The second part of the cases studies included in-depth interviews at both news websites. These were conducted over time and in several different locations. Most were done during visits to both websites news operations. Additionally, some were done over the telephone if the subject was either not based at one of the newsrooms or too busy to meet. Friendly relationships were also formed with various people at the sites and thus more informal conversations continued over time.

All of the official interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed soon after they were done. In total fifteen interviews at the *latimes.com* were done with everyone from the editorial intern to the executive editor of the *latimes.com* website. At *salon.com*, sixteen different people were interviewed including the editor-in-chief and many of the bloggers. I interviewed almost anyone who was willing to give their time to the project. There was also a conscious effort to make sure a variety of positions were interviewed so that the findings were not from a singular department or job title.

The focus interview approach was used (Yin 1989). I had a set of questions but left it open to see where the interview would go. The set of questions were based on the original research questions from the study. The questions were catered to the job title of the person being interviewed but overall many of the questions remained the same no matter what the position of the person being interviewed.

I asked each person if they wished to be identified by name and not one objected. However, there were several times when a subject asked to tell me something off the record and I respected that wish. Most people were more than willing to share their experiences with their respective news gathering operations.

3.2.3 SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Supporting documents were a key source of information in painting complete pictures of these two news organisations (Jankowski and Wester 1991).

Documentation was a key way to back up the evidence from the direct observation and in-depth interviews. It provided a sort of secondary verification of the facts which were being assembled.

The first type of documentation was media about the news organisations.

Ironically, news organisations despite their desire to make transparent other areas of life are often not the most transparent places. It was very helpful to have other media about them to help gather evidence this research could not directly provide (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:160).

The second type of documentation used was internal administrative documents including news agendas, convention plans and outlines of practices.

Additionally, both sites gave me memos on their website numbers which helped in compiling profiles about the sites.

The third type of documentation was evaluations about the websites done in the 2007 State of the Media Project by the Project for Excellence in Journalism¹³.

The 2007 report did a special section on ‘A Topography of News Websites’ and both *salon.com* and *latimes.com* were featured. Although this did not replace the data gathered in this study, and indeed much had changed since the Project’s evaluation, it nonetheless gave a larger picture and filled in missing pieces as to how these websites went about constructing news online.

Finally, secondary interviews were used with two key players at the *latimes.com*. I was unable to secure interviews with a lead political blogger at *latimes.com* as well as the executive editor of the greater *Los Angeles Times* news gathering operation. Two in-depth interviews they did with other outlets were found and used them as supplementary knowledge to the findings.

3.2.4 CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analysis part of the research looked at the coverage of the 2008 General Election by the subsequent websites over a three month period from late August 2008 to November 2008, when the election ended. Using a time frame

¹³ <http://www.journalism.org>

for content analysis research on the Web, is a salient feature of most studies done using this methodology (McMillan 2000). I specifically used the conventions and debates as key days for content analysis.

The content analysis was used to see how the planning compared to the actual dissemination of content. It is what researcher Klaus Krippendorff terms, identification analysis. 'Identification concerns what something is, what it is to be called, or to what class it belongs...In content analysis, the simplest task requires that a decision be made concerning whether something has occurred, was said, or has been printed' (2004:54).

It was a necessary part of the case study in order to fully understand the process of news-making which ends with dissemination of content. In using content analysis as a form of research I sought to provide a larger picture. As Krippendorff describes it: 'As a research technique, content analysis provides new insights, increases a researcher's understanding of particular phenomena, or informs practical decisions' (2004: 18)

Due to the ephemeral nature of the World Wide Web it becomes very difficult for a single researcher to conduct an expansive content analysis of a website, therefore before beginning parameters were set for monitoring content. First, I took screen shots of both homepages and for *latimes.com* the Campaign '08 Landing Page during the days and times chosen to capture content. Second, I wrote down the titles of all the articles and blog posts both websites had put up that had a time or date stamp of the day of sampling and that solely related to the presidential campaigns. Third, I wrote down any additional platform content each website used to tell the election story whether it be cartoons or a video,

again only if it was put on the website the day of sampling. Finally, I read each new blog post, again solely related to the presidential campaign, which was time stamped with the day chosen to sample and made a list of the sources used in each story.

In order to analyse the content analysis I first counted which technological platforms the websites were using to tell their story. This fell under the multi-platform tenant that is shaping the role of the journalist. This information was used to see how multi-platform each website was but also to see if the resources they had allocated ahead of time, such as sending a video-journalist to a convention, actually made it on to the websites.

Second, I analysed the number and types of sources for each blog post. The sole concern behind this part of the content analysis was to see if blogs were indeed providing new pieces of ‘real’ reporting as both organisations were telling me they did. I wanted to see if that was backed up by actual blog posts or if most pieces simply ended up being an analysis of other journalist’s original reporting. Each blog post that was related to the Presidential election was noted and the source(s) for each was written down.

Thirdly, I looked at the titles of all the various content related to the Presidential election to see if any themes arose. I wanted to gauge if certain narratives were being followed. It became clear from the beginning that certain stories were of much more interest to the online user, so I wanted to see how both websites were handling this seeming user interest in coverage.

In total, content analysis was done eleven times beginning August 25, 2008 and ending November 4, 2008. During each day of analysis, the websites were analysed approximately three times during the day. The day of the election, content was recorded over six times in order to keep up with the amount of news being produced.

3.3 CONSTRAINTS AND SETBACKS

The first and perhaps biggest constraint, in doing the direct observation portion of the fieldwork was access, which most scholars note as one of the biggest barriers to doing ethnographic research (Lindlof 1995). I began by writing letters to the two news organisations asking for entrance. They were both generous in giving me access to their newsrooms but the amount of time I was able to spend in both places was not as much as was set up in the ideal methodology. The *latimes.com* constraints came due to the amount of time journalists were able to give me and *salon.com*, due to location constraints.

Access to the *Los Angeles Times* newsroom was given through the Interactive Technology editor in early June. I then began networking and used my knowledge of other players in the newsroom to gain access to different parts of the news gathering operation. Once the national convention coverage began, I used my connection with the Web Deputy for the National Desk to gain access to the newsroom during the conventions and debates. The two rounds of layoffs and restructuring while I was observing changed the dynamic of the newsrooms

and made it at times difficult to gain access on the days that would have been ideal.

The direct observation element at *salon.com* was divided into two parts. I first visited the San Francisco office in June of 2008. The plan was to spend three days in the newsroom but the first day at the office the editor had decided to work from home; which consequently, gave me only two days with the staff there. The case was similar when visiting the New York office of *salon.com*. The New York news editor was not in the office many of the days that I was in the city and therefore the data could only be gathered during the limited period access was given to the office and located in New York City.

The second constraint was the amount of content analysis due to the websites being updated frequently throughout the day. Content and layout on both websites are constantly changing and therefore recording it becomes a difficult task. It quickly became too much information and so the ambition of the analysis had to be scaled back soon after beginning to two to three times per day, on the chosen days.

The third constraint encountered was time. The fact the decision to focus on the Presidential Election provided a time period to observe the news gathering but it also gave a hard ending date to collect the fieldwork data. There was potentially an endless amount of information to be gathered and the news kept going even when the record-keeping stopped.

3.4 CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH CALLS

This research, as noted in the Introduction, is not going to answer all of the questions about how these news organisations' work. It is limited in its scope by having only a singular researcher and the amount of time that was able to be given to the research. Also, its aims are to find out about the news making process and although part of that is economic, the creation of news on a daily basis is mostly done outside of that bubble so that focus was taken out of this study.

There are many areas of further research that this study would benefit from including adding in-depth interviews with many of the economic players within both of these organisations. Additionally, it would be of great benefit to do a content analysis of what other news organisations offline output where doing at the same time concurrent with the content analysis of these sites. It could add added emphasis to the uniqueness of the online content and how the online nature of news is affecting the offline output.

Overall, however these mixed method case studies provide a depth and richness to the understanding of newsmaking for an online medium. It highlights all of the factors that come together to create a new medium that is increasingly dissimilar from the old one (Boczkowski 2004). As Jane Singer points out in her analysis of the importance of ethnographic research:

Ethnography will continue to be an optimal method for exploring the nature and effects of this enormous cultural transition for journalists and journalism. It is

ideally suited to understanding not just causes or effects, not just products or practices, but also the processes that underlie them, the perceptions that drive and are driven by them, and the people who have always been at the heart of the journalistic enterprise, whatever its iteration (2008: 170).

Chapter 4-Journalism Goes Online: A Brief

History

‘If newspapers wish to keep both their businesses and their voices, then engaging with the online world is a non-negotiable imperative’ (2005: 6): according to Emily Bell, former new media editor at *The Guardian*. Much has changed in online journalism since the very first news websites hit the ground running in the early 1990s. But one thing has not changed, every year and with every story, the World Wide Web increases its audience, credibility, and uniqueness as a source of news and information for millions around the world (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008).

The rush to capitalize on a new, often misunderstood, technology led most offline journalistic outlets to set up on the World Wide Web soon after its inception. And in fact by 1996 most had done so (Levins 1997 in Salwen et al. 2005). The rise from fledgling supplementary addendums to their TV, radio or newspaper counterparts to full-on suppliers of news of their own has been a very bumpy ride. It has been full of trial and error. The very high (elections, 9/11, and the Iraq War) to the very low (Princess Diana death rumours, lack of business models and the ongoing fight for legitimacy). The journey has been helped by the proliferation of technology, giving those all over the world access to both UK and US journalistic websites. Is it the ‘End of Offline’ as Bell questioned in

her above mentioned article? That has yet to be seen, but it is the beginning of an online journey for journalism with no ending date in sight.

There are several ways to look at how online journalism came to be a source of news for global audiences within a decade of its inception. Very few academic journals decided to track the growth of the Internet and its impact on journalism as it was occurring in the early to mid-1990s. They instead chose to focus on how news was being covered and the growth of twenty hour news cable programs. The exception to this was the American Journalism Review, who since 1995 chose to dedicate numerous articles to the growth of online journalism and how it was being accomplished¹⁴. From the late 1990s through to today, the Internet's impact on journalism has been chronicled in numerous ways but in the early advent few seemed to be analyzing the new medium, rather seeing it as a supplement to other journalism platforms.

The climate in which online journalism has been looked at historically is a hostile one. Much of it has to do with the perceived encroachment of online journalism on the newspaper audience. One interesting aspect of the decline in newspaper audience is that at the same time as its readership was declining, so was the viewership in major US national TV news programs. Indeed from the years 1993 to 2006 the decline in those claiming to watch nightly network news in the US was staggering. Sixty percent reported watching nightly network news regularly in 1993 while the number drops to twenty eight percent in 2006 (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007).

¹⁴ See AJR.org archives a full list of articles related to the Web. In particular, JD Lasica wrote extensively about the newly expanding role of the Internet in the field of journalism

Subsequently, those who claimed to have ‘read a newspaper yesterday’ in 1994 was fifty eight percent, dropping to just forty percent in 2006 (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007) and a further loss in 2008 to thirty four percent (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2008a). According to the Pew Research Center’s 2008 Biennial News Consumption Survey: ‘[S]ince the early 1990s, the proportion of Americans saying they read a newspaper on a typical day has declined by about 40%; the proportion that regularly watches nightly network news has fallen by half’ (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2008a).

The story in the UK is a similar one. Numbers have steadily declined for people reading traditional press and watching nightly news bulletins. BARB (Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board Ltd.)¹⁵ has shown that over the past ten years the audience for nightly news bulletins has seen a marked decline as well. The highest BBC audience for the 10 O’clock News in the first week of July 1998 was nearly seven million (BARB 1998). As of 2009, that number is closer to five million. The BBC did create a 24-hour news channel, BBC 24, in 1997 but the average viewership, according to a 2004 study is only about two million for an entire week (Wilkes 2004). Additionally, ITV News saw their nightly news bulletin go from an audience of a little over nine and a half million in July of 1998 to almost three million in 2009 (BARB 1998, BARB 2009). There are again other explanations for this decline as ITV has cancelled and rescheduled

¹⁵ <http://www.barb.co.uk>

the bulletin several times, leading to viewer confusion (OFCOM 2003). But even so, it is a remarkable drop within a decade.

Is it fair to say that this has all been caused by online? Statistics on both sides of the Atlantic seem to say no. Polls and research done on the topic have found that most people use online journalism as a supplement to other platforms including TV, radio and print (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2006, Ahlers 2006). Users seem to still rely on print, radio and most of all television for their primary news sources. The current statistics on news usage will be explored further in this chapter. The online audience, nonetheless, is a huge concern for most established journalistic outlets. This is why all of them have gone online to establish a presence and take a piece of the audience that is migrating to the World Wide Web.

The following chapter aims to give an account of how the Internet came to be a medium people go to get their news. I will argue that there were two major changes occurring around the turn of the century that led to this shift. First of all, there is the penetration of the Internet into the everyday lives of people. This made it accessible for millions to use the Web. The ease of use was aided by mainstream media companies setting up a presence on the Internet. These sites changed vastly over the last fifteen years but have retained the main focus: to provide news to a growing online news audience. People flocked online both at work and in their homes as the technology became more understood and the companies found there was an audience there to provide their product to.

Secondly, as the Internet grew and became readily available to millions not just in the US and UK, but all over the world, specific stories were leading people online for their news and fundamentally reshaping the way mainstream media and its audience defines journalism. I have termed these stories ‘watershed moments’ in the use of online news. Each of these events provides a unique look at how this new medium is challenging the journalist and journalistic outlets by shattering key concepts of how news is created and the parameters within which it functions.

4.1 TECHNOLOGY

The use of the World Wide Web to access news and information may seem like an overnight reality but the truth is it took several years for users of the Internet to catch up with innovation. There have been many sources documenting the invention of the Internet and its subsequent rise to mainstream success, mainly from Internet authors (Roscoe 1999, Leiner et al. 2003). I will not try and retread that territory but instead give a very brief account of the rise of Internet technology within the framework of news. It is almost impossible to overstate just how important the technology is in understanding what has changed in journalism. As scholar Jean Chalaby states: ‘While many socioeconomic and cultural factors play a role in the transformation of the news media, this causal complexity should not distract us from analysing the considerable impact of technology on the media’ (Chalaby 2007:235).

This section analyses the penetration of the Internet over the last fifteen years. It also explores the number of people using the web specifically for news and how they use that news. Finally, it charts the growth of the presence of news websites on the Web. All of these changes happened because of technology innovation which has revolutionized the journalistic news-making process.

4.1.1 PENETRATION

Both in the USA and the UK, it is almost impossible to figure out the exact penetration of the Internet into our daily lives. Most studies give different numbers as to the current saturation within each subsequent country and often do not take into account work use or people getting Internet via things like mobile phones. There is some data, however, which paints a broad picture of the technology that is making huge gains around the world at a very rapid pace.

The early numbers for Internet penetration put the United States users at around twenty million in 1996 (Lasica 1996). The number of households with modem access doubled from January 1996 to January 1999, going from a little over eighteen million to over thirty seven and a half million (MediaMetrix 1999). Internet penetration in the UK was at around thirty nine percent in late 1999 (Ingram 1999).

A 2000 study by MediaMetrix sought to give a perspective of the growth of the Internet on a larger scale. The study looked at Australia, Canada, France, Germany, UK and US audiences. It found that on an average day forty million

people used the Internet at home, with over one hundred and eight million different people using it over the entire month. At this point, US users were dominating the overall Internet population with sixty eight percent of users coming from there and less than ten percent from each of the other countries (MediaMetrix 2000). A study done in January 2002 gave a glimpse of the global online audience. The worldwide Internet population grew to a total of almost three hundred and nine million people, the non-US audience representing almost one hundred and seventy eight million of that (comScore 2002).

A 2006 study by Pew Research put internet penetration in the US at seventy percent and home broadband (a quicker way of accessing the Internet) at thirty seven percent (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2006). Another study by USC Annenberg (2004) put the figure a bit higher at seven percent or about one hundred and forty one million people.

A 2006 comprehensive study, that claimed to be the most accurate since metering began, showed the Internet worldwide audience at six hundred and ninety four million people (15+). This total represented fourteen percent of the world's population (comScore 2006). 'Today, the online audience in the U.S. represents less than a quarter of Internet users across the globe, versus ten years ago when it accounted for two-thirds of the global audience': said Peter Daboll, president and CEO of comScore Media Metrix (comScore 2006).

A study done around the same time, by eMarketer put the worldwide Internet audience even higher at one billion (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007)

with eight hundred and forty five million people using it regularly. According to the study the US was still leading the overall market with China coming in second.

Table 4.1- World Internet Use

| World Regions | Population (Est. 2008) | Internet Users Dec. 31, 2000 | Internet Users Dec. 31, 2008 | Penetration (% of Population) | Users Growth 2000-2008 |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Africa | 975,330,899 | 4,514,400 | 54,171,500 | 5.6 % | 1,100.0 % |
| Asia | 3,780,819,792 | 114,304,000 | 650,361,843 | 17.2 % | 469.0 % |
| Europe | 803,903,540 | 105,096,093 | 390,141,073 | 48.5 % | 271.2 % |
| Middle East | 196,767,614 | 3,284,800 | 45,861,346 | 23.3 % | 1,296.2 % |
| North America | 337,572,949 | 108,096,800 | 246,822,936 | 73.1 % | 128.3 % |
| Latin America | 581,249,892 | 18,068,919 | 173,619,140 | 29.9 % | 860.9 % |
| Oceanic / Australia | 34,384,384 | 7,620,480 | 20,593,751 | 59.9 % | 170.2 % |
| World Total | 6,710,029,070 | 360,985,492 | 1,581,571,589 | 23.6 % | 338.1 % |

Source: Internet World Stats 2008

The most recent numbers come from a comprehensive study from Internet World Stats¹⁶. The numbers are based on world population and Internet usage as of December 31, 2008. As you can see from Table 4.1, of the over six point seven billion people in the world, almost one point six billion of them are Internet users. In percentage points, that is nearly twenty four percent of the

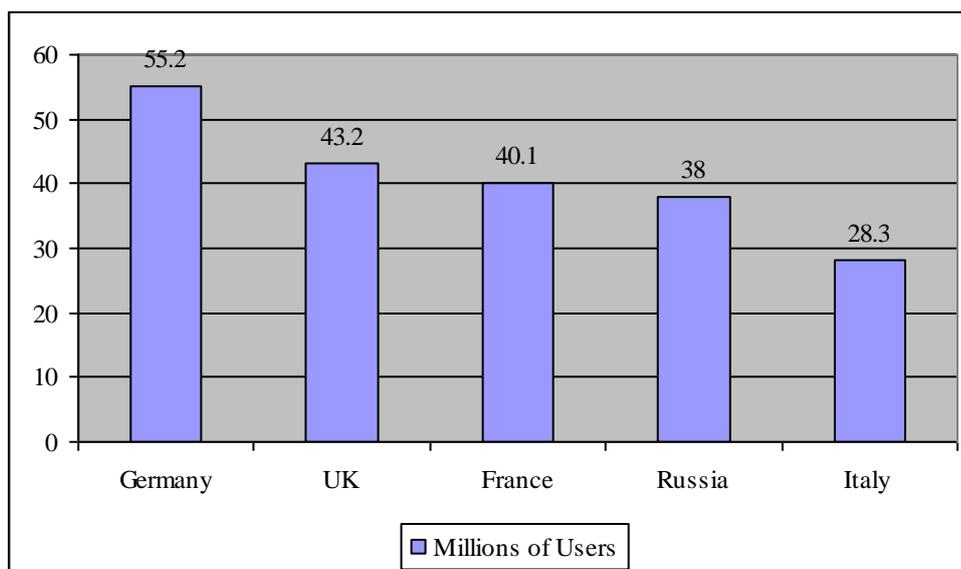
¹⁶ <http://www.internetworldstats.com>

world's population. Not only that, it is an almost three hundred and forty percent increase from the year 2000 when around three hundred and sixty million people were Internet users.

According to this research, the biggest number of Internet users comes from Asia followed by Europe, North America and Latin America/Caribbean.

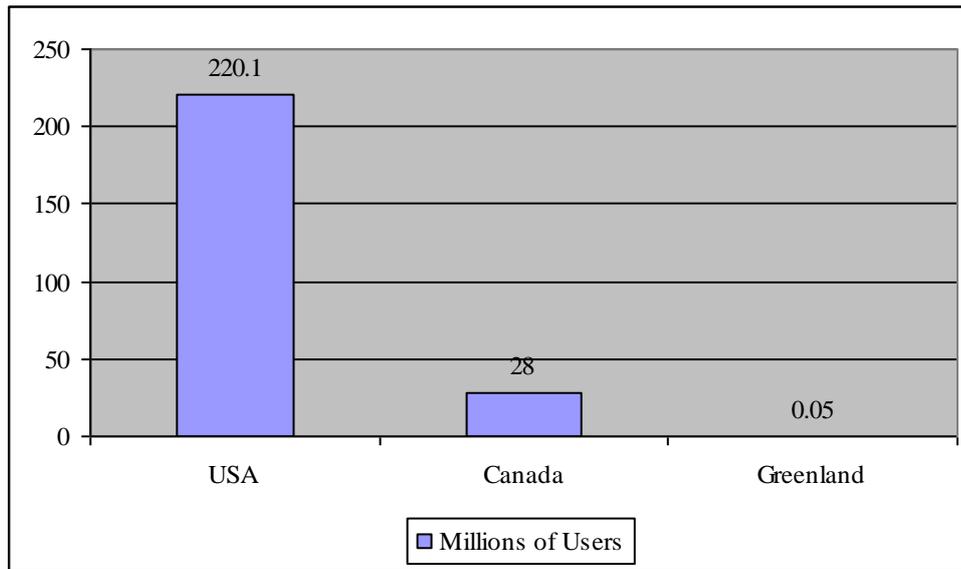
However, if you look at penetration based on the population of these regions North America holds a much larger amount of Internet users at around seventy three percent of the population followed by Oceania/Australia, Europe and Latin America/Caribbean respectively. The saturation of the Internet in just eight short years is astounding. The Middle East has seen an almost thirteen hundred percent increase which is similar to what Africa has experienced with its eleven hundred percent increase in users. Every single region in the world has seen triple digit increases of users since the century began.

Table 4.2- Top 5 Countries in Europe for Internet Use



Source: Internet World Stats 2008

Table 4.3- Internet Users in North America



Source: Internet World Stats 2007

The numbers for Internet penetration both in the United Kingdom and the United States, as shown in Table 4.2 and Table 4.3, show higher than average numbers of users compared to the rest of the world. In the United Kingdom of the almost sixty one million people who live there over forty three million are online. This is approximately seventy one percent of the population. The United States percentage is similar at around seventy two percent of the population using the Internet. The numbers show this is about two hundred and twenty million of the over three hundred and three million people in the population. From the year 2000, this is a one hundred and eighty percent growth and one hundred and thirty one percent growth respectively.

This rapid expansion of the Internet is often compared to the growth of television less than fifty years earlier. However, television saw a much slower increase in penetration when it was introduced commercially back in the 1930s

(Federal Communications Commission History 2005). It was brought to US and UK markets commercially in 1939 and 1937, respectively (Abramson 1998). However, US statistics show that in 1950 there was a mere nine percent penetration rate. Five years later it was sixty five percent. Ten years on, television could be found in eight seven percent of homes in the USA (Television Bureau of Advertising Report 2007). It is the same story for much of the UK with a much slower penetration rate than the one we see occurring with the Internet. The rise of television in homes during the 1950s (around fifteen years after their initial introduction into the commercial market) was due to both the advancement in technology that made TV sets more affordable as well as watershed news events. This is also what can be seen with the Internet albeit at a much faster pace.

4.1.2 NEWS USE ONLINE IN THE USA AND UK

Beyond just technology penetration it is also important to understand how many people use the Internet for news. It is naïve to assume that just because news is available online that people are accessing that information. Traditional media (television, radio and newspapers), even today, is still the main way people get their news (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2008a). According to a study by Pew Research Center for People and the Press: ‘[R]elatively few Americans report the internet as their sole source of news. Instead, the vast majority of people who get news from the web also are using traditional sources. Of the 29 percent who got news online yesterday, 84 percent also got news from TV, radio or newspaper. Just five percent of Americans got their news only from

the web' (2008a:8). These statistics are true both in the US and the UK and help us to frame the argument when understanding the impact of technology on the journalists and how they do their job.

There is not much information from the late 1990s as to the number of people going online for news. The Pew Research Center has charted the rise of Internet in news in the USA since 1995. It shows that the audience goes from about two percent in 1995 to thirty one percent in 2006. The six percent gain between 2006 and 2008 showed even more people going online for news at thirty seven percent. This contrasts with the aforementioned declines in TV watching, newspaper reading and radio listening. This news usage chart (Table 4.4) from the Pew Research Center for People and the Press (2008) shows Americans news habits over time.

Table 4.4-US News Use Over Time

| Newspaper Readership Declines; Internet News Increases | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | <u>1993</u> | <u>1996</u> | <u>1998</u> | <u>2000</u> | <u>2002</u> | <u>2004</u> | <u>2006</u> | <u>2008</u> |
| <i>Listened/read yesterday...</i> | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Newspaper | 58* | 50 | 48 | 47 | 41 | 42 | 40 | 34 |
| Radio news | 47* | 44 | 49 | 43 | 41 | 40 | 36 | 35 |
| <i>Regularly watch...</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Cable TV news | -- | -- | -- | -- | 33 | 38 | 34 | 39 |
| Local TV News | 77 | 65 | 64 | 56 | 57 | 59 | 54 | 52 |
| Nightly network news | 60 | 42 | 38 | 30 | 32 | 34 | 28 | 29 |
| Network morning news | -- | -- | 23 | 20 | 22 | 22 | 23 | 22 |
| Online for news three or more days a week | -- | 2** | 13 | 23 | 25 | 29 | 31 | 37 |
| * From 1994; ** From 1995. | | | | | | | | |

Source: The Pew Research Center for The People & The Press 2008a

The only other medium to see a rise in numbers (nightly network news and network morning news are virtually flat) was cable TV news. Online news, after staying relatively flat for a few years, is once again making large gains.

Table 4.5-Online News Growth

| Regularly go online for news* | <i>General public</i> | | | <i>Internet users</i> | | |
|--|-----------------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------------|---------------|
| | <u>1998</u> | <u>2008</u> | <u>Change</u> | <u>1998</u> | <u>2008</u> | <u>Change</u> |
| | % | % | | % | % | |
| Total | 13 | 37 | +24 | 35 | 55 | +20 |
| Men | 17 | 40 | +23 | 42 | 59 | +17 |
| Women | 8 | 34 | +26 | 27 | 51 | +24 |
| Black | 8 | 24 | +16 | 24 | 45 | +21 |
| White | 13 | 38 | +25 | 36 | 54 | +18 |
| 18-29 | 18 | 42 | +24 | 33 | 54 | +21 |
| 30-49 | 16 | 45 | +29 | 37 | 59 | +22 |
| 50+ | 5 | 27 | +22 | 32 | 52 | +20 |
| College grad+ | 24 | 61 | +37 | 39 | 67 | +28 |
| Some college | 16 | 44 | +28 | 35 | 57 | +22 |
| HS or less | 7 | 19 | +12 | 30 | 39 | +9 |

* Go online for news at least three days a week.

Source: The Pew Research Center for The People & The Press 2008a

Table 4.6-Daily Online News Consumption

| Since '06, a Rise in <i>Daily</i> Online News Consumption | | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| <i>Go online for news daily</i> | <u>2006</u> | <u>2008</u> | <u>Change</u> |
| | % | % | |
| Total | 18 | 25 | +7 |
| Men | 22 | 28 | +6 |
| Women | 14 | 22 | +8 |
| Black | 9 | 14 | +5 |
| White | 19 | 25 | +6 |
| 18-29 | 15 | 26 | +11 |
| 30-49 | 24 | 30 | +6 |
| 50-64 | 20 | 26 | +6 |
| 65+ | 7 | 11 | +4 |
| College grad+ | 32 | 44 | +12 |
| Some college | 18 | 30 | +12 |
| HS or less | 10 | 11 | +1 |

Based on general public.

Source: The Pew Research Center for The People & The Press 2008a

The two tables above break down who is consuming online news and also daily access of online news. As the chart shows, the higher level of education, the more likely a person is to consume online news. There has also been a ‘substantial’ rise in the proportion of Americans who get their news online every day. It went from eighteen percent in 2006 to twenty five percent in 2008.

These numbers are confirmed by Nielsen/NetRatings a body that monitors hits on news websites. A Nielsen/Net Ratings (2002a) report noted that the US news audience began to see a rise in 2002. It showed that five of the main sources for Internet financial news were significantly up.

Traffic to the *LA Times* Web site surged 37 percent from 451,000 surfers to 616,000. The *Chicago Tribune* site jumped 29 percent with 561,000 visitors compared to 435,000 visitors during the previous week. The *Wall Street Journal* attracted 477,000 surfers jumping 29 percent, while *forbes.com* drew 467,000 unique visitors rising 27 percent. Rounding out the list, *marketwatch.com* gained 23 percent more surfers for the week to 1.8 million (Nielsen/Net Ratings 2002a).

These numbers were confirmed in a 2009 report by Nielsen Online (Saba 2009). According to the study, more than half of the top thirty newspaper websites gained double digit percentages of visitors over the previous month. The three biggest winners were the *N.Y Daily News Online Edition* which saw a thirty eight percent rise in users; the *latimes.com* which saw thirty six percent rise in users; and finally *politico.com*, a net native site, that saw a twenty nine percent increase in its users over the previous month.

The 2006 report published by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that: ‘Some 50 million Americans turn to the internet for news on a typical day, a new high water mark for online news-gathering that coincides with rapid growth of broadband adoption in American homes’ (2006:2). The report found that penetration was responsible for a twenty five percent growth in online consumption over four years. It also said that increased quality from online news websites could also have led to the increase. The study showed that since March 2000, nineteen million people got their news online on a typical day while today asking the same question in December 2005 the number is at forty four million. The study also showed that when the same question was rephrased it garnered a fifty million person response. This is a huge growth over a relatively short period of time.

The same study showed that one in three Americans regularly get their news online. The number was at about one in four in 2000. However, the study did have an interesting finding when it comes to how people use the Internet for news.

The web serves mostly as a supplement to other sources rather than a primary source of news. Those who use the web for news still spend more time getting news from other sources than they do getting news online. In addition, web news consumers emphasize speed and convenience over detail. Of the 23 percent who got news on the internet yesterday, only a minority visited newspaper websites. Instead, websites that include quick updates of major headlines, such as MSNBC, Yahoo, and CNN, dominate the web-news landscape (2006:4).

Also interesting to note is the amount of time Americans spend with news is flat, according to the 2008 Pew biennial study, even with the increasing availability of it over multiple platforms.

While somewhat fewer people are following the news on a typical day, on average, Americans, including young people, are spending about the same amount of time with news as they did a decade ago. This year's news consumption survey finds that people spend just over an hour—66 minutes—watching, reading, and listening to the news on a given day. Nearly half of that time (30 minutes) is spent watching television news, 14 minutes listening to news on the radio and 13 minutes reading a newspaper. The average time spent getting news online among the American public is just nine minutes (2008:9).

However, as the above statement mentions, this does not mean that people are as interested in news as they used to be on a daily basis. In fact: '...the proportion of young people getting *no* news on a typical day has increased substantially over the past decade' (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2008a:5). As you can see from Table 4.7, over ten years the amount of young people who say they got no news yesterday has increased by nine percent. The only age group who engage with news on a daily basis the same amount as 1998 is the 50-64 year old demographic. Add to this information the statistics that 'just of a third of Americans younger than 25 say they enjoy keeping up with the news a lot, while nearly as many (26%) say they get little or no enjoyment from following the news' (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2008a:31), and the picture for news producers looks to be an uphill climb in the future.

Table 4.7-Decreasing News Use

| Going Newsless | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| <i>No news yesterday...</i> | <u>1998</u> | <u>2008</u> | <u>Change</u> |
| | % | % | |
| Total | 14 | 19 | +5 |
| 18-24 | 25 | 34 | +9 |
| 25-29 | 17 | 21 | +4 |
| 30-34 | 15 | 22 | +7 |
| 35-49 | 14 | 17 | +3 |
| 50-64 | 14 | 14 | 0 |
| 65+ | 6 | 13 | +7 |

Source: The Pew Research Center for The People & The Press 2008a

The news audience online in the UK began to rise in May 2002 (Nielsen/NetRatings 2002b).

The UK's most popular source for news and information is the *news.bbc.co.uk*, which regularly attracts a unique audience of at least two million visitors per month...In terms of the newspapers' websites, *guardian.co.uk* receives the most visitors, regularly attracting a unique audience of over one million visitors per month to its site. In the last six months, its audience peaked in May 2002 with 1,158,000 visitors from home and work combined. *Cnn.com*, *ft.com* and the *telegraph.co.uk* follow in terms of unique audience, with on average half a million visitors per month (2002b:1).

A March 2007 study by HitWise UK puts *news.bbc.co.uk* on top of the UK with around a fourteen and a half percent market share. Overall, the study showed that News and Media Industry accounted for just over four percent of all UK Internet visits, which translates to one in every twenty four.

More recent numbers (January 2009) from ABCElectronic, which monitors newspaper circulation figures and online monthly unique visitors, showed a

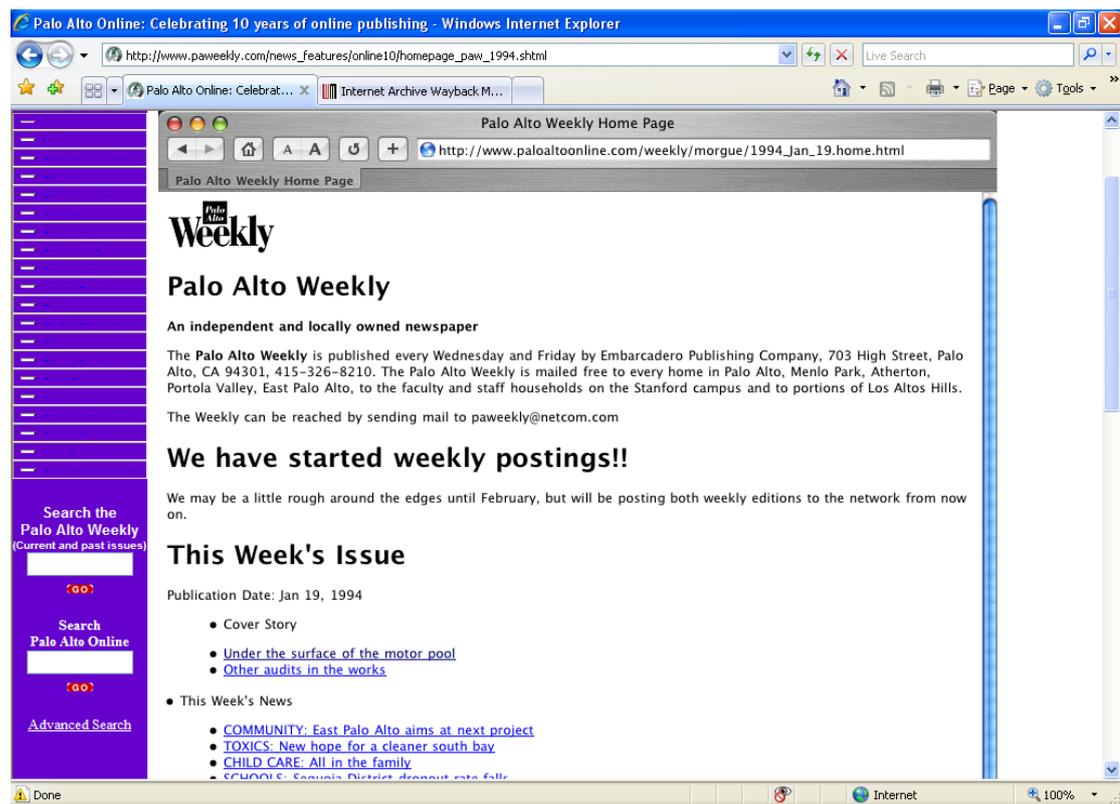
substantial growth between those early 2002 statistics and today (ABC Electronic 2009). The top four UK newspaper parentage sites all saw huge gains from January 2008 to January 2009. The Mail Online (parentage site of the *Daily Mail*) went from almost eighteen million unique visitors to nearly twenty three million. Times Online (parentage site of *The Times*) saw an almost fifty two percent rise in its traffic from fifteen million unique visitors to nearly twenty three million. The biggest change in year over year numbers was seen by the Telegraph (parentage of *The Daily Telegraph*) which went from around twelve million unique visitors in 2008 to nearly twenty six million in January of 2009, which is an almost one hundred and ten percent year over year. The biggest numbers were from *guardian.co.uk* (parentage site of *The Guardian*) which now has almost thirty million unique visitors a month, up from around twenty million the year before. However, a majority of these users are not from the UK. For example, although the *telegraph.co.uk* has seen huge gains in its monthly unique visitors more than seventeen million of them are from other countries with around nine million from the UK. Although this is the biggest differential of all the sites, the numbers are comparable with the others.

A recent Reuters Institute study sought to better understand news use in the UK as total unique visitors does not necessarily indicate UK news use. According to the report: 'it is clear that the Internet still accounts for a tiny segment of overall news consumption. In the short term, the web shows no signs of supplanting established modes of news consumption' (Currah 2009:23). However the study does go on to say that nearly ten million people now identify the internet as the most useful way to get news. These numbers show that although the numbers or

percentages for online news use in the UK are not at USA levels, there is still a sizeable desire for online content that is only growing.

4.1.3 ONLINE NEWS GROWTH

Figure 4.1- First Newspaper Website



Source: Palo Alto Weekly website

The Palo Alto Weekly has the distinction of the first newspaper (or indeed any traditional media outlet) to publish its entire editorial content on the Internet¹⁷ (Salwen et al. 2005:3). It launched on January 19, 1994 first as <http://www.service.com/paw> and later became www.paweekly.com. The first UK publication to launch online was *The Daily Telegraph*. It began publishing what

¹⁷ For a timeline of Palo Alto Weekly's online advent see <http://www.paweekly.com/aboutpao/timeline.php>

it called the 'Electronic Telegraph' in November 1994. ABC News did launch a news section in partnership with American Online in October 1994 (Gunther 1995). It was, however, not until over a year later when they officially launched their own site with their own independent content and therefore is not viewed historically as the first offline news organisation to create an online product.

Many other big offline news brands in the US launched websites throughout the 1990s. *Cnn.com* launched in August of 1995 followed in the same month by NBC. NBC collaborated with Microsoft to create *msnbc.com*, which has remained a partnership to this day (Gunther 1995). The BBC was a bit late in its online offerings but has since dominated the UK online landscape with the number one visited news site in the country (Hitwise UK 2007). Its efforts were launched in November of 1997. The Guardian Unlimited established its web presence in January 1999 but despite its late entry has risen to the top not just in the UK but in America as well (Nielsen/NetRatings 2003). Other notable traditional media outlets who established a presence online (according to their subsequent websites) include *The New York Times* (January 1996), the *Washington Post* (June 1996) as well as the *Los Angeles Times* who began publishing online in April 1996. Overall the boom year for Internet news websites was 1996. The year started with just a handful of web-based newspapers and by the end there were over sixteen hundred worldwide (Levins 1997 cited in Salwen et al. 2005).

It is not only the sites that do original journalism that are seeing the number of hits on their websites grow but the news aggregate/portal sites as well. Google

News and Yahoo News both hold top spots in ratings numbers in people going online for news. According to Google's Europe Manager: 'At Google, we don't own content, nor do we create it: we help people find it... Google News enables people to search on any subject, and it then links them to stories from thousands of news outlets around the world'(Arora 2006). The only one site that comes close to these two is BBC News online (Hitwise UK 2007). These portal sites do not do original reporting but rather are a 'one stop shop' for all the news sources and agencies around the world. This is confirmed by the Reuters Institute study which estimates that: '...over 70 percent of the traffic to the leading UK newspaper websites originates from an external hyperlink: search results are believed to be the dominant generator of traffic' (Currah 2009:33).

According to the 2009 Project for Excellence in Journalism 'State of the News Media' Report, although there is no one method for tracking numbers the big sites have remained steady in the past few years and are still growing bigger. According to a combination of reports by ComScore, Nielsen and Hitwise the top sites are Yahoo News, AOL News, Google News (Aggregators) with MSNBC and CNN (Original News Gathering Operations) keeping pace. The reports all suggest that all of these sites are only seeing large amounts of growth with many approaching a monthly unique visitor total of forty million users.

4.2 WATERSHED MOMENTS

'This particular growth phenomenon for online news media is further enhanced by news events that attract a larger amount of public attention, whether they are

war, disaster, celebrity news or anything else' (Salwen et al. 2005:250). It is not surprising to anyone that the growth of the audience in online news cannot be separated from news itself. As with television before it, the online news websites have seen huge growth in their audience after big events have occurred.

Television saw its expansion in news viewership after a momentous decade of news in the 1950s and early 1960s. In the US there was the Suez crises of 1956, the launch of Sputnik in October 1957, the sending of troops to Arkansas in order to enforce desegregation in the public schools, Fidel Castro's rise to power in 1959, the Nixon/Kennedy debates of 1960 but perhaps the event that finalized television news' place in American homes was the assassination of the President John F. Kennedy Jr. (Tracey 1998). This event more than any other brought the nation to a standstill and made television the place people went to for news.

If there were a single event that one could point to in the growth of the online audience, the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 would be it. It not only led American audiences online but people around the world logged on to find out any and all information they could about what was going on. Mainstream journalism was not the only information source to see a huge growth after September 11, the blog (an online diary or web log) became notable after the events (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2002). This thesis deals with the issue of blogs in subsequent chapters but it is worth noting here the implications for the entire World Wide Web the terrorist attacks had in making blogs part of online news.

It is simplistic to say that 9-11 was the first ‘big event’ to send people to the Internet looking to online journalism for information. I have identified six events that are ‘watershed’ moments in leading people online and to the expansion of the Internet as a source of news. They are the Oklahoma City Bombing, the TWA crash of 1996, the death of Diana Princess of Wales, the scandal surrounding the relationship of then US President Bill Clinton and his intern Monica Lewinsky, 9-11 and finally the war in Iraq. This list is heavily influenced by Stuart Allan’s *Online News* (2006) in which he charts the rise of online news.

These news stories not only increased the online audience but also exploited some of the unique features and in some cases faults of the World Wide Web as a new medium for news. The issues of immediacy, gatekeeping and who supplies news are just some of the tenets of journalism that were affected directly by the coverage the online journalists gave to these events. These historical dates are not an exhaustive account of all the moments that have come to define online journalism, however, each provided the Internet audience with something new and led them online for their news.

4.2.1 OKLAHOMA CITY BOMBING-ONLINE FIRST

On April 19, 1995, around 9:03am, just after parents dropped their children off at day care at the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, the unthinkable happened. A massive bomb inside a rental truck exploded, blowing half of the nine-story building into oblivion. A stunned nation watched as the bodies of men, women and children were pulled from the

rubble for nearly two weeks. When the smoke cleared and the exhausted rescue workers packed up and left, 168 people were dead in the worst terrorist attack on US soil (Oklahoma Bombing Investigation Committee 2007).

The bombings occurred right as news organisations were setting up their own presence on the Web. It was still before many mainstream outlets had gone online and thus provided an interesting look, on a very small scale, of what was to come. *Usatoday.com* was only in their third day of publishing online.

According to the editor of the online edition of the paper at the time: ‘We had quite the baptism by fire... But, you know newspeople. Everybody loved it’ (Cichowski in Cochran 1995). *The Raleigh News and Observer* had also gone online only months before the blast but saw a huge jump in numbers after they started posting information on the Internet for their readers. The online site¹⁸ went from about two hundred and fifty thousand hits a day to four hundred and fifteen thousand on the day of the bombing. They saw one point four million hits for the entire week and two million the next week (Cochran 1995).

American Journalism Review Editor Rem Rieder (1997) identified three key changes that were beginning to occur in online journalism with this story. First he noted that most traditional journalists still viewed the online world with hostility and used their websites to recycle stories from their primary outlets

This could be seen on the burgeoning news websites, for although there was a huge jump in numbers, there was still a lack of information available to those going online. Most newspapers and network news sites only posted wire service

¹⁸ <http://www.NandO.net>

information and only a few posted pictures instead waiting for their next day newspaper editions or network news to debut their original reporting (Allan 2005).

Another further milestone in the Oklahoma City bombing case on the web was the admission of guilt by the bomber Timothy McVeigh. *The Dallas Morning News* found out about the confession first and decided to publish the information online immediately instead of waiting for the big exclusive in its paper the next day. Reider noted that the quickness with which it was published online made it impossible for McVeigh's attorney to get an injunction against the publication. It was a first for a traditional mainstream media site to use the Web as its first means of transporting the information (Rieder 1997).

Finally, Rieder argued that the Oklahoma bombing showed how media outlets can compliment each other (1997) One writer for the San Francisco Examiner put the contribution this way:

post-Oklahoma traffic between the on-line world and the news media represents a coming of age for relations between the two realms. The Internet is no longer merely an "information superhighway" buzzword, a specialist business or technology story.' In his opinion, 'the Oklahoma story had created a type of feedback loop between the news media and the online community, which possessed the potential to be either informative or treacherous (Rosenberg 1995).

Steve Outing, an online newspaper service consultant commented further about this issue in an American Journalism Review article in 1995.

I think this was a watershed news event for online newspapers, as evidenced by the big jump in traffic at news sites around the Internet. A story like this is ideal for online news operations. It's one of those events that people can't get enough news about. They don't want to wait till tomorrow's print paper arrives...with stale news. They don't have to turn on the tube and see what TV producers want to show them at a particular time (Cochran 1995).

4.2.2 TWA CRASH-RUMOURS BEGIN

On the evening of July 17, 1996, two hundred and thirty people boarded a TWA flight from New York's JFK airport to Paris's Charles DeGaulle airport. Flight 800 departed at about twenty minutes past eight that night. Ten minutes into the flight it crashed into the Atlantic Ocean killing everyone on board. The plane was absolutely destroyed. Those investigating the crash said the jet broke apart over the Atlantic at about 13,700 feet and erupted into a fireball at around 8,500 feet. One report estimated it took about twenty four seconds for the plane to hit the water (NTSB 2000).

The TWA crash was notable in the world of online journalism because of the rumours that followed the downed airliner. Many reported that it was really the United States Navy that accidentally shot a missile into the plane.¹⁹ Other people thought that a bomb was placed on board the plane. It spread quickly over the uncensored Web so much so that the FBI and Navy officials had to denounce the allegations (Lasica 1996).

¹⁹ There are several websites that are still devoted the conspiracy theories surrounding the TWA crash. They include, but are not limited to, <http://www.alt.conspiracy.com>, <http://www.activism.milita>, <http://www.survivalism.com>, <http://www.impeach.clinton.com>

Maggie Cannon, the then editor-in-chief of Computer Life, was one of several journalists who received a document allegedly proving the plane was downed by a US missile. According to Cannon: 'The nature of the Internet leads people to more readily believe rumours too. The Internet is often viewed by its users as an unfiltered, primary source of information and not to be distrusted like the traditional news media. There is almost an immediate acceptance of information on the Internet' (Cannon in Allan 2005:23). The government agencies used the Internet to get their message across and also to plea for the public's help in finding out the truth about what had happened.

The FBI initially took over the investigation and issued a statement some 16 months after the crash ruling out any criminal activity. Ultimately the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) said that it could not conclusively say what had happened but that the most likely cause was mechanical difficulties (NTSB 2000). The root problem was thought to be an electrical shortage in one of the wing's fuel tanks.

Internet rumours and conspiracy theories did not end with the official announcement by the NTSB. In fact, this crash was only the beginning of what was to come as online journalism began to shift from being another extension of a well known media outlet to a well known media outlet itself.

4.2.3 DEATH OF PRINCESS DIANA-GLOBAL VILLAGE

The sudden death of a famous world figure is not something new to the world of journalism. Newspapers, radio and television had been covering these types of

tragedies for years before Princess Diana was killed in a car crash in August 1997. However, it was the first time a huge figure like this one was killed in the age of Internet journalism and its impact on the medium was felt immediately.

The circumstances surrounding her death are still headline news to this day. On August 31, 1997 Diana and her boyfriend Dodi Al Fayed left a Paris hotel, got in a chauffeur driven car (with Diana's bodyguard also inside) and sped through the streets of the city. A car crash in a tunnel ultimately took the lives of Diana, Dodi and the car's driver but what exactly happened to cause the crash has led to conspiracy theories and great debate all over the world.

According to a *New York Times* article (Sorkin 1997), among the major news organisations with a Web presence at the time of her death (MSNBC, CNN and ABC), all of them had a significant increase in the number of visitors to their sites. Jeff Gralnick, the head of *abcnews.com* at the time, said: 'Traffic was perking along last weekend, and then almost instantly it quintupled. We had our first million page views ever on the Sunday after her death. And it was a holiday weekend' (Gralnick in Sorkin 1997). The major network and cable news stations weren't the only ones to see in uptake in users. *The Virginia Pilot's* online newspaper²⁰ saw visitors to its national area-where the Diana story was featured-increase fivefold (Wagner 1997). Chat rooms were created by the online venture of the *Newport News* and according to its creator: 'Princess Diana has generated more local interest than any news story since the service's inception' (Solomon in Wagner 1997).

²⁰ <http://www.pilotonline.com>

And these Internet sites and others utilised the technological functionality of the Web. Timelines were widely used to help people get a sense of what had happened that night. In addition, background stories on the Princess were put up as well as many images of the heavily photographed royal. Reporter Bruce Simpson noted: ‘Perhaps the key benefit of the Net as a news-delivery mechanism is the way that users can do their own research and scan huge amounts of information [in] such a short space of time while users of other media are spoon-fed whatever the news-editors feel appropriate’ (Simpson in Allan 2005: 78). One of the biggest successes of the medium was the bulletin board which allowed people to express their grief in big numbers (Sunday Times in Allan 2005:78).

Not only did the story of the death of Princess Diana send people online for the news but it was the first event on a major scale to utilize the ‘global village’ that the Internet creates. According to Reese Cleghorn: ‘Tony Blair's phrase "the people's princess" took hold around the world. But even that was not big enough, as it turned out. She was the first Queen of the Global Village, a media world that parallels our own’ (Cleghorn 1997).

4.2.4 CLINTON/LEWINSKY SCANDAL-GATEKEEPERS AND SOURCES

When Bill Clinton was elected President of the United States in 1992, allegations of marriage infidelity had already been swirling around him.²¹ These alleged cases of sexual impropriety were however never proven conclusively in court for most of the Presidents tenure. They were also not covered extensively by the mainstream press but were rather left to alternative entertainment news shows and tabloid newspapers and magazines (Williams and Carpini 2000). The exception to this was when Clinton was initially running for President in 1992 and was forced to address ‘rumours’. He and his wife, Hilary Clinton, appeared on the program 60 Minutes to vehemently deny the allegations and after their appearance much of the coverage died down.

Then in 1998, a post by independent online reporter Matt Drudge changed not only the legacy of President Clinton but of online news as well.

Figure 4.2- Drudge Report: First Post of Lewinsky/Clinton Scandal

**Web Posted: 01/17/98 23:32:47 PST -- NEWSWEEK KILLS STORY ON
WHITE HOUSE INTERN**

**BLOCKBUSTER REPORT: 23-YEAR OLD, FORMER WHITE HOUSE
INTERN, SEX RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT**

****World Exclusive****

²¹ These include alleged affairs and sexual improprieties with Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones and Kathleen Willey

****Must Credit the DRUDGE REPORT****

At the last minute, at 6 p.m. on Saturday evening, NEWSWEEK magazine killed a story that was destined to shake official Washington to its foundation: A White House intern carried on a sexual affair with the President of the United States!

The DRUDGE REPORT has learned that reporter Michael Isikoff developed the story of his career, only to have it spiked by top NEWSWEEK suits hours before publication. A young woman, 23, sexually involved with the love of her life, the President of the United States, since she was a 21-year-old intern at the White House. She was a frequent visitor to a small study just off the Oval Office where she claims to have indulged the president's sexual preference. Reports of the relationship spread in White House quarters and she was moved to a job at the Pentagon, where she worked until last month.

The young intern wrote long love letters to President Clinton, which she delivered through a delivery service. She was a frequent visitor at the White House after midnight, where she checked in the WAVE logs as visiting a secretary named Betty Curry, 57.

The DRUDGE REPORT has learned that tapes of intimate phone conversations exist.

The relationship between the president and the young woman become strained when the president believed that the young woman was bragging about the affair to others.

Source: The Drudge Report Archives

Michael Isikoff, the man who originally uncovered the affair while working at *Newsweek* magazine, was initially hopeful that Drudge's online post would go away due to the lack of credibility Drudge was seen to have.

Will the story break out into the mainstream? I wondered... But I took some refuge in thinking that as with the Willey story last July, it couldn't immediately go anywhere. Nobody knew anything, and the most important part—Starr's criminal investigation—was unknown to Drudge. There would be no obvious source to confirm what Drudge had written. Maybe it could be contained, I thought—but I doubted it (Isikoff 1999:341).

He was wrong. The Sunday morning political chat shows picked up on the post right away. They were cautious when speaking of it, due to the perceived lack of mainstream credibility the Drudge report possessed (Isikoff 1999). Four days later, however, the *Washington Post* published a piece on the affair and soon after others followed suit. *Newsweek* eventually posted online the original Isikoff story which was how the affair was uncovered in the first place.

Matt Drudge soon became a hot commodity in journalism. Everyone wanted to know who he was and where he came from. Drudge was a self-proclaimed news junkie who started his own news website after failing to secure a job in mainstream journalism. He went from Washington to Hollywood and set up an email newsletter called the Drudge Report after finding some interesting information while working in low level jobs at CBS, Television City. His newsletter soon became a website and eventually a news destination. According to Drudge, he was the first to report of the death of Princess Diana, first to talk

of one of Clinton's other paramour Kathleen Willey and first to break the alliance between Microsoft and NBC (National Press Club 1998).

Michael Salwen puts the contribution of Drudge and his report this way:

Zippergate was a defining moment for online journalism, for both better and worse. On the positive side, the incident showed that even a small online media player could influence public opinion and public policy. To some, it seemed that no longer would a relatively small, elite group of media organisations set the news agenda for the public. On the negative side, the same positive was a negative. The incident augured the breakdown, or at least the erosion, of traditional media gatekeeping processes. Once one media outlet, not matter how small or obscure, exposed a juicy story, the story became 'public' and fair game for all to report (Salwen et al. 2005:64).

Salwen notes perfectly the two major changes that occurred in journalism because of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal. The first is the idea of who produces news. Drudge was and still is an independent voice connected to no big news agencies, yet he has a huge voice in the world of news. Four days after he published his story the *Washington Post* decided to follow up on the story and every major news organisation followed suit. Soon after those events, Drudge claimed to have six million visitors per month (National Press Club 1998).

Today the number is closer to twelve million, according to the website's own metrics. These large user numbers and the influence Drudge has gained over time does not just affect journalists and mainstream journalism outlets but also political actors and the dynamic between the press and those in political power (Williams & Carpini 2000).

The second major influence of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal was the beginning of the end of news and information belonging to an elite group of journalists who were essentially gatekeepers. The initial report by Drudge showed this and then another shockwave was sent through the journalism community when the man investigating Clinton's improprieties, Kenneth Starr, published his findings. The now infamous Starr Report was not given to news organisations first but rather was made public to everyone at the same time via the Internet. According to one Web traffic tracker, nearly twenty five million individuals saw the Starr report the first two days it was online (Heyboer 1998). This is considering that most people were not on the Internet still in 1998 (Katz 1998). America Online (AOL) set an all-time usage record with a thirty percent spike once the report was posted. AOL's thirteen million users logged a collective of over ten million hours online in one day (Heyboer 1998).

The implications of these changes were immediately a huge topic of discussion within the journalistic community.²² Matt Drudge made the bold pronouncement that: 'The Internet is going to save the news business. I envision a future where they'll be 300 million reporters, where anyone from anywhere can report for any reason. It's freedom of participation absolutely realized' (National Press Club 1998). This contrasts with First Amendment scholar Jon Katz's technology caution: 'Convergence coverage distorts information, spreads falsehoods, shatters privacy, inflates and thus alters stories, and, now, even wreaks havoc with government. We sometimes wonder if it's we who are changing, but the

²² The issues will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

truth is that it's media—our collective mirror that is' (Katz 1998). Both of these points of view have been tempered with time, the proliferation of the Internet and a better understanding of how people use the web for news.

4.2.5 SEPTEMBER 11-THE BIG EVENT

The terrorist attacks of Tuesday, September 11, 2001 have already made their way to the history books in classrooms not just in America but around the world. It was a catastrophic event that was made even more dramatic by the fact that viewers around the world could watch the attacks happen live. Anyone with a television set could tune in to watch the second plane hit the World Trade Center and then a third hit the Pentagon. An hour later the WTC towers collapsed, live on air in front of a huge audience trying to make sense of what was going on.

The event was tailor made for a television audience but that did not mean that the Internet did not see huge changes both during the tragedy and for a long time afterwards. According to the editor of *abcnews.com* at the time:

I work in the Internet space so I think the Internet has tremendous value to people's lives. But I'm also a realist, and I recognize that millions more people have access to television and radio than the Internet. When there's a dramatic event like this, TV usage and TV news usage goes up dramatically. It has nothing to do with whether the Internet does exist or doesn't exist (Gershon in Palser 2000).

Millions of people sought out the Internet to find out what was going on in those first few hours after the initial crash. The race online to find out any information

was aided by the fact that many people were at work during those hours and were unable to get to a television to see the pictures and watch the attacks happen. The traffic was so high at three of the top online news sites (*cnn.com*, *nytimes.com* and *abcnews.com*) that most people were actually not able to make contact with the sites because of a lack of server space (Palser 2001, Pew Internet & American Life Project 2002). *Cnn.com* saw the highest numbers of any mainstream news website. They had one hundred and sixty two million pages views on Tuesday and three hundred million on Wednesday. This compares to fourteen to fifteen million on an average day (Palser 2001). They reported almost twenty five million unique visitors for the month of September 2001 that was up one hundred and forty one percent from the month before (Langfield 2002). According to the Pew Internet and American Life report, *cnn.com* had nine million requests for their main page every hour on the day of the attacks (2002).

Cnn.com was not the only organisation to see huge numbers of people flocking to their site seeking information about what was happening. *Msnbc.com* had over twenty two million unique visitors in September 2001, followed by *tme.com* which saw its monthly average rise three hundred and fifteen percent to nine and a half million visitors that month (Langfield 2002).

The United States audience was so eager for information it went to United Kingdom based websites for answers and the reverse was true as well. The *cnn.com* audience went up dramatically within the US (as mentioned before) but when looking at worldwide figures the increase was again quite large. The

worldwide audience for the site was at thirty eight million unique visitors for the month of September 2001 with half coming from outside the US (comScore Networks 2001). The *nytimes.com* and *washingtonpost.com* saw a third of their audience come from outside of the US. *CBSNews.com* said its non US audience grew by half (versus August 2001) to twenty one percent and stayed that way throughout the month of September. *Telegraph.co.uk* watched as its US audience doubled in September 2001 to fifty one percent from twenty four percent the previous month. Even more dramatic, *timesonline.co.uk* saw a majority of its September audience coming from the US. Sixty percent of visitors came from the States compared to forty percent in August (comScoreNetworks 2001). Additionally, Hitwise, found that British Internet usage from home rose seven point four percent in September 2001 (MUDIA 2002).

It was also true that the percentage of people who used the Internet increased getting their news online. The numbers were up to twenty seven percent from twenty two percent in the late summer of 2001 (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2006). According to the same Pew study: ‘People tend to dig in-depth into news stories online in the face of major events, and this may draw new people into the habit of going online for news. Some portion of the unexplained growth in online news over the past few years might reasonably be attributed to the effect of major news events’ (2006:12).

Another effect of September 11 for online news, besides driving massive amounts of people online for information, was that it highlighted one of the best features of the Internet—the ability for a dialogue between journalists and their

audience (Outing 2001). The larger audience provided a wealth of information for the journalists from uploading videos and pictures they had taken to providing their own eyewitness accounts on bulletin boards (MUDIA 2002). *Abcnews.com* bulletin boards alone had received 12 million page views in the first week. The site could process between forty five to fifty posts per minute and the rate of submissions often exceeded that limit (Palser 2001). BBC America also reported receiving thousands of emails from eyewitnesses after the attacks (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2002).

The final change that 9-11 brought to online journalism was the growth of alternative sources of news. As noted above, after the initial attacks many of the mainstream news sites went dark due to overloaded demand for their product. The lack of information from mainstream sources such as *cnn.com* and the *nytimes.com* lead people to search the Internet for other sources to find out what was going on in New York, Washington DC and Pennsylvania. As Stuart Allan points out: ‘Hundreds of refashioned websites began to appear over the course of September 11, making publicly available eyewitness accounts, personal photographs, and in some cases video footage of the unfolding disasters’ (2002:127).

Blogs (or Web logs, a sort of online diary) were a source of information for many who wanted to hear first-hand accounts of those close to the attacks or involved in them directly (Outing 2001). The Pew Internet & American Life Project noted this change in their report on the effects of 9-11 on the Internet: ‘The number of individual blogs has exploded in the last year, fuelled at least in

part by the incidents of September 11 and the various responses to these events...Most of these blogs are not particularly interested in becoming “real” news sources, but they do provide a view of how many Web surfers seek and provide information online’ (2002:27-28).

4.2.6 WAR IN IRAQ-LEGITIMISATION OF BLOGS

This is a war that in large part played out on the Internet -- partly because of the 24-hour nature of the war: partly because of the incredible amount of detailed information available: partly because of the embed program, which created a ton of information for journalists to publish online: partly because of the information bloggers in Iraq published: and partly because of the global nature of the medium and the story (Dube in Glaser 2003c).

The decision by American forces and a ‘coalition of the willing’²³ to invade Iraq in the spring of 2003 brought some big changes once again to the Internet as a news source. Mainstream media outlets had learned from their mistakes with the September 11th attacks and refused to be caught off guard when it came to the war and potential audience it might attract (Glaser 2003a). There were some fundamental modifications in the way people used the web as a source of news.

The War in Iraq saw a huge shift in people going online as a primary source of news. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project at the time of the 9-11 terrorist attacks only about three percent of American Internet users claimed that the Internet was their primary source of news and information about

²³ Colin Powell originally used the term in an interview with BBC News in March 2003. The reference can be found at <http://www.moderateindependent.com/v1i7coalition.htm>

the attacks. Two years later, seventeen percent of American Internet users say their principle source of information about the war is the Internet (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2003). Overall, the 2003 report showed that five days after the war began more than thirty three percent of American Internet users went online to get news. In the initial days after the conflict began that number was as high as thirty seven percent.

The numbers were still high a year later. A Nielsen/Net Ratings May 2004 report showed that traffic from people at work to news sites surged in that month. The *New York Post* saw a one hundred and thirty percent growth from the previous week, the *San Francisco Chronicle* went up eighty two percent from the week before. Additionally, Google News continued making huge strides with a work audience of over one and a half million one week and almost two and a half million the next (Nielsen/NetRatings 2004). In addition, the audience numbers for the established news brands reaffirmed that people were using the Internet more for news. *Cnn.com*, *msnbc.com* and the *foxnews.com* website all reported huge surges in their at work audiences. They shot up fifty eight percent, thirty eight percent and seventy eight percent respectively over their previous weeks (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004). It was not just the American based news sources that were seeing a large gain in numbers. Traffic to the BBC website from America went up forty seven percent the week after the war broke out according to Hitwise. The company also reported that the left-leaning site *Guardian.co.uk* saw a big jump from its US audience which was up eighty three percent (Specker 2003).

Much of the shift online may have been due to the fact that not only was Internet technology faster and more available (see above) but also mainstream news sites began to take it more seriously and invest more of their resources into it. A study by American University's School of Communication showed that: 'media outlets covering the Iraq war and its outcome have been using their online sites to publish different content from what appears in newspapers and is broadcasted on TV and radio' (Kahn 2005). The research went on to say that online news has become 'mainstream'.

The use of the blog made huge gains with the Iraq War. Blogs were starting to be used after the September 11 attacks but became more widely understood and used during the war. Blogs popped up by the hundreds of thousands as software made it easier to publish and people were wanting more and more information about what was 'really' going on (Glaser 2003c). It was not just independent journalists and citizens using the blogs either, mainstream media sites also linked themselves to bloggers or required their reporters to keep blogs as well (Glaser 2003b). According to Angus Frame, editor of *globeandmail.com*:

The rise of blogs, memorably during the war with Iraq, was the single most important development in online journalism in 2003. I felt that mainstream online outlets, including giants like *nytimes.com* and *cnn.com*, struggled during the war. But blogs maintained by individual journalists on the ground in Iraq brought more colour, insight, feeling and even humour to the war than anyone else (Frame in Glaser 2003c).

A study of Iraq War Blogs by Melissa Wall (2005) showed just this shift. She looked at thirty blogs with various start points and motivations. Wall concluded that:

While absorbing some traditional news values – timeliness, for example – this new news genre at least in part embodies characteristics that challenge our notions of what constitutes traditional news. In terms of their narrative style, the blogs are notable for their personalization. The sharing of personal information and sometimes providing diary-like personal accounts of events emphasizes the non-professional and non-elite status of most of these blogs. The use of personal opinion gives a certain intimacy to the blogs and suggests that the blogger is someone the readers can believe they know, someone who is not manipulated by a corporate boss or a filter of professionalism (Wall 2005: 165).

What these blogs and indeed much of the Internet coverage also provided for Internet users was an alternative source of information for what was going on. Indeed, a Pew Internet & American Life Project research report found that a quarter of all US Internet users had gone online at one time or another for news that was not covered in the mainstream press. Furthermore, that same percentage said they had seen on the Internet graphic images that were deemed too graphic or disturbing to be shown on television or in newspapers (2004). Mark Glaser of the Online Journalism Review noted: ‘...the Internet has matured to become an important source for news for people around the globe. Nothing beats it for alternative points of view, access to global newspapers and independent press, weblogs and warblogs of every stripe, and discussion boards that would make your grandma turn blue with rage’ (2003a).

4.3 CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the use of the Internet for news and information is now here to stay. How much more it will grow and how often people will choose to use it remains to be seen. The studies that have been done show that a majority of people still get their news from television and newspapers and use the Internet as a supplementary source for news. However that may change over time as technology develops further and people begin adapting to the ‘what you want, when you want it’ personalized journalism of the Internet.

As evidenced from above, each event has brought about new and often interesting questions for the future of journalism. The issues of immediacy and the need for accurate information, as well as where to publish first were brought up with both the Oklahoma City Bombing and the TWA crash. The subject of accuracy was still in the forefront when rumours began after the death of Princess Diana. Her death brought up another key change with online, the Internet with no single audience, but a global one. Suddenly, the potential audience is the world, not just your city, country or even continent. The Clinton/Lewinsky scandal opened wide questions about who are news producers and shattered the idea of media as gatekeepers. The events of September 11 and the war in Iraq only solidified these concepts and also made us rethink the role of the audience as both consumer and producer.

These changes were not lost on McNair in describing his cultural chaos theory of journalism.

The volume and rate of flow of the information that circulates in the globalized public sphere, the immediacy and unpredictability of its content, and its cognitive impact (dependent on individuals' belief in the truth and reliability of news), are obvious causal factors in the cultural chaos observed on such occasions as the 9/11 attacks, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, or the occupation of Iraq (McNair 2006:184).

The ones with the most to lose or gain in this new age are the established news brands. The so-called 'traditional' journalism outlets and their 'traditional' journalists are watching closely as this news medium progresses. If the Internet's brief history is any measure, they stand a good chance as the brand names are often what people continue to seek out on the Internet. According to one of the biggest voices in the journalism community, Rupert Murdoch: '[T]he challenge for us – for each of us in this room – is to create an internet presence that is compelling enough for users to make us their home page. Just as people traditionally started their day with coffee and the newspaper, in the future, our hope should be that for those who start their day online, it will be with coffee and our website' (American Society of Newspaper Editors 2005).

Chapter 5- Portrait of *latimes.com* and *salon.com*

As the sociological effects of democratisation, cultural commodification, and technological evolution have been felt on capitalist social organisation, the power relationships which hitherto existed between, say, boss and worker, man and woman, gay and straight, or black and white, have dissolved into a more fluid, volatile, continually evolving state in which the control of economic resources no longer equates to the control of cultural resources and political power (McNair 2006:203).

Both *latimes.com* and *salon.com* are formidable names in the world of online journalism yet the economic makeup of each and their reasons for publishing online could not be more different. The list of accomplishments that hang over the *Los Angeles Times* brand are formidable. It has thirty nine Pulitzer prizes, almost a dozen Web awards, over one hundred and twenty years in print, the fourth largest circulation in the country and a claim to being the largest metropolitan daily newspaper in the United States.²⁴ And yet, the *Los Angeles Times* brand finds itself losing ground quickly and is at a distinct loss as to what is next. The newspaper established a place in the expansive, expanding western half of the United States largely thanks to a family who invested in its future. Today, the corporate owners of the *Los Angeles Times* are in the midst of bankruptcy proceedings and the future has never looked so uncertain for both its owners and the journalists who make the news.

²⁴ All claimed by the Los Angeles Times on its website
<http://www.latimes.com/services/newspaper/mediacenter/la-mediacenter-facts,0,6679489.htmlstory>

David Talbot began *salon.com* in 1995 with a few of his colleagues from the *San Francisco Examiner* newspaper. It was one of the first net native news organisations to pop up as the World Wide Web began to change the way we get news and information. It began strongly winning many Web awards and receiving good press²⁵. Since then, the site has survived a dot-com bust, which saw it ask for readers help in order to survive and the loss of its founder, who left to pursue other interests in 2006.

This chapter gives a brief history of each website, outlining the traditional newspaper route of one and the journalist web-driven route of the other. It looks at the appearance of each website when you log on as well as the web metrics (given by the organisations themselves). The final section of each analysis delves into the economic structures of both and how they are supported financially. The lack of financial stability within these news organisations as well as the worldwide economic crisis that began as this research was finishing presents a challenge to the chaos theory (McNair 2006). However, what these great economic challenges ultimately show is the uncontrollable nature of publishing news online which was addressed by McNair in the conclusions to his 2006 publication.

5.1 HISTORY

5.1.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF *THE LOS ANGELES TIMES*

²⁵ <http://www.salon.com/press/awards/>

The *Los Angeles Daily Times* was first sent out into the streets of Los Angeles on December 4, 1881. Soon after its inception, Civil War veteran and budding entrepreneur Harrison Gray Otis became a part of the ownership structure. In 1884, the Times-Mirror (Mirror was the name of the printing plant) was incorporated and Otis bought out the other interests to become its head. The new figurehead set out ‘to impose his own views and standards on the paper: to heighten the quality and prestige of the sheet: to enlarge its size, its circulation and its influence’ (Berges 1983:12).

He did just that and created a paper that began to shape what the Western half of the United States was becoming. He soon brought on a young Harry Chandler, who would eventually marry his daughter, to be head of circulation. Chandler took over the reigns after the death of Otis in 1917. Harry Chandler was a strong businessman who saw the potential in owning such a powerful entity. Through the power of the *Los Angeles Times*, he exerted his strong pro-business voice which saw the successful building of the controversial Los Angeles aqueduct and the moving of the film industry to ‘Hollywood’.

This type of ‘booster’ journalism, as Michael Schudson frames it, was common of 19th and early 20th century newspapers. According to Schudson: ‘[N]ot infrequently, in the 19th century, newspapers were founded in order to draw attention to and increase the real estate values of frontier towns. This ‘booster’ spirit survives and colors the American press’ (2001:164).

Norman Chandler, Harry's son, was brought in during the paper's struggling times of the Depression in 1936 as general manager to handle the day to day role of the paper. In 1944, after his father's death, he would become the head of the company. The *Los Angeles Times* was at the time in constant competition with two Hearst publications, one published in the morning 'The Los Angeles Examiner' and the other in the afternoon 'The Herald-Express'. Norman Chandler soon after his ascent to power decided to publish a breezy afternoon tabloid 'The Mirror' with the goal of attracting the post World War II newcomers, who were flocking to Southern California.

Norman Chandler decided to hand the reigns over to his son, Otis Chandler in 1960, after a large power struggle with other family members. Otis Chandler sought to make the *Los Angeles Times* a national company. 'He intended the Times to become a total journalistic enterprise characterized by prestige and quality' (Berges 1983:98). This shift coincided with the professionalization of journalism which reached a high point in the 1950s and 1960s in America (Schudson 2008). In 1962 Chandler made a deal with Hearst to close their morning paper 'The Los Angeles Examiner' in return for the Times Mirror to close their afternoon paper 'The Mirror'. The lack of competition reaped huge profits for the *Los Angeles Times* which became the big morning newspaper. Around the same time Otis Chandler began the Los Angeles Times-Washington Post news service which began serving subscribers all over the United States and Canada. The campaign to put the *Los Angeles Times* on a level playing field with the other power players (*New York Times*, *Washington Post* etc.) worked.

Otis Chandler relinquished day-to-day control in 1980 and became editor-in-chief, leading to an era of successive publishers from various backgrounds. In 1989, the Hearst paper 'The Herald Examiner' closed, leaving the *Los Angeles Times* as the sole major entity serving the greater Los Angeles area. In 2000 the Times Mirror merged with the Tribune Company, creating a major market media conglomerate with entities in all the major US markets on all platforms. After being put up for sale in 2006, The Tribune Company was bought by Chicago-based real estate mogul Sam Zell in December of 2007, amidst much controversy and several other high-profile bids. Even though he had no direct experience with large newspapers, he saw the promise of a dysfunctional company that he believed had potential (Bruck 2007).

Latimes.com was launched in April 1996. The *Los Angeles Times* news organisation was one of the early adopters of a Web based presence however much of it was just shovel ware from the newspaper edition.²⁶ Many of the current staff will admit that the newsroom was slow in its embrace of all the Web had to offer. According to one top editor at the organisation:

We've had a ton of incredibly bad management on our website over the years and now we're finally, Meredith is finally doing a good job where her predecessors were all pretty awful...So we've had this huge dysfunctional mess known as our website. Where you had people years ago when we should have taking off that just ignored it. You know we downsized it before in like 2000 and something when we had layoffs. And then it wasn't owned by the newsroom at all, it was owned by the business side. And then we went through

²⁶ Based on information from archive.org, which can be found at http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.latimes.com

a period where no one knew who was in charge of the website. And so now this is the first time in quite some time that we've officially said, no the website is part of the newsroom, we're gonna be one newsroom not two (July 21, 2008).

Meredith, is Meredith Artley the now executive editor of the *latimes.com* website²⁷. She came from one of the most successful news outlets on the web, *nytimes.com* followed by the *iht.com* website which was a parentage site of the *International Herald Tribune* newspaper.²⁸ She was brought in near the beginning of 2007 to help get the *latimes.com* 'on the map'. The *Los Angeles Times* had decided in 2005 to put more resources behind the site and revamp it slowly but according to all the people I interviewed, when Artley was hired the effort became much more serious. The executive editor reports to the editor in chief of The *Los Angeles Times* newspaper Russ Stanton but also to one of the Vice Presidents in charge of Tribune interactive sites who is based in Chicago.

5.1.2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF SALON.COM

I only have vague judgments about Web journalism in general based on my fleeting contacts with it—overall I find it shrill and superficial, a function of the triumph of the blog. There is not enough truly original thinking or reporting, not enough substantive work that challenges conventional wisdom of the right or left. Journalism in general seems dispirited these days, ground down by the relentlessly, sublimely idiotic Bush administration and the media industry's own lack of imagination (Talbot 2006).

²⁷ Ms. Artley left *latimes.com* at the beginning of September 2009 to be a top editor at *cnn.com*

²⁸ *Iht.com* has since been folded into the *nytimes.com* website

Salon.com is recognized throughout the industry for being one of the first journalistic endeavours to exist solely on the Web (Sullivan 2008). The other big name that came to the web around the same time, and one for which Salon is often confused is *slate.com*. But while Slate began with the backing of a larger news organisation (it is owned by the *Washington Post*), *salon.com* began as an independently owned company. It was created by a group of journalists from the *San Francisco Examiner*, led by David Talbot.

Talbot believed the emerging World Wide Web offered opportunity for another new kind of publication. Talbot's notion was to create a biweekly, Web-based magazine of arts criticism and cultural and political commentary—a sort of liberal-libertarian salon in which erudite writers would dissect Great Ideas, and plugged-in readers would offer their own thoughts via electronic discussion groups (Farhi 2001).

The website debuted in November 1995 as a biweekly online publication and five months later, turned itself into a weekly publication. Beginning in February 1997, the site went to a daily model which allowed it to become less an online magazine and more a daily newspaper online. The sites founder Talbot referred to Salon as a 'smart tabloid' (Journalismjobs.com 2001) and expanded on this with an early manifesto saying Salon was, 'an interactive magazine of books, arts and ideas. Salon is not a techno-cult. Salon stands for *Emilitant centrism*. The Internet, which breaks down the distinction between readers and writers, is the most democratic medium in history. Salon hopes to employ this electronic forum to advance the cause of civic discourse' (Farhi 2001).

This type of journalism is in stark contrast to the objectively, detached journalism that still dominates much of the ideologically understood newspaper journalism in America. According to Michael Schudson, since the 1960s a shift has been occurring in American journalism. He states:

the practice of journalism has altered significantly, with a more unembarrassed blend of professional detachment, analytic—and hence interpretive—diligence, and market-driven consideration for the passions and interests of the audience than in the immediate past. Yet attachment to a particular vision of journalism—fact-centred, aggressive, energetic, and non-partisan—remains powerful, practically sacred, among American journalists (2008:35).

This dualism is best seen in the more blended approach of *salon.com* to the type of journalism they aspire to and create versus the fact-centred, non-partisan approach of the *Los Angeles Times*.

The online news organisation right away received acclaim when it broke big news stories and became a larger part of the media conversation. According to founder Talbot (2001): ‘I think we’ve broken story after story that the rest of the media refused to break even when they had the story because they were scared of the story, or they just didn’t think it was appropriate. Conventional media is pretty narrow when it considers what is newsworthy and worthy of our attention.’

In late 1998, Salon broke the story that Representative Henry Hyde of Illinois, who was about to lead the Bill Clinton impeachment inquiry, had had an affair

33 years earlier. During the Kenneth Starr impeachment proceedings Salon also lead the way in uncovering flaws in the Whitewater investigation and Monica Lewinsky affair. According to the current editor in chief, who was at the time news editor: '[Y]ou know we were the ones who really sort of saw through the witch hunt that was the Clinton impeachment. And we're really buoyed by our readers for having that solid news judgment. And for giving voice to some of the scepticism that other people had. We were there for people during the Florida recount and the travesty that that was' (June 11, 2008). In a piece in 2000 called 'Prime Time Propaganda'²⁹ Salon writer Daniel Forbes uncovered how the White House had secretly reviewed scripts for prime-time network television shows in order to insert their anti-drug message. The story won the site an Online Journalism Award.

The website has also at one time or another employed some high-profile names in the field of journalism including Anne Rice, Joyce Carol Oates, John le Carre and Christopher Hitchens. Today their star columnists include Camille Paglia, Garrison Keillor and Joe Conason. Its Arts & Entertainment section with reviews and original interviews also does extremely well for the site. The website also incorporated blogs in the early part of the 21st century, which brought a different audience to the site and gave it a lot more daily content.

5.2 METRICS FOR THE WEBSITES

5.2.1 *LATIMES.COM*

²⁹ <http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/2000/01/13/drugs/>

The numbers for the *latimes.com* website, like most of the Web discussed in previous chapters, have gone up as the technology has increased and people are relying on websites for sources of information. September 11th was a huge watershed moment for the site and the day after *latimes.com* recorded a new daily record of five point two million page views.³⁰ In 2002 the website began requiring users to register in order to access site content, which was an advertising decision to get more information about who was reading content. The site posts its number monthly in the Readers Representative section of the website, which can be accessed by anyone.

In the five months of observation, the site increased its viewership a fairly significant amount. The website records its numbers in two ways. The first is number of page views, which simply counts the number of pages that are viewed within a month. The second is unique visitors, which measures the number of people who visit the site a month, but does not count repeat visits by the same person.

In June, the website received one hundred and fifteen million page views (Artley 2008a). It then jumped by ten million in July and August to one hundred and twenty seven million and one hundred and twenty six million page views respectively (Artley 2008b, 2008c). The number of unique visitors, according to Omniture tracking system, was nineteen million and twenty million in July and August. The site increased by another ten million page views in September and October. One hundred and thirty seven million page views were recorded in

³⁰ <http://www.latimes.com/services/newspaper/mediacenter/la-mediacenter-milestones,0,117814.story>

September and one hundred and thirty nine million in October (Artley 2008d, 2008e). The unique visitors also increased to twenty two million and twenty four million respectively. According to executive editor Meredith Artley:

‘*Latimes.com* keeps getting better at SEO (search engine optimization), which means our stories are ranking higher in Google and other search engines. We are also performing better on sites like Digg.com. All that adds up to more exposure and more readership than ever before’ (Artley 2008b).

The Election Day numbers brought large metrics to the site as well. November 4, 2008 saw more than eight million page views to the site, which was a record. It was smashed the next day when over ten million page views were recorded on the site (Artley 2008e). The Presidential election results were a big draw but California’s controversial Proposition 8, which sought to define marriage as strictly between a man and a woman, was the big draw for readers the day after the election.

Not only did the website in general increase its users but the *Top of the Ticket* blog, which was handling all the campaign news, increased its numbers within the five months to hold the top blog spot on the website. In June the site had over one point seven million page views (Artley 2008a), by August that number was up to over two point three million page views (Artley 2006c) and by October the month before the election almost four point three million page views were recorded on the blog (Artley 2008e).

5.2.2 SALON.COM

The numbers for *salon.com* began increasing just as my observation of the site began according to the manager of web analytics for the site. Although I could not obtain numbers for Salon's debut, by 2001 the site had between three and three and half million monthly unique visitors (Farhi 2001, Journalismjobs.com 2001). The current head of web analytics told me Salon had been hovering at around four million monthly unique visitors for a long while but due to the increase in links, particularly from Yahoo, the site had for the few months preceding my visit (June 2008) steadily increased to approximately six million monthly unique visitors.

Those numbers are confirmed in several web analytics profiles I was given by *salon.com*. In the months from January through May 2008, *salon.com* was averaging around four point three million unique visitors a month. If you compare that to June 2008 to December 2008, the site was averaging nearly six million unique visitors a month. The focus on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) was something almost every person I interviewed mentioned and played a key part in getting more links to Salon from outside sources.

5.3 THE LOOK OF THE WEBSITES³¹

5.3.1 LATIMES.COM

³¹ Both websites have since been redesigned. They occurred just as this thesis was being completed. The new designs can be seen at <http://www.latimes.com> and <http://www.salon.com>

Figure 5.1-Homepage of *latimes.com* September 26, 2008 (1)



Figure 5.2- Homepage of *latimes.com* September 26, 2008 (2)

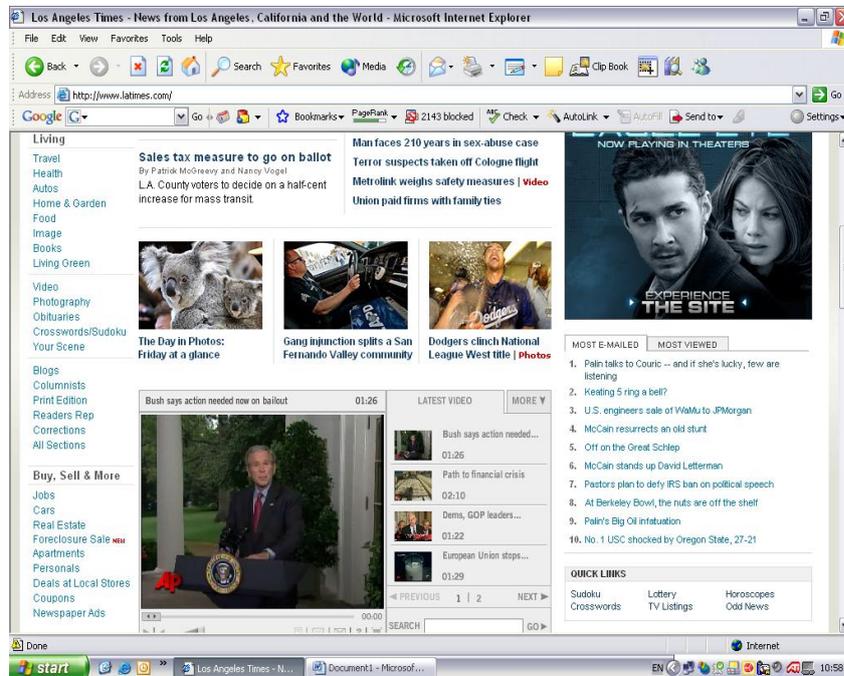


Figure 5.3- Homepage of *latimes.com* September 26, 2008 (3)

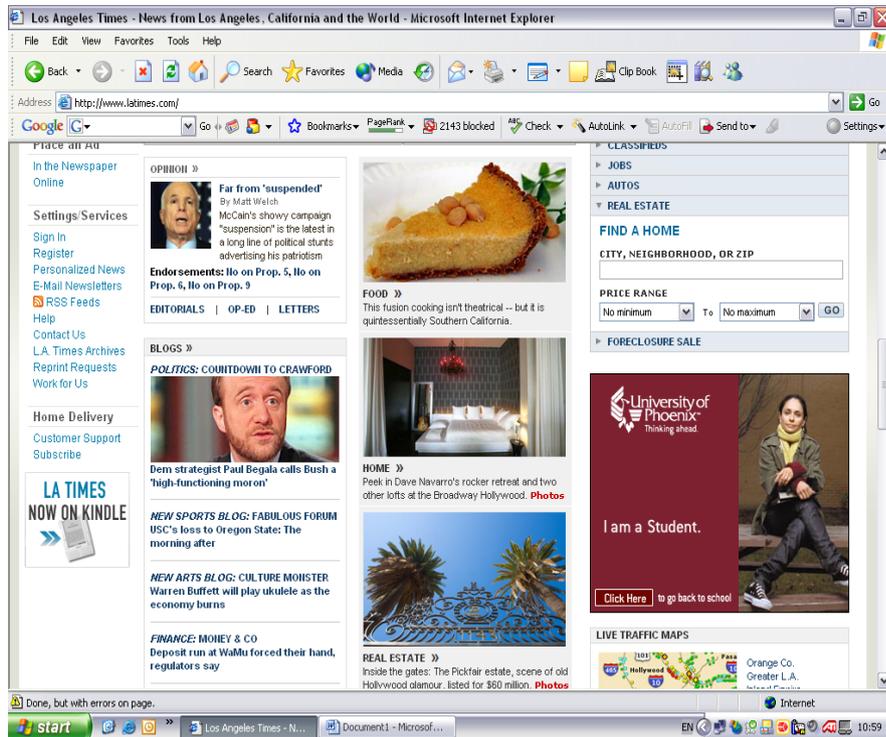
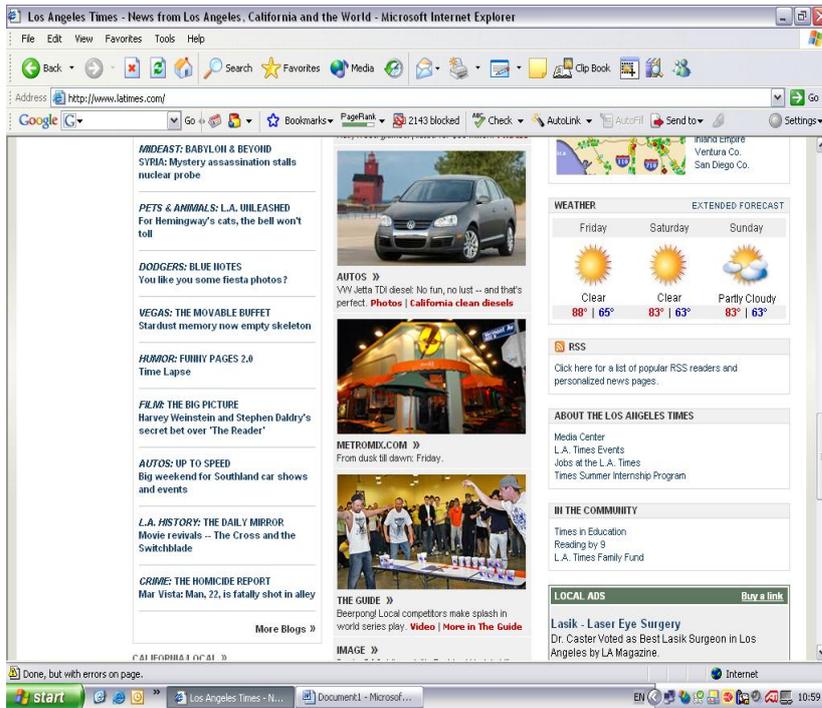


Figure 5.4- Homepage of *latimes.com* September 26, 2008 (4)



The homepage of the website is one of the key ways people get content on the site, the other being through large search engines such as Google and Yahoo. The main page tries to highlight key stories that are being produced by various news desks as well as the content from the Entertainment section and the people working for Metro Mix/The Guide, which is not considered by the journalists at the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper as part of the journalism being done for the site. How this all works together to create output for the site will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Each news desk takes care of its own section's Landing Page. Due to the amount of content and importance of the story, a 'Campaign '08' Landing Page was created for all the election subject matter. It highlighted all the written stories, the blog posts, the interactive elements, and the video content that was being done on the site related to any part of the election.

Figure 5.5- latimes.com Campaign '08 Landing Page (1)

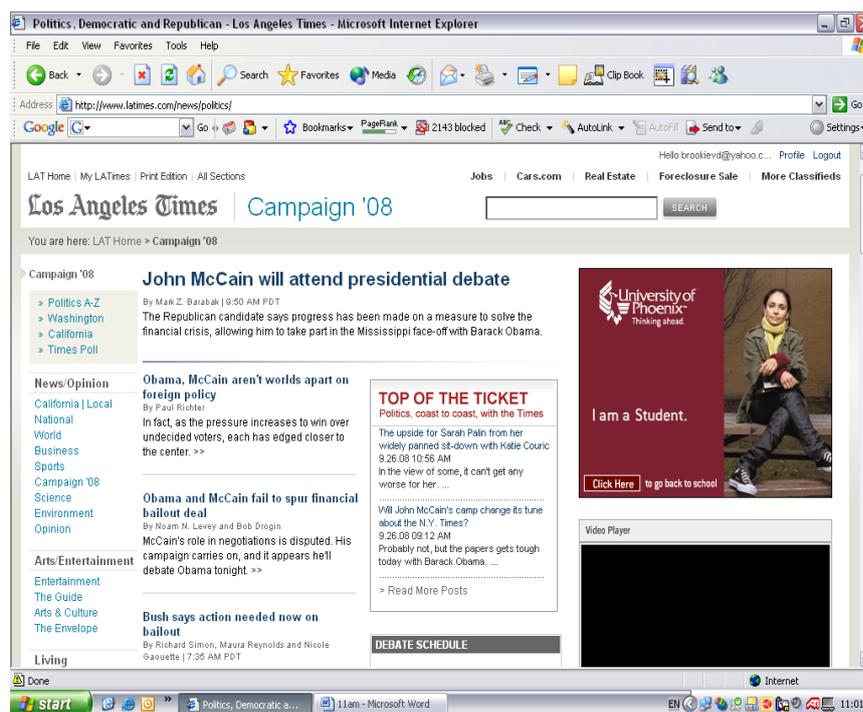


Figure 5.6- latimes.com Campaign '08 Landing Page (2)

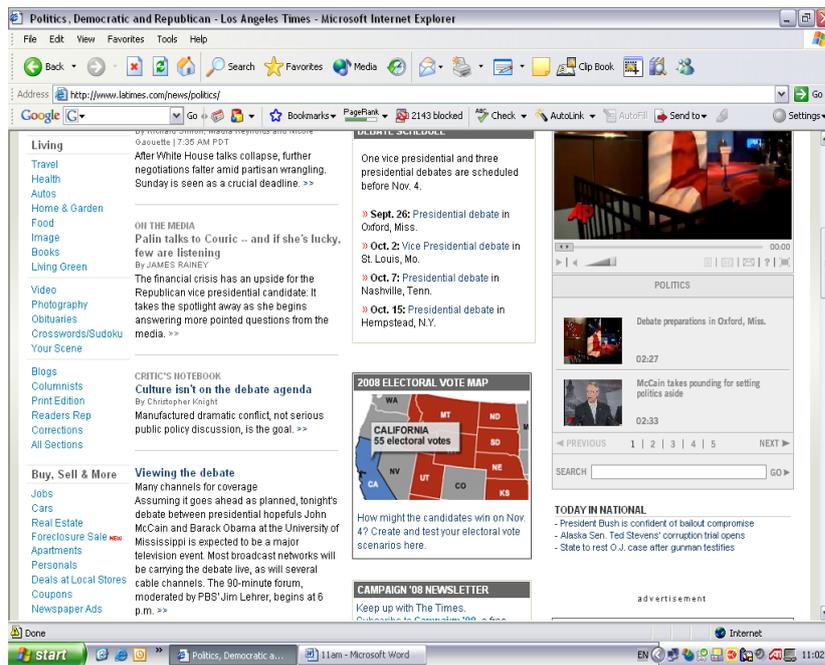
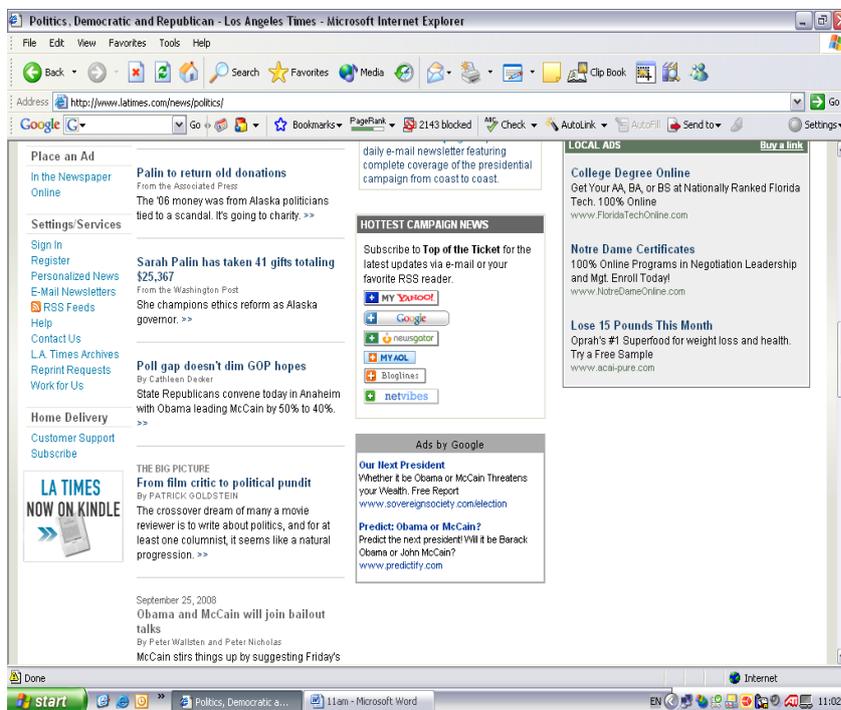


Figure 5.7- latimes.com Campaign '08 Landing Page (3)



5.3.2 SALON.COM

Figure 5.8- Homepage of *salon.com* September 26, 2008 (1)

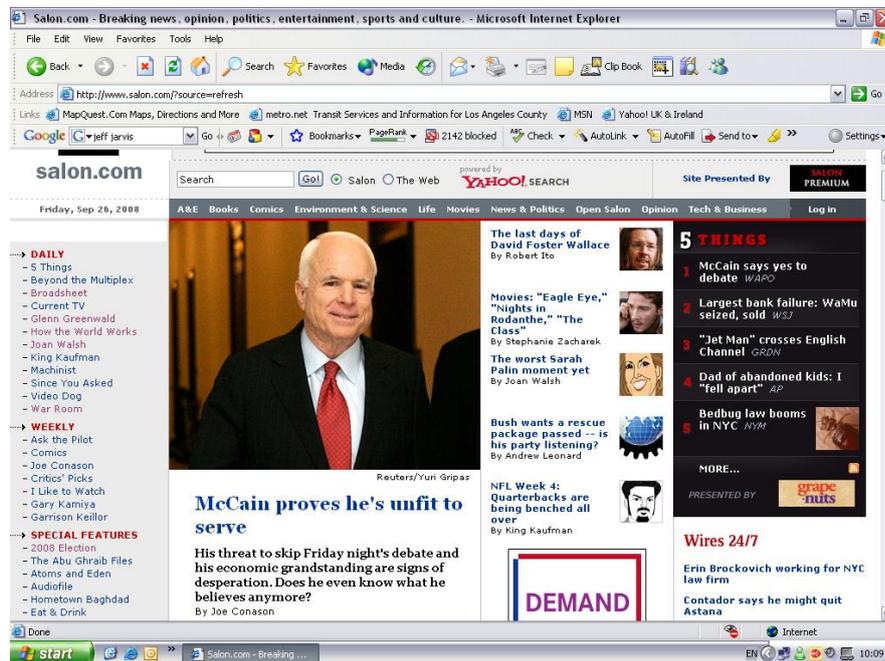


Figure 5.9- Homepage of *salon.com* September 26, 2008 (2)

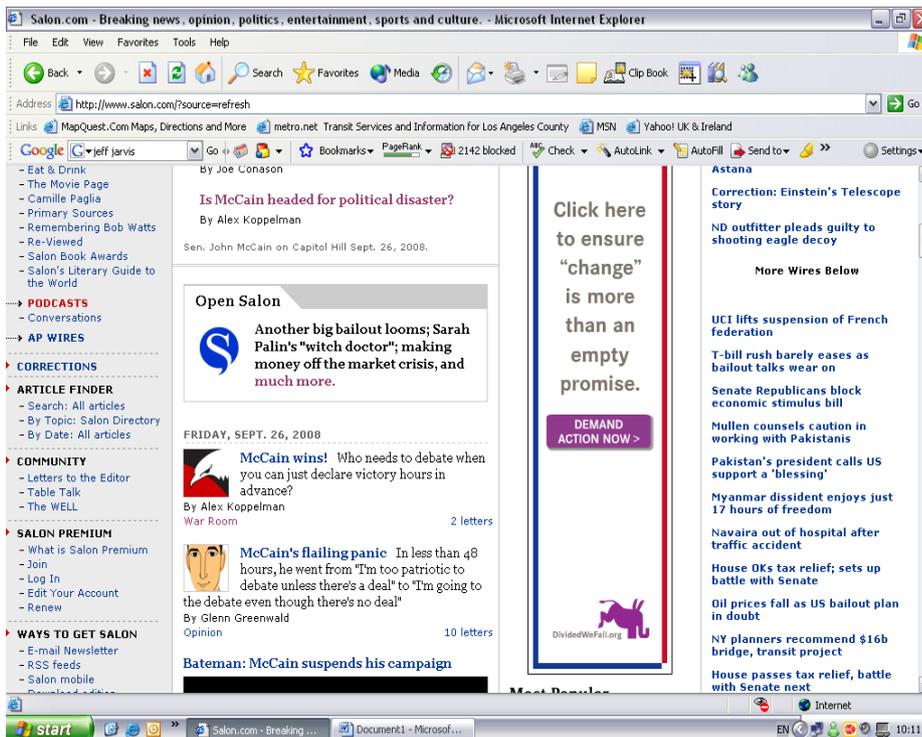


Figure 5.10- Homepage of *salon.com* September 26, 2008 (3)

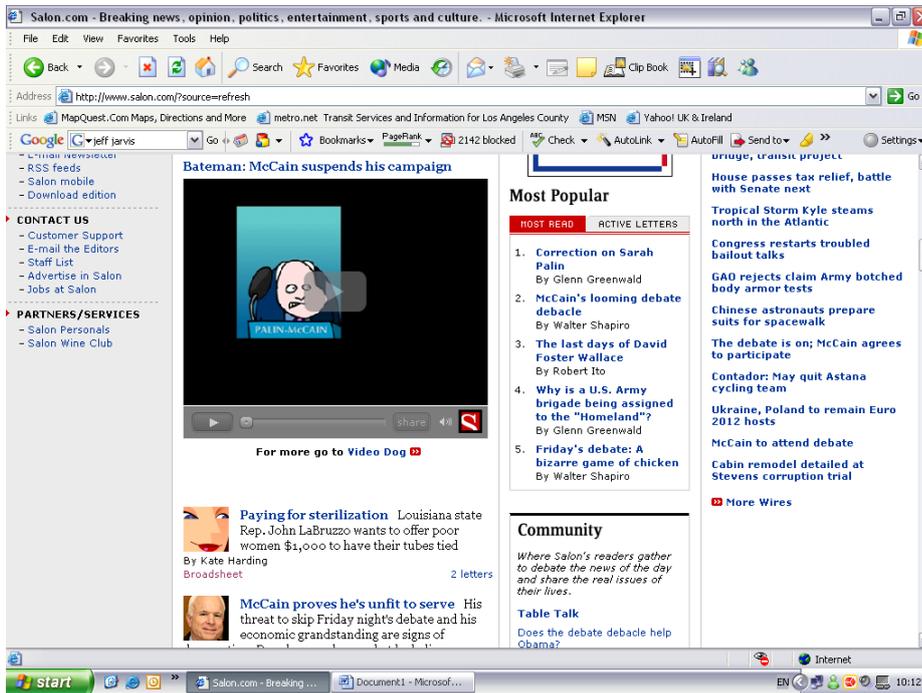


Figure 5.11- Homepage of *salon.com* September 26, 2008 (4)

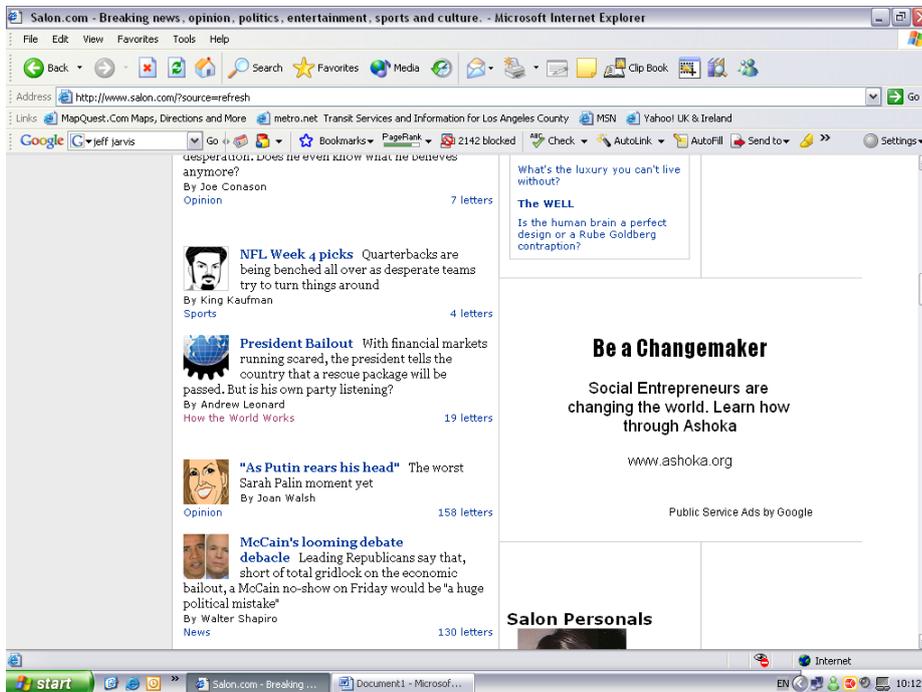


Figure 5.12- Homepage of *salon.com* September 26, 2008 (5)

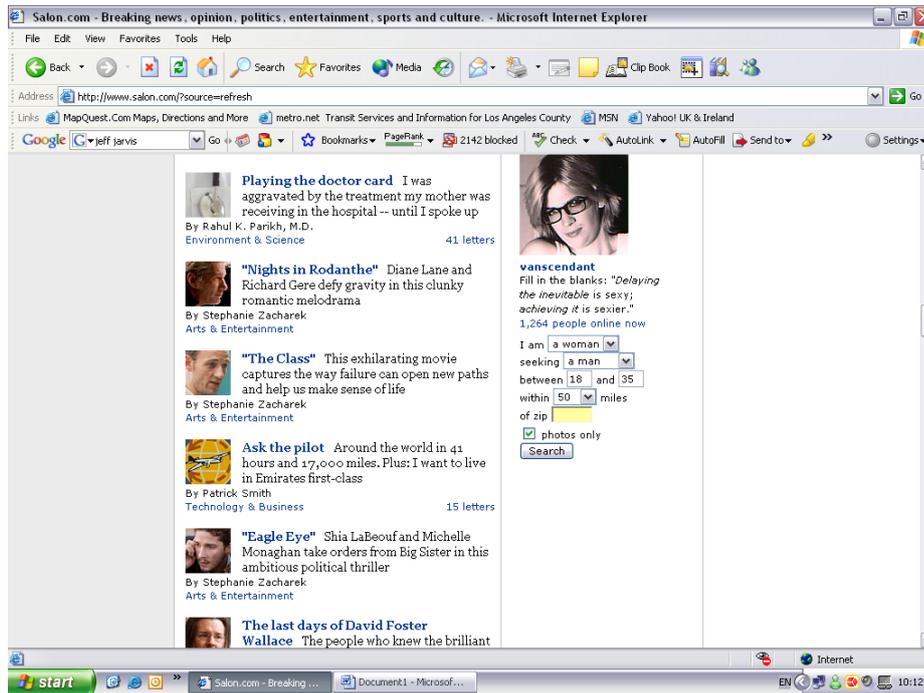
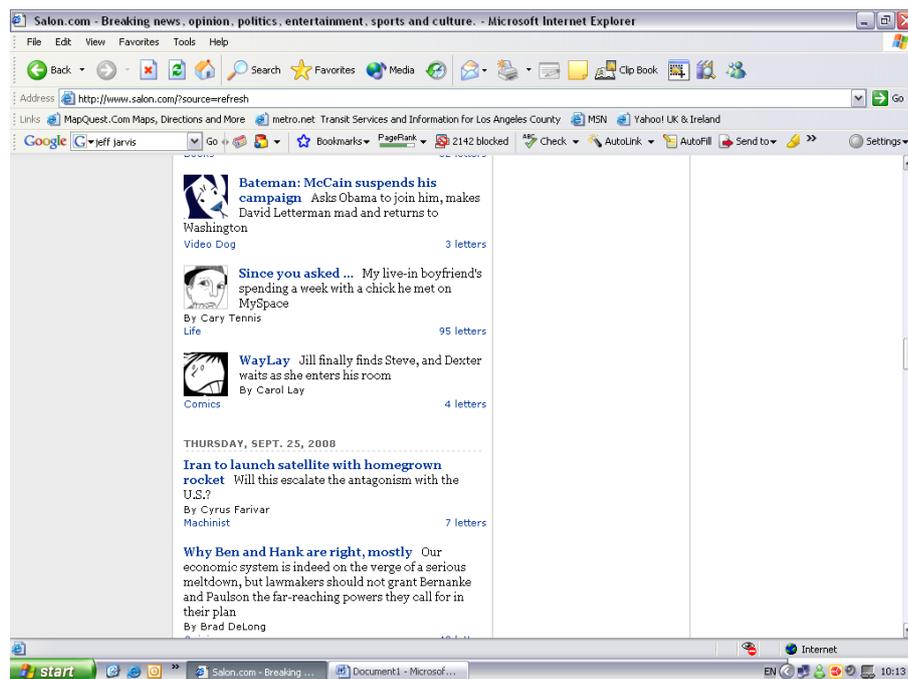


Figure 5.13- Homepage of *salon.com* September 26, 2008 (6)



The homepage is divided into four columns. The one on the very left is constant as you navigate throughout the site and links you to all the content and information the site provides. It is divided up in the top part by daily, weekly, monthly and special reports the site has done. It has access to the *Associated Press* wires, ways to contact Salon and any further information you would need about the website (from ways to get Premium Salon to their Community sites).

The second column is all of their original daily content listed in chronological order. The top is their ‘cover’ story, which changes about three times per day but there is no specific schedule. It is usually a written story but can be a blog post or other feature if deemed appropriate. It is entirely up to the editors what they decide should get the top spot. The rest of the list remains the same throughout the day, although some of the headlines will change as blog posts are updated and new content becomes available.

The third column is comprised mainly of advertisements. However, the very top part is what they call the ‘Sky Box’. It is between four and five articles, blog posts, columns or even comics that are being highlighted for the day. As with the cover story, these headlines can rotate. They are each accompanied by a graphic. Often an item will appear in a Sky Box at the beginning of the day and rotate over to become a ‘cover’ by the end, depending on the day and content.

The final column on the right is a list of wire stories. *Salon.com* provides its readers with Associated Press wire headlines that are constantly updated

throughout the day. In addition, they have a staff member that highlights five stories entitled '5 Things' that he/she deems interesting or of note. That will change throughout the day as with other parts of site. If there is no one in the office to be in charge of the '5 Things' for the day, the column will just list all the AP wire headlines.

5.4 CURRENT ECONOMIC SITUATIONS

Cultural chaos sees the capitalist mode of production (within which both of these websites function) as:

...the best model of socio-economic organisation thus developed by human beings, not for reasons of superior morality or ethics...but simply because the political (democracy), economic (competitive markets) and cultural (freedom) conditions of its existence have permitted the greatest advances in human productivity and material wealth, alongside the greatest improvements in human well-being for the greatest number (McNair 2006:30).

The optimism for the capitalistic mode of production is central to understanding the cultural chaos argument in opposition to the control theory (McNair 2006:95). However, the argument of the success of capitalism in respect to journalism becomes a bit tenuous particularly in respect to these two websites. Although they are both highly competitive and seen as successful examples of online news websites both are having serious problems generating long-term revenue. This lack of financial stability was dealt a serious blow in the autumn

of 2008 with the worldwide economic crisis. The 2009 State of the News Media report put it this way:

Then came the collapsing economy. The numbers are only guesses, but executives estimate that the recession at least doubled the revenue losses in the news industry in 2008, perhaps more in network television. Even more important, it swamped most of the efforts at finding new sources of revenue. In trying to reinvent the business, 2008 may have been a lost year, and 2009 threatens to be the same.

Imagine someone about to begin physical therapy following a stroke, suddenly contracting a debilitating secondary illness.

Journalism, deluded by its profitability and fearful of technology, let others outside the industry steal chance after chance online. By 2008, the industry had finally begun to get serious. Now the global recession has made that harder (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009).

This current economic crisis and instability in the capitalist market is something McNair addressed as a potential problem in his concluding remarks on chaos. He sought to temper his optimistic outlook on capitalism by stating that his conclusions and trends could be ‘thrown off course by a global economic crisis of capitalism’ (2006: 207). He went on to say:

The chaos paradigm applies as much to economics as to cultural evolution, and there can be no guarantee that patterns of the recent past will continue into the future. The coming crisis of global capitalism, occasionally glimpsed but never realised...From such events, and they are becoming more frequent and intense, unpredictable consequences for global economic, political and cultural trends follow (2006:207-08).

The consequences for both of these organisations have been a downsizing in staffs and a visible frustration by journalists. The larger brunt of the economic downturn was felt by *The Los Angeles Times* due to its newspaper focused structure and lack of focus on the Web. *Salon.com* also saw cutbacks but to a much lesser degree and with less public outcry from their employees.

5.4.1 *LATIMES.COM*

The Tribune Company was taken over in 2007 by Chicago billionaire Sam Zell. Zell had always dreamt of owning a newspaper and even with an eight point two billion dollar price tag and declining revenues he bought the struggling company and took it private. It was a controversial decision which brought a lot of turmoil, even in the five short months I was in the building.

One of the first things Zell did after buying Tribune was to try to figure out ways to increase revenue for the struggling company. He publicly commissioned a report from one of the Tribune officers on the productivity of the journalists (Kinsley 2006) Controversially, productivity was measured by column-inches of words. Thus the *Los Angeles Times* fared poorly with the average journalist producing only fifty one pages of words per year in comparison to the average journalist at the *Hartford Courant* (also owned by Tribune) who produced three hundred pages of words per year.

This study was released about the same time the Tribune Company announced it would aim for a 50-50 split between ads and news across all the pages of the paper (Perez Pena 2008a). This change in business strategy was soon followed by an announcement that that the company would transfer control of its monthly magazine from the newsroom to its business operations (Perez Pena 2008b). This news did not go over well with most in the journalistic community. ‘The result: no matter what seems to happen at the Times in the last several years—old Tribune, new Zell-led Tribune—we all get to witness some blowout spectacle, the kind of spectacle such manuals are supposed to keep behind closed doors’ (Doctor 2008).

Soon after these reports were made public, an endless series of staff cutbacks began in July 2008 in order to solve budget problems. According to a memo by the editor in chief dated July 2, 2008: ‘I deeply regret to report we will be reducing the size of our editorial staff, both print and Web, by a total of 150 positions, and reducing the number of pages we publish each week, by about 15%’ (Stanton 2008a). Another one hundred jobs would be cut elsewhere in the company. A little over a week later, the publisher, David Hiller, was fired. In a memo to staff Hiller noted: ‘Sam’s the boss and he gets to pick his own quarterback’ (Roderick 2008a).

One columnist, in an editorial in the *Washington Post*, put his feelings this way:

Zell, for those of you fortunate enough not to follow news of the newspaper business, is the Chicago real estate magnate who last year purchased the Tribune Co., which owns the Times, the Chicago Tribune and a number of smaller papers. At the rate he's going, he's well on his way to accomplishing a feat that McNamara

[the man who bombed the Times building in 1910] didn't even contemplate:
destroying the L.A. Times (Meyerson 2008).

His sentiments were echoed by others. In a *Los Angeles Times* interview one prominent Los Angeles attorney said: 'The overall picture of what's happening to the Times is simply not good. There has never been a time when Greater Los Angeles has been more in need of civic education, the central role of The Times' (Hiltzik 2008).

In August of 2008, the company hired a new publisher. Los Angeles native Eddy Hartenstein, who was credited with building satellite television leader DirecTV. 'Hartenstein said he had no plans for further cuts, and no directives from Tribune management to contemplate them or to reach a staffing target' (Hiltzik and Zimmerman 2008). Two months later more layoffs would be announced.

As soon as I began my observation, I realized that the man in charge from Chicago was not beloved by most of the people. The majority of journalists had hopes that he could turn around the company but most referred to him in a joking or derogatory tone. In a news release by a former *Los Angeles Times* staffer who was suing the Tribune company, it said: 'Sam Zell's illegal and irresponsible actions and public statements have damaged the reputation and business of the company he purports to want to preserve' (Roderick 2009).

The lack of reverence toward economic elites (in this case a billionaire who owns the company) is one of the central components of the new media climate of

cultural chaos. McNair does not seek to deny that these owners and advertisers want control but simply that it is harder to gain. According to McNair:

The main argument of this book is to suggest that while the desire for control of the news agenda, and for definitional power in the journalistic construction of meaning, are powerful and ever-present...the capacity for elite groups to wield it effectively is more limited than it has been since the emergence of the first news media in the sixteenth century (2006:4).

He goes on to make the case that journalists can wield more power than allowed in critical media sociology. He says chaos theory: ‘...views journalistic organisations and the professionals who staff them as more independent and disruptive of power in their communicative activity than their allotted role in critical media sociology has allowed’ (2006:4).

This disruption of power was on full display when in mid-September a high-profile lawsuit was filed by several former and current *Los Angeles Times* employees against the Tribune Company and Sam Zell. The lawsuit was contending that reckless management was destroying the company. According to an article about the suit, ‘Tribune’s roughly 18,000 employees became owners of the company when it was taken private in a transaction that saddled the business with \$12.5 billion in debt and also created an employee stock ownership plan late last year’ (Hirsch 2008). Zell quickly responded saying:

The overwhelming majority of our employees have risen to the occasion—they are working extremely hard, innovating as never before, trying new things, pushing the envelope. They are using their own best judgement and questioning authority when

they need to—something employees at this company rarely did in the past. But there is a difference between questioning authority or challenging the business as usual attitude, and maligning the company in public. That's just bad judgment and does no one any good. It's a distraction that's unnecessary (Fishbowl LA 2008).

Prominent new media critic Jeff Jarvis weighed in on the suit saying: 'The LA Times' problems—like those of other papers—were caused by decades of egotistical and wilfully ignorant neglect by the owners, managers—and staff—at the paper' (Jarvis 2008).

The lawsuit was not the only moment for journalists to publically show their disdain for the management of the company. Unnamed journalists began the website [tellzell.com](http://www.tellzell.com)³² to voice their frustration. Then in July 2008 after more threatened layoffs employees displayed large banners (see Figure 5.14) outside of the Times building in full view of the public.

³² <http://www.tellzell.com> is still available to see but stopped posting in September of 2008

Figure 5.14 Banners outside of Los Angeles Times building (inkstainedretch 2008)



October brought about more cutbacks, despite earlier refutations of no more layoffs by the new publisher. ‘75 of our friends, colleagues and capable staff members in Editorial will be told that they are losing their jobs. This is about 10% of our total staff and these cuts are comparable in scale to those made on the business side of the Times last week’ (Stanton 2008b). The biggest hit was the Washington DC bureau of the *Los Angeles Times* which was basically folded into one large Tribune Company entity to serve all its news outlets (Romenesko 2008).

The layoffs could not save the company from the amount of debt it had incurred under Sam Zell’s ownership. On December 9, 2008 the Tribune Company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. According to an article by the *Los Angeles Times*:

Tribune has become the first major news organisation to file for bankruptcy, which could add a new dimension of uncertainty for the company and its 16,000 employees. During a Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganisation, major management decisions must pass muster with a bankruptcy judge, and the ultimate fate of a company -- including whether it remains intact or is sold off in pieces -- could be decided in part by its creditors (Rainey and Hiltzik 2008).

The publisher of the newspaper quickly responded with a statement: 'Tribune Co. is continuing to operate its media businesses, including its newspapers, television stations and websites. And at the *Los Angeles Times* and *latimes.com*, we remain dedicated to providing you with the level of service and 24/7 news coverage you've come to expect from us' (Hartenstein 2008).

It did remain publishing both on the Web and in newspaper print form. However what these economic problems highlight is that in spite of the website increasing its numbers and presence on the Web, those creating content for the Web were downsized with the larger organisation. There was no direct focus given to the growth of the website from the top of the masthead but rather they were seen as an addendum to the larger newsgathering organisation. Mark Deuze (2008) addressed this lack of respect: '...their [online journalists] workspaces are still very anarchic, lacking central oversight. Such a lack of managerial intervention indicates lower status, with online staffers populating a perpetual in-between status' (2008:206).

5.4.2 SALON.COM

The current economic downturn and turmoil the site is experiencing is nothing new to those who have worked at or followed *salon.com* for any length of time. In the March 2001 issue of *American Journalism Review* one story headline read ‘Can Salon Make It?’ The article appeared as the dot com boom of the late 1990s began to turn into the dot com bust of the early part of the new century.

Salon.com began as an investment in the future of journalism. Creator David Talbot was able to secure funding from Apple Computer, Adobe Systems, venture capitalists Hambrecht & Quist and TV producer Norman Lear among others. In June 1999, Talbot decided to take the company public in order to get more capital to run the company. It was able to raise twenty five million dollars in its initial offering by selling about two point five million shares at between ten and ten and a half dollars a share (Surowiedcki 1999). However, this initial excitement soon turned sour as by January the shares were trading at ninety four cents.

The tumble stopped when the shares went back up to around two dollars for most of 2000. However this couldn’t prevent two rounds of layoffs in 2000, while the company tried to stay afloat. In June of that year it announced plans to fire thirteen employees or about nine percent of its workforce, in a bid to cut twenty percent of its expenses (Los Angeles Times 2000). Just six months later, in December 2000 another round of layoffs was announced. According to a report at the time: ‘Tough times continue in the world of Internet news as the

popular online news magazine *salon.com* dropped twenty percent of its staff yesterday. The job cuts came along with a slashed operating budget' (NewsHour 2000).

Soon after, according to the current editor in chief, the company realized it wasn't going to make it and so reached out to the readers. Much of the content went behind a pay wall that was available to subscribers who numbered up to ninety thousand at their highest. This decision ultimately saved the company. Non-subscribers were still able to view *salon.com* without a pass but there remained ads and a majority of the content was unavailable. The number of visitors began to decline by 2005 due to the immense proliferation of content available for free on the Internet and subscribers felt they were not getting much value for their investment. The pay wall to view all content soon went away and the advantage to subscription was in an advertisement free site and bonus giveaways.

The redefined relationship between the user and producer of news is a central focus of this study. Although news production is the primary focus, *salon.com* shows that users of news can also be a direct source of revenue for online news organisations. However, this form of online revenue stream has not been proven to be a long-term solution for news websites, even though some are still using it as a revenue stream and trying to make it work (Perez-Pena 2007, Schewe 2008). *Salon.com* found that although it worked in the short-term, people were not willing to pay for content that may be available on other news websites for free long-term.

The company was forced to make a tough decision in 2008 when ‘Salon Media had raised \$1 million in equity financing by selling its stock, just in time as its money was running out, again’ (Ali 2008). Even with the increase during this research of monthly unique visitors and increased funds, the company still fired nine staffers soon after the election was over. This number included the Washington DC bureau chief. According to editor in chief Joan Walsh: ‘it was personally very sad to me to lose friends and colleagues, but we did what we needed to do to preserve the financial health of the company, and I’m confident about our prospects’ (Calderone 2008).

5.5 CONCLUSION

These two ‘mainstream’ (Deuze 2003) online news websites provide an excellent contrast in their background, the way they look, their numbers and economic setup. Although the goal of both is the same, how they have come to be resources for their users is quite different.

The *Los Angeles Times* is a historical institution in the city that bares its name and provides an ideal template for the history of newspaper growth in the United States. Its website has many layers to it as the journalists and those creating content for the website have sought to capture all the unique platforms and properties of the Web. As it was already a known offline brand, the *Los Angeles Times* brings to *latimes.com* an audience of millions that it has built on.

However, this newspaper brand comes at a price as the company that owns it, has seen its earnings fall with the decline in newspaper profits across the nation.

Salon.com's history is intertwined with the World Wide Web. As a net native news organisation, it has tried to use the newfound interactivity between the user and producer online to create its own brand. The website particularly exploits the blog platform and voice-driven nature of the Web. It has seen a steady growth in numbers over the years but cannot compete with the large-scale global success of offline brands such as *nytimes.com* and *cnn.com*.

Financially the news organisation struggles in a highly competitive, heavily saturated marketplace. It has been forced to restructure its makeup several times and has had to rely on investors to keep the website afloat when advertising revenues dip. It relies heavily on the newfound relationship with the user to keep it relevant and profitable.

These background profiles provide not only a look at how these websites originated but also set up the economic structure of both news organisations. Although, the economic restraints are just one aspect that goes into the newsmaking process they are important to understand in order to completely evaluate the work of the journalist. The following chapters aim to take the base knowledge of the websites given here and outline the newsmaking processes, the redefined relationship within the newsrooms, the contrasting styles and ultimately the distinctive nature of making online news.

Chapter 6-Making News on the Websites

For many viewers, the 2008 election has become a kind of hybrid in which the dividing line between online and off, broadcast and cable, pop culture and civic culture, has been all but obliterated (Carr and Stetler 2008).

One of the great challenges in finding out what is happening in online journalism is trying to understand the goal of the pursuit. The World Wide Web is a plethora of information even without journalists and news organisations weighing in with information of their own. The goal of newspapers and television news programs has always been a fairly straightforward pursuit: present the day's news and information in the allotted time and space to an audience who sit and consume it in written or visual form.

The rules (as detailed in chapter 2) have changed online. So what is the goal of journalists who use the World Wide Web as their platform? Throughout this research two key words emerged from the observation and interviews: conversation and storytelling. The way these two organisations go about creating a type of journalism routed in conversation and storytelling is different but the focus on these goals is the same.

This chapter explores this new emergent type of journalism that is being created online in order to better understand the news process. It then uses this understanding of the goal in order to describe how these two news operations have chosen to cover news beginning from their physical layouts to the way the

information is disseminated on the Web. In the following chapter (7), this framework will be used to explain how the websites covered the Presidential Election as a news story.

6.1 CONVOTELLING JOURNALISM

One of the central arguments within definitions of news and information has revolved around the debate between traditional investigative journalism (or ‘real’ journalism) and tabloid journalism (Bird 2009). The debate of what journalism ‘should’ be and do (Gripsrud 2000:294) versus what is often popular becomes even more heightened in an online environment that still spends time defending its legitimacy (Zelizer 2000). According to Barbie Zelizer: ‘Distinctions between high and low, information and entertainment, substance and style, responsibility and sensationalism, all have motivated the elevation of a slew of ‘desirable’ journalistic practices and the simultaneous degradation of others’ (2000:ix).

Colin Sparks (2000) sought to help define what was meant by tabloid, as it had become increasingly debated within academic circles and journalism practitioners. He identified three ways the term was used both academically and in journalism circles. For the purposes of this study, the second term used by Sparks is the most relevant. In this sense, tabloid is seen as a ‘shift in priorities within a given medium away from news and information toward an emphasis on entertainment’ (10-11). Although the argument Sparks is making primarily centres on print journalism versus broadcast journalism the point which he

makes is relevant to this online medium. He says: ‘The issue of the balance between news and entertainment in broadcasting is clearly an important one, particularly since broadcasting constitutes a much more available medium for the masses of the population than does the printed press, but it does not have any direct implications for availability of serious news at the margins of the medium’ (11). As Sparks (2000) and Gripsrud (2000) point out, this has continually led to an either/or debate that is unhelpful and often misleading as forms of journalism are often overlapping.

However, this ‘real’ news versus ‘tabloid’ news debate is not the only one that many find hard to distinguish. Gaye Tuchman in her 1978 study noted that it was also hard for newswriters to distinguish between fact-driven journalism and ‘news-analysis’ journalism. When Tuchman asked newswriters to explain the difference: ‘[S]everal reporters and an assistant city editor indicated their reluctance to put their “professional instinct” into words by saying they did not know...Like achieving the identification of facts, determining value judgments was said to rest on professional instincts, including reliability of sources and the nature of the story itself’ (1978:99).

However, as scholars and journalists continue to debate definitions a shift is occurring that does not entirely leave classifications in the hands of media scholars or journalists anymore. According to media scholar Dan Berkowitz: ‘In an era when journalism consisted of something that you could hold in your hand, distinctions between news, analysis, opinion and entertainment were clearly labelled’ (2009:290). But now, he argues, these meanings have fallen into the

hands of media audiences to determine what journalism is: ‘it is not journalism’s say but the audience’s belief that matter most... If an audience member confuses the two forms—or does not recall which source provided which kinds of understandings of the world—then both forms play a role in shaping a vantage point of how the world works, and an audience member’s mental images twist again’ (2009:291).

Certainly, in looking at these two websites both in how they cover a story and what they choose to cover, all of these types of journalism [serious (real), tabloid (or popular), news analysis (interpretive)] can be seen and are regularly sought out as news. However, a new type of journalism is also beginning to emerge that incorporates a new found redefinition by the audience with the mixing of forms listed above.

6.1.1 ‘IT’S NEWS IF PEOPLE WANT TO READ IT’

The bottom line for all the journalists working for these websites is content. There is never enough and defining one type of content as superior over another is completely washed away in this environment. Is it important that Fox News called Michelle Obama ‘Obama’s Baby Mama’? *Salon.com* thought enough to make it a feature story on their homepage for a day³³. Is it important that on Election Day *latimes.com* video journalists asked people in line to vote what they thought about the process? The website thought enough to feature it prominently on the homepage as Election Day was coming to an end.

³³ http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2008/06/13/baby_mama/index.html

‘It’s news if people want to read it.’ (August 29, 2008) said one *latimes.com* journalist. ‘I don’t think there’s a shared definition of news. I think people are challenging definitions of news:’ (June 11, 2008) said the editor-in-chief of *salon.com*. Other journalists at these two online news organisations echoed those sentiments while some said the ideology of journalism (Deuze 2005) as providing a public service, holding to objectivity, remaining autonomous, placing importance on the immediate and sticking to a code of ethical standards still held true. The two things that threaded through most of the conversations and observations I had about what was news or what made a piece of information worthy of being made news by the organisation were (1) immediacy and (2) public interest.

These two central facets of what makes up news is not simply a conclusion reached from these two case studies. Alastair Hetherington (1985) shed light on the first British Royal Commission on the Press (1979-9) which concluded: ‘To be news an event must first be interesting to the public...Second, and equally important, it must be new, and newness is measured in newspaper offices in terms of minutes’ (Royal Commission in Hetherington 1985:2).

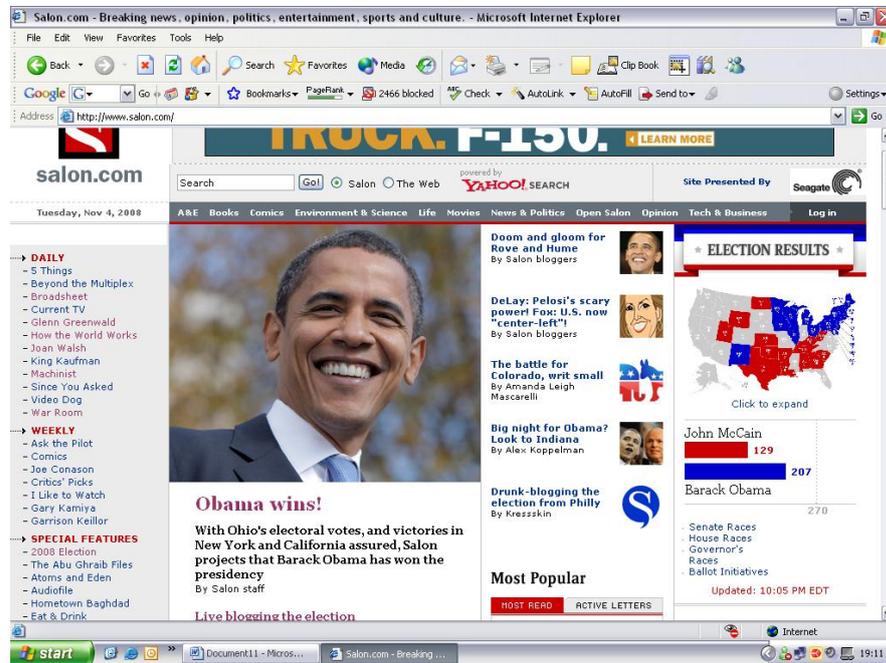
And years later, the news is still lead by the new. In fact this may be the most important part of any content created for a website. The homepage producers at *latimes.com* were constantly combing the wires and looking at stories the various desks were working on to try and put something new up on the site. If a story would do well they would try and add ‘new’ content via different platforms,

according to the executive editor. They would often put up a user poll, maybe a picture gallery or even a discussion blog. It was all about bringing some new piece of information or creating some interaction for an audience with an insatiable appetite.

The *latimes.com* was the first newspaper website to report that Barack Obama had picked Joe Biden as his Vice Presidential candidate. This reaped huge benefits according to the web deputy at the politics desk. Not only was there bragging rights but Google News carried their story as its headline for five hours bringing more traffic to the site than would be the case with an average story.

Salon.com, although not a 24/7 breaking news website, still felt the importance of being on top of stories it felt it 'owned'. It used the blogs primarily for these stories and in particular the 'War Room' blog became the new that they could highlight on the homepage to be on top of a story. On the night of the election the blog was the primary source of information and constant cover story on the site. It was the 'War Room' blog that announced the winner of the Presidential race to the viewers of *salon.com*. It did so one hour before any of the other mainstream news organisations announced Barack Obama was the new President-elect. Even though most of the news gathering organisations knew that without the state of Ohio, John McCain could not muster enough electoral college votes to win the election, they waited until polls closed on the West Coast before declaring Obama the winner. *Salon.com* felt they had enough evidence to prove him the winner and did so through their blog at approximately, 11:00pm EST.

Figure 6.1- *salon.com* Declaration of Obama as Winner of Election



The second thing that made something worthy of content on either of these sites was public interest. I noticed almost every single person in both newsrooms checking website statistics regularly and particularly those who were in charge of putting up homepage content. In addition, in all of the meetings that both websites held daily the numbers for the previous day were always highlighted. One of the homepage producers for the *latimes.com* told me that the top editors constantly wanted to be made aware of what or was not doing well on the website.

But it is not merely the numbers that these websites are looking at to see engagement. Stories that bring in huge amounts of email or comments within blog posts are key to understanding what the public want. These websites also

look at popular search terms on their websites as well as what has done well for them in the past. If a blog post or story seems to be popular both in numbers and comments, the site may choose to cover it further in long-form or add to the content on another platform.

The news editor of *salon.com* felt that there is no ‘puritanical model of what should be newsworthy’ (August 12, 2008). According to him:

...you know if everybody’s talking about something and you can take more of an illicit stance than it shouldn’t be news, but still is news. You know Janet Jackson’s nipple flip it’s news, I’m sorry it’s like, it may feel stupid to cover it but you’re gonna cover it somehow because if everybody’s talking about it. You know it’s not some grand conspiracy driven by a puppet master...you can give a moral lecture on what they ought to care about...but that does not determine what we cover (August 12, 2008).

This same sentiment was echoed by the executive editor of the *latimes.com* website:

I mean news it’s like art, it can be anything. You know it can be so broadly defined... We look at what readers are looking at, we look at what they’re searching for. One of the most searched for terms on our site is immigration, that’s crazy right. So I mean we look at things like that and we say okay we need to get our immigration page going, so we launch phase one of our immigration page and we’ll make it better and all that. So that’s news you know. In some ways it’s anything that will get people talking and engaged and impact a group of people (September 28, 2008).

According to Brian McNair: 'In journalism the normative separation of the public and private spheres has narrowed, as the business of politics has become more personalized, and the worlds of entertainment, government, business and other spheres have merged' (2006:11).

In this sense, online news and journalism is moving away from a detached objective telling of facts in a pre-packaged form that it feels are 'important' for people to know. But it is not moving to a fully tabloid format either, as both websites gave prominence to more serious topics and news stories throughout all of my observation and content analysis. New media researcher John Pavlik (2001) put it this way: 'Taken as a whole, these new media developments are transforming the very nature of news content and storytelling... What is beginning to emerge is a new type of storytelling that moves beyond the romantic but unachievable goal of pure objectivity journalism' (24).

Pablo Boczkowski (2004), after his analysis of three parentage news websites, said there were three potential effects in the content and form of news as it migrates to the Web. The first is journalism goes from being journalist-centred to user-centred. The second is that instead of being a monologue the news appears to include unidirectional statements within a broader spectrum of ongoing conversations. Finally, news is becoming micro-local, with content focused on small communities of user defined either by common interest or geographic locations. According to Boczkowski: '...whether or not some of this conversational content is considered as news by currently working journalists, my research provides enough grounds to suggest that it may be becoming

increasingly newsworthy to the audience of new-media news' (2004:186). The effects Boczkowski proposes are confirmed within these findings as the production of newsmaking shifts online.

Online news is now a hybridized form of conversation and storytelling. These two sites, to varying degrees, were trying to evolve the conversation of news and events in the public interest. But also trying to tell the best story, in the best format it deemed technically possible within an urgent timeframe. The type of news now being created by these two websites is in essence, what I call, *convotelling*.

To be sure, the degree to which *convotelling* is done can vary. And neither of these sites are doing it in an ideal form. As Mark Deuze pointed out: 'The combination of mastering newsgathering and storytelling techniques in all media formats, as well as the integration of digital network technologies couple with a rethinking of the news producer-consumer relationship tends to be seen as one of the biggest challenges facing journalism in the twenty-first century' (2009:93). In this way *convotelling* is the goal of the websites while constraints of the past and present still weigh on their ability to do so.

Salon.com, due to the smaller nature of its news gathering operation and the prominence of its personalities and blogs, the conversation is much more prominent. According to the managing editor:

And news is news, it's not really about length. You know sometimes a very short thing and a very informally written thing can kind of have a galvanizing effect on

the reader and ignite a big conversation just as some of our longer pieces do. And so we're just looking for quality, for timeliness, for kind of a Salon take on a topic that's hot that day, whether it's in a blog or whether it's something we conceived of or one of our columnists, we don't care (June 12, 2008).

The *latimes.com* website is still using much of its original content from newspaper-oriented reporters and so storytelling is much more prominent on the site. The depth to which this is changing the traditional understanding of journalism will be explored in the final chapter of this thesis but it is worth noting here that when looking at how news gets made on these websites, different conventions apply than those that previously existed in newspaper or television journalism. Gans (1980), Tuchman (1978), Schlesinger (1978), Epstein (1974) and Fishman (1980) told us that news gets made under certain circumstances but these goals and practices are changing as shown in the newsmaking processes at both places. The purpose of the journalist then begins to shift from a top-down disengaged fact-based storytelling to facilitating these stories and conversations and giving them a *voice-convotelling*.

So how does a story grow from its inception to a homepage-cover story, blog post, video, comic strip etc... on both of these case study websites? For *latimes.com*, it is a very complicated situation which changed even in the five short months I was observing the news operation. *Salon.com* on the other hand relies on a very streamlined system with much fewer players and much less discussion.

6.2 PHYSICAL LAYOUTS

6.2.1 *LATIMES.COM*-CENTRALISED

A recent survey of online journalists found that most of the respondents worked for websites of what they termed ‘legacy outlets’ (what I call parentage) or are working for former legacy journalists who started independent online ventures of their own. According to the survey: ‘They are grounded in the more organized, traditional news model and have carried that foundation to the Web’ (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). Although this statement is broad and vague, one of the definitive organisational models that have been carried into the Web environment of parentage (or legacy) websites is the physical layout of the newsroom.

The Los Angeles Times building in downtown Los Angeles is quite formidable. Upon entering the building, it becomes apparent that it is quite difficult to navigate around the various office areas. Many employees expressed that even they have a hard time finding their way around. The original building, which sits on the corner of 1st Street and Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles, was erected in 1935; but what remains intact today, is a hodge podge of smaller buildings put together to create one large structure encompassing an entire city block.

The edifice itself is steeped in history. The 1st Street lobby, called the Globe lobby, is not just a waiting room but also a shrine to the history of the Times and its building. There is memorabilia, famous stories, profiles of key owners (most

notably the Chandler family), and even ten foot high murals by artist Hugo Ballin. The public can tour the lobby and you will find it noted in Los Angeles guide books. You are instantly aware that this brand means something both in the realm of journalism and to the history of Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles Times, as with most other large news gathering US organisations, has other bureaus around the United States and world. It has a presence in Sacramento (the capital of California), New York City, Washington DC and a few other key US cities. It also has reporters in twenty countries around the world. However, this changed in the five months of my study as cutbacks lead to the decision by management to cut back on these national and international reporters and newsgathering operations. The cutbacks in international and national newsgathering, not just within the *Los Angeles Times* but across the country, have been a focal point for many journalists and researchers who lament the changing nature of journalism (Reider 2009).

At the beginning of June 2008, news operations existed on many different floors of the building. There are seven floors in total, but at the time three of them were dedicated to editorial content. The second floor is home to the multimedia department, which handles the video content for the site. This team of around ten to twelve people is tucked into a small cavernous area in the middle of the floor. The area includes offices and several edit bays but was quite isolated from everything else. The floor also contained a lot of the design desks, which work primarily toward the newspaper's end product. The second floor is also home to most of the Feature departments (Calendar, Travel, Real Estate etc.).

The third floor is essentially the 'news' room. It is where the majority of the news gathering operation and the different news divisions exist. The floor also contains the offices of the head of editorial content, Russ Stanton, as well as his page one editors, managing editors and all of the section heads. He sits in the one of the centrally built offices (which house other section heads or managing editors) in the middle of a large open area. The entire floor is a mishmash of the buildings that were strewn together and so there is no cohesiveness to its layout.

The large open main 'news' area is divided into sections (based on newspaper headings) that include Metro, Foreign, National, Business etc... These divisions are not based on actual dividing walls but are only apparent by hanging signs above different sections of desks. These are similar to what Tuchman (1978) describes in her portrait of various newspaper organisations. Walking through the large open area, you will notice large flatscreen televisions on the walls displaying the homepage of *latimes.com*. There are also televisions on almost all of the desks.

The Sports section occupies a large separate area on the third floor that is not directly connected with the rest of these sections. The Visuals department, which mainly focuses on photography, is also on the 3rd floor. The department, which runs itself separately from the rest of the news gathering operation, consists of about eighty staff members. Their office is in a separate space from the main hub of news.

The fifth floor of the building housed the Web team at the beginning of observation. An expansive rectangular room in the middle of the building was where they were stationed. There were offices along the sides of the room and cubicles in rows in the middle of the floor. It did not have the buzz of the floors below and contained what appeared to be quiet people sitting in front of computers going about their work. The desks were formed in rows divided by grey three foot high partitions.

The majority of the floor worked on different sections of the website in order to keep it updated constantly, particularly 'The Guide' and 'Calendar' sections, along with Travel. The key 'news' section was closer to the back of the room near the small interactive team which was off to the right in its own area. The head of the whole operation, *latimes.com* executive editor, Meredith Artley sat in her own office at the back of the room. The 'homepage team', which at any given time consists of about three to four homepage producers was situated directly in front of her office. The blog editor was in a nearby office as well as the head of operations for the Web, the section development manager for the Web and the breaking news manager for the Web. This changed immediately after my first visit as the breaking news manager was laid off along with two hundred other editorial employees. A few months later, seventy five more editorial employees would be laid off.

The layoffs changed the newsroom immensely over the five months I was observing the operation. First, after the two hundred editorial layoffs in July of 2008, the third floor main 'news' room had a surplus of open desks. The fifth floor lost some key journalists as well, but to a much lesser extent so it did not

feel empty comparatively. The editor in chief gave an interview right after the layoffs were announced saying the next big step for the *Los Angeles Times* would be bringing everyone together in the same newsroom.

We got to a pretty good start last year, but even in my previous job I felt we weren't moving fast enough and we didn't go deep enough in the integration, so that's going to be a huge part of what I want to accomplish in the first year on this job. We have some physical limitations [in terms of the building structure]... and we've got to do a fairly substantial remodel to pull that off. But the plan is, when we finish that off, to have a fully integrated newsroom on one floor (Hirschman 2008).

However, the move would not occur in September but rather at the beginning of October. The move was followed by another round of layoffs after one less than three months earlier. Many of those who were forced to leave their work space were also asked a week or two later to leave permanently.

The move would eliminate most of the need for the fifth floor. The free weekly entertainment paper that the *Los Angeles Times* produced, Metro Mix, remained on the floor. However, the interactive team moved down to the second floor to be near the graphic designers, layout team and the multimedia people. The homepage team took over the area that had once been home to the National Desk. The National Desk was moved into the opposite corner in between the Foreign and Business Desks. The reason for this was the downsizing of the National desk after the second round of layoffs. Although most of these people were not transferred or let go until after the election, the National section was hit hard by the downsizing. The Tribune Company decided to consolidate all of their Washington news bureaus into one Tribune bureau, thus eliminating the presence of the *Los Angeles Times* in Washington. This decision also saw a lot

of journalists working on the National desk in Los Angeles, either move sections or leave for good.

Trying to figure out who is in charge and how everything gets done in this maze of a building takes a bit of time. Most of the employees I spent time with agreed that the building and the layout of the different newsrooms didn't help news production in any way, shape or form. However, they all also wanted me to be impressed by this historic building I was entering, which made for an interesting dilemma.

Clearly, the *Los Angeles Times* building is steeped in history. However, due to the speed at which news is produced and the new technology that is used to produce it, there is no way that this building and its layout helps to do that very efficiently. This small issue as you will see, is in fact indicative of a larger problem the *Los Angeles Times* (and in fact most American newspapers) faces. The problem lies in reconciling who they were with what is actually being demanded by online journalism.

6.2.2 SALON.COM-NEWS HUBS

The Salon news organisation exists in three different cities in the United States, in that there is no central 'newsroom'. It also has key staff members who work from home however, most of the full-time staff, both in editorial and business, are in San Francisco and New York City. Salon also relies heavily on freelance journalists, who are located throughout the world essentially (but primarily

reside in the United States). There is a smaller bureau of three people that live in Washington D.C. Two of the DC reporters are focused solely on politics and government. The other is the sole investigative reporter Salon has on permanent staff.

San Francisco is one of the biggest cities on the West Coast of the United States and is where Salon began. The company occupies an office that is neither big nor small and is comprised of about ten to twelve editorial staff and about the same amount of advertising staff. It is also where the key site engineers work from, although at the time I visited they were down two engineers, which for a small company seemed to be providing a bit of stress.

When you walk into the office, you are greeted by a receptionist in a waiting area.

An opening behind the reception desk leads you to the main work area. It is a long row of cubicle desks that go along the windows of the side of the large building it is contained in. If you turn right and go beside all the cubicles, at the end you will get to a few offices that are home to two of the managing editors. Beyond that are two much larger offices that are in the corner of the room. One is home to the CEO, who at the time of my visit, was off on paternity leave. The other is where the Editor in Chief works and contains a small conference desk. All of the separate offices are partitioned by glass, which gives a feeling of openness and cohesiveness to the space. It does not feel like the editors are separated as much as just existing in bigger work spaces.

The desks are half full. Most of the reporters, and even the managing editors, are not required to be in the office or have a set schedule. It is a very autonomous work environment. However, with this sense of autonomy comes little camaraderie and sense of a news team. Obviously, these people work together to create an end product, but there is little discussion and a lot of silence.

The office in New York City is located in mid-town Manhattan. It is in a non-descript building, in what appears to be an area that houses several fashion oriented establishments. Before my visit to the bureau in August of 2008, I was told that a lot of the reporters were on holiday so there would be less going on in the days I was there. However, upon my arrival I found much of the same environment to what I found in San Francisco. The biggest difference was that the office was very hard to find within the building where it is located and there was no sign on the door to indicate place.

The office is divided into two sections one is an open area with many desks which is where most of the editorial team sits. There is one office that is sectioned off from the others which is occupied by the New York Editorial Director who is now heading up the Open Salon website, which was being launched in the time I was observing the website (see chapter 8 for further discussion of Open Salon).

It is a much more verbal environment than the previous office however most of the office communication, as with San Francisco, takes place over instant messenger or email. Again there is a sense of autonomy with which each of the

editors and reporters go about their work. Off to the side there is a small conference room that I learned was mostly used for meetings for the business side or when lunch was ordered for the team.

I was not able to visit the Washington DC bureau (Chapter 3) but am aware it is a small office composed of three reporters. This office is downsized to two after the Bureau Chief is let go in a mid-November round of layoffs. It is apparent in interviews with two members of the team of three that due to the fact that they are both travelling on the road a lot, the office is not in use every day.

6.3 NEWSROOM STRUCTURE

One of the central tenets of the control theory, used to describe what goes on in newsrooms, is the idea of hegemony. According to Brian McNair: 'Hegemony can be summarised as an ideological environment in which the members of a society as a whole consent to the maintenance of a system which it is not in their interests to support...because they internalise the values and beliefs of dominant groups as their own' (2006:44). Gaye Tuchman (1978) claimed that sociologically speaking, there is no conflict between the professional and the organisation in newswork. They ultimately both serve to legitimate the status quo.

Warren Breed (1955) said that journalists had six reasons for conforming to institutional norms and policies. These included: institutional authority and sanctions, feelings of obligation and esteem for superiors, mobility aspirations,

absence of conflicting group allegiance, the pleasant nature of the activity and the fact that news becomes a value. With exception to the final reason of news becoming a value in itself, all of these reasons become quite tenuous when looking at both of these online newsrooms.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the feelings of esteem for superiors does not factor into how these journalists are working nor do mobility aspirations within the organisations. At the *latimes.com* the ownership is publicly disrespected and internally the management is constantly in flux which creates no sense of hierarchy. Additionally, the gap between the online journalists and newspaper journalists both in terms of physical spaces and value given within the larger news organisation (explored throughout this Chapter and the remainder of the thesis) actually creates conflicting group allegiance. *Salon.com* is relatively new and the journalists are given a great deal of autonomy in their newswork which leaves a gap in top down hierarchy that explained previous institutional norms within newsrooms.

Externally, as journalism is in the midst of larger epochal shifts as audiences change how they consume news and organisations are changing how they produce and distribute it, there is no certain structure for mobility within the field. The idea of newsmaking being a pleasant activity is also something challenged on an external level. The 2009 State of the News Media Report showed that journalists were in fact quite concerned about the future of their individual jobs and that the amount of work they were forced to do became quite stressful for them as a result (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009).

The structures that were put in place around television news programmes or newspaper publishing deadlines may have reinforced an organisational allegiance to a certain way of going about creating a 'news' product. Whether or not this amounted to a model of hegemonic media control is debateable.

However, what was occurring in these two online newsrooms/hubs bared little resemblance to a controlled environment. On the contrary, in their own way, the two newsmaking structures were very dissimilar to processes and routines that came before. It is closer to the chaos model McNair describes as: 'holistic and organic, rather than structured, ordered processes achieved through the manipulation of cultural apparatuses by dominant elites engaged in efforts at mass manipulation. (2006:15)'

6.3.1 LATIMES.COM-NETWORKED CHAOS

The *latimes.com* website is a 24 hour, 7 days a week operation. They have a team of homepage producers working on the homepage and highlighting information on the website at all times. The team varies from five people during the day to one on the overnight shift. Reporters are also working around the clock for various news desks (or beats) gathering information. To be sure, the amount of resources in the building during the day shift versus the overnight shift, are not even close to the same amount but news is being updated on the website all the time.

News on the website comes from a variety of places. First and foremost by the *Los Angeles Times* reporters, bloggers, photographers, interactive team members, videographers as well as user discussion boards and opinion/editorial columnists. This original material is seen as superior to other content put on the website due to its exclusivity. In other words, no other website will contain these various stories, expressed in this particular way.

In addition to these sources of news, *latimes.com* provides news from other Tribune companies namely, the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper and KTLA, an LA-based local television operation. It also subscribes to the Associated Press (Strupp 2008) and Reuters for written news content. CNN provides video for the site, but it is not used as often as AP or KTLA video. The website has agreements to publish photos from the AP, AFP/Getty, European Press Photo Agency and will occasionally use other Tribune company photos.

The website is built in a program called Assembler, which during my observation did not seem to garner much favour from most of the journalists. It was a very complicated building system. It was kept in place due to the need for all content to connect easily with the newspaper's news gathering operation from past and present as well as with the rest of the Tribune company news gathering organisations.

The blogs are not built in Assembler but rather on the Web-based system Typepad. It is a program that anyone can use simply by logging on to the Typepad website. According to those who deal with blogs on the site, it gives

writers much more flexibility and allows posts to go up more quickly than would be the case in the Assembler system. It also allows flexibility for many of the freelance journalists who are blog writers and not in the building or part of the larger news operation.

All blog posts, news stories and photo galleries are handled by the copy edit desk in different forms depending on what time of day and what section the story rests in. Copy editing begins on the AM Copy desk as early as 5am Pacific Time. The AM copy desk was created to copy edit the increasing web content that could not be handled by each desk's copy editor because they usually do not come in until the early afternoon. The team handles the editing of much of the blog posts, sports stories, foreign stories and early breaking political news from the campaign trail. Beginning in the mid to late afternoon each desk then handles their own content but before that it is the approximately six person AM desk team that handles all the content. On average, the team will edit anywhere from eighty to one hundred and twenty items in a morning shift.

However, not all of the content on the website is handled by the AM copy desk, as its chief editor is quick to point out.

So if it's going on the website, we're gonna edit it. But by the same token if it's on the Web, it doesn't mean we've done it. There's a lot of stuff on the Web that we have nothing to do with. The Guide, for example, is uncopy edited by us right now. We haven't figured out a way to do that. The Features desk downstairs does a lot of editing for the Web. There are people on the website, producers, reporters, they create material for the Web that we don't see... So almost everything we do is for

the Web but not everything on the Web goes through us. And that's the thing we're trying to work on (August 29, 2008).

A majority of the web content on *latimes.com* is from the news gathering operation of the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper. The newspaper is still very much the focus of the reporters writing, deadlines and affects the times stories appear on the site. Stories are uploaded to the website by each section as soon as they are copy edited and ready for public consumption. This usually occurs in the late evening around 9 or 10 PM Pacific Time. Occasionally, a reporter will update an earlier written story for the Web but this is usually coordinated beforehand when they know a story will be breaking during the day and a Web update will be needed. Sometimes these stories will be finished earlier in the day, but most still appear in the late evening, in connection with newspaper deadlines going to print.

The system created for news gatherers is essentially trying to meet two deadlines, online being now and print being once per day. This disparity in deadlines is a key predicament within the newsroom. The editorial demands in creating news for an online audience does not match the highly edited, slowly evolving story form that has been nurtured in newspaper newsrooms for decades. Rather, 'the speed of news flow has increased, reducing the gap between an event's happening, its being noted and reported, analysed, discussed and acted upon' (McNair 2006:2).

In order to try and solve this breach, each news desk had an assigned Web deputy who worked with the desk to get content for each section to the website.

The Web deputies also trained the reporters how to use the Assembler platform and add content like photos and roadblocks³⁴ to their stories. In the case of the National desk, the Web deputy was a central figure in shaping much site content during the party conventions and Presidential debates. The Web deputies were all a part of the ‘Web’ department as opposed to the ‘newsgathering’ print team and were put in place to train reporters and act as a bridge between the two departments.

The website has one reporter that is in charge of breaking news during the day. He has covered all the major stories for the website for the last three years from the Michael Jackson and Phil Spector trials, to Katrina and Rita hurricanes. Since the beginning of 2008 his main focus has been the Presidential campaign trail. He makes sure the website’s stories are either updated or if necessary will write a complete story for the site. I noticed the reporter on my first day observing at the site as everyone seemed to know him but it took me a while to figure out exactly what his role was. According to the reporter: ‘I mean my day starts and I usually go to all the assigning desks to see if there’s anything I should be dealing with. I’m not doing that now because of the campaign. And they know, if they need help they’ll yell. So I don’t report to any of them, but I’ve dealt with all of them’ (October 7, 2008).

The website has chosen to deal with the constant ‘now’ deadline online through larger news gathering operations such as the subscription based Associated Press or by the websites approximately fifty blogs. According to the *latimes.com*

³⁴ A roadblock is a box that appears halfway through an article that links to other related content available on the website for users

executive editor: 'Blogs are the centre of gravity for original content on *latimes.com*. We do a lot of updating throughout the day, where we get new stories on the bailout or the status of the debates or whatever it is but the blogs are really where we have a lot of people...' (September 25, 2008). The site will also handle breaking news through photo galleries, which are very popular, video or discussion boards.

S. Elizabeth Bird (2009) argues that one of the symptoms of tabloidization in the media is the 'greater use of visual images.' However she goes on to say that: '...it is important to consider tabloidization in context. A movement to clearer, more accessible news that speaks more directly to readers does not necessarily equate with a decline in standards' (2009:42). This would apply in the case of the *latimes.com*. The website was always quick to add photo galleries or attach video to its text-driven articles but it usually only added content rather than take away from it. There was always a sense, from the newspaper staff, that adding this visually driven, less explanatory content was a 'dumbed down' version of the story. However I would argue that users flocked to this content and as it added to the *convotelling* journalism the website was seeking, tabloid or not, it was and is news.

The photography department realized the importance of the Web and assigned five photographers to work specifically on Web content. They work primarily as Web photo editors creating photo slideshows and adding additional visual elements to the site. The head of the department also informed me that he also now instructs his photographers out in the field to shoot extra photos for the

Web, to give it some original content. He estimated that about forty seven or forty eight percent of the Web traffic came from photography. According to the managing editor: ‘The Web is a visual medium and people...just love to look at pictures. You know it’s easy to do to. I mean we actually have a ton of good ones, which helps’ (July 21, 2008).

The multimedia team (which is under the larger umbrella of visuals/photography) of about ten people produces all of their video content strictly for the Web. They primarily work with the print reporters, providing additional content to their stories. They do have some original series that appear on the Web, but they do not receive much prominence on the homepage and over the five months I am there, are scaled back a bit. One of the biggest functions of the multimedia team is training primarily print reporters and editors how to create a video story. They take teams of people through training sessions to teach them the fundamentals. This also changes in the five months I am there as in the second round of layoffs the head of multimedia takes a buyout and the person hired to do all of this training for the print reporters is laid off. The direction of the team is now in flux.

The Interactive team consisted of about three people and a few other adjunct journalists throughout the building that may work on other content for the website or newspaper but help out when needed. They primarily worked on long term projects or big stories (such as the election) they knew would be coming in the future. They collaborated with many of the different news desks as well as

the executive editor for the website in creating maps, visuals, graphs, databases etc...

Although these various teams are essentially coming together to create this website there is little coherence in the strategy. In this, the idea of news *emerging* from various forces as introduced by McNair rather than being controlled become quite obvious. There is not only a lack of cohesive structure in creating news but also the sense that news online cannot be controlled and so the best way to handle it is to simply get content out and add to it or promote it as much as possible.

The executive editor tried to remedy this by bringing the entire Web team together for daily early morning news meeting on my first day of observation in early June of 2008. The meeting consisted of analyzing what had done well on the website the day before as well as what featured content each news section had to offer the website that day. A representative from each news gathering section was in the meeting and talked about stories that their reporters were working on during the day so the team would be aware of what would be available to the website. In addition, the Interactive team and Multimedia team had a presence in the room to talk about their Web content. The blog editor spoke about which blogs were getting a high number of hits and any interesting posts that had come up in the last twenty four hours.

A long portion of the approximately thirty minute meeting was devoted to what items were appearing on Google Hot Trends³⁵. These are the top terms being searched on Google at that exact moment. The team found it was ‘on top of’ most of the stories and search terms it saw on the board and felt confident about their coverage. This meeting was the only time during the day that all of the people who work to make what *latimes.com* produces came together. As my months of observation wore on, I was told that the daily meetings were attended by fewer and fewer people and became much less important than they were originally set up to be.

6.3.2 SALON.COM-AUTONOMOUS JOURNALISTS

Salon.com, unlike *latimes.com*, is not a 24/7 news operation. It views itself as a Web magazine. It deals with original stories in two principle ways, either in traditional text-based ‘story’ form or through their primarily text-based blog content. In addition, after their user-generated content blog site ‘Open Salon’ debuted in September, occasional articles were put on *salon.com*. They have a number of blogs on their website that cover a variety of topics. In addition they have a few comedic cartoons that appear on the site produced by Tom Tomorrow and Scott Bateman. The former appears weekly, the later almost daily during the election cycle I observed.

Their oldest blog, and the one that deals with political content, is called ‘War Room’. It is primarily authored by one writer but other freelance and staff

³⁵ <http://www.google.com/trends/hottrends>

writers contribute to its content. The editor in chief, Joan Walsh has an opinion blog. Salon recently hired a constitutional lawyer named Glen Greenwald who had a successful blog on his own to blog for their site. His blog brings in huge numbers for them and is rated in the Top 40 on Technorati. It primarily deals with legal issues related to politics and the political process.

The site has a blog revolving around women's issues called 'Broadsheet'; one about global economics called 'How the World Works'; one about technology called 'The Machinist'. The two latter are primarily authored by one writer each. The Broadsheet is authored by several female staff writers that publish on a variety of different topics on the website as well as a few freelance bloggers.

Salon features an AP news feed, which is automatically put on the site and resides in the right hand column. It also started a widget box on the top of its homepage called '5 Things' which is run by one of its full time-staffers. The box highlights five stories featured on other news websites that the reporter feels may be of interest to the audience. It is changed approximately twenty to twenty five times per day.

The site employs about twenty five editorial employees and uses a lot of freelancers to cover all their long-form stories. *Salon.com* has one multimedia editor who is in charge of building the sites' video and audio content. According to the editor:

We tend to be most successful in working with the reporters and working with the different sections of the site to integrate into their section. Because they already

have the audience so those are going to be the people that are interested in that specific video. So rather than going out and soliciting you know individual video stories from freelancers or from our reporters, who are mostly writers, I really sort of work in house to try to generate content with our reporters to develop their presence on the site but also just work with stories they're already doing to see if there's another video element we can add (August 12, 2008).

Salon.com also has partnerships with Current TV and Big Think to produce short video blog elements that appear on the site a couple of times per week.

The site additionally employs a small team of photo editors. The main editor lives in San Luis Obispo, California (south of San Francisco) and works from home. The various editors work with her to create visuals to accompany stories and blogs. The team uses pictures from AP, Reuters, Getty, I Stock or on rare occasions will photograph items themselves. The main photo editor is also an illustrator and will often create unique images to accompany stories, especially when they are given 'cover' status.

Every morning at 8am Pacific Time there is an editorial meeting, which takes place over the phone, about what all the sections are working on for that day and what other content needs to be covered. There are other various section meetings throughout the week. On Tuesday there is a 'covers' meeting to see which stories may merit a cover in the upcoming week and on Fridays a 'news' section meeting occurs which incorporates a large section of the editorial staff. Due to the stratification of staff, the meetings are done in conference call fashion.

It is not a rigid process in deciding what gets covered and what does not. The site will make sure to cover the big news in politics and culture but beyond that the reporters have a lot of autonomy in what they want to write about and pursuing their own leads. According to one of the political reporters: ‘You know occasionally we’ll get an assignment from an editor but that’s pretty rare. Usually I could do mostly whatever I want, which is kinda nice’ (September 11, 2008). He is in constant communication with his direct section editor but that relationship is casual and fluid. The various editors will periodically fly to the different offices in order to interact with the other staff members on the other coast.

The process and structure in this environment gave the journalists and bloggers a high amount of autonomy. The use of individually authored blogs, in particular, prevented a group think mentality and allowed specific voices to find a niche in the online environment. This set-up is exactly what McNair describes when assessing chaos in light of news organisations. ‘It [chaos] views journalistic organisations and the professionals who staff them as more independent and disruptive of power in their communicative activity than their allotted role in critical media sociology has allowed’ (2006:4).

6.4 COVERING NEWS

The methods created by these two news organisations leads to a typical chaos theory environment where the ultimate end product becomes very hard to predict or control (McNair 2006:49). Add to this the goal of *convotelling* journalism,

which is a very unstructured process that deals with unpredictable factors such as feedback and technology and it becomes clear that in covering news, there is no singular ideology to follow or attain to. *Latimes.com* and *salon.com* showed not only through the election cycle but also in how they chose to cover other information they deemed newsworthy just how many factors contributed to the ultimate output.

6.4.1 LATIMES.COM-GAY MARRIAGE IN CALIFORNIA

The ‘networked chaos’ type environment that has been set up to produce online news for the *latimes.com* website, becomes even more apparent when a news event of significance occurs. One such event took place the day before the State of California began issuing marriage licenses to gay couples. The observation of the story was something that I happened upon while spending a day in the central Los Angeles newsroom.

The Metro news desk had in place an ambitious plan to send out many of its reporters to various locations, covering many angles of the story including personal stories, protestors, courtrooms issuing licences etc. This list was given to members of the Web team through the story budget document. The reporters would be going out in the early morning hours but it was unsure exactly when they would have articles finished to put up on the website. Additionally, the California, National and Foreign desks were also producing reaction stories to the marriage licenses being issued related to what desk they were working from.

The lack of consulting with the Web team when it came to the various news desks coordinating with needs of the website was very common. It was one of the most frequent complaints from the Web homepage producers and caused a lot of unnecessary communication problems between the two. On the desk that I primarily observed (National/Politics) the Web Deputy was often left to bridge the divide and try and appease both sides who were constantly frustrated with the situation.

Besides the Metro desk, the interactive web team had pre-produced a Question & Answer page relating to the legal issues surrounding gay marriage in California. They had also set up a 'Your Scene' photo area for users to upload their own pictures from the day. Additionally the team had created maps showing where marriages were occurring around the Southern California area. The focus on engaging the user in the story through giving them interactive technological platforms was one of the best *convotelling* devices the *latimes.com* team produced. As most of its original article-based content was still centred on the newspaper, these new elements gave users much more of the story and exploited many of the unique features of the Web that are not available in an offline form.

The photography department had prepared some pictorials based on some of the stories the Metro desk was working on. It was also sending multiple photographers out to cover the various marriage ceremonies occurring around the area. The multimedia department had a plan to film various wedding video

vignettes which it would have ready fairly early in the day to put up on the website.

The web team had assigned various bloggers who were going to be at numerous city halls posting all day. Their bloggers would also be following any protests or problems that might occur at the locations that issued the licenses.

In an impromptu meeting the day before these licenses were being issued, many of the people who were creating the various content wanted to know where it would be placed on *latimes.com*. This is a prime example of the lack of hierarchical editorial cohesive structure and highlighted the more networked chaos the team relied upon. The story was not planned with a consistent editorial line but rather was left to the various departments to decide how they were going to handle it. The content then came to the Web homepage team to decide how they were going to treat the story as a whole with all the different and competing parts. There was no discussion about whether the issuing of marriage licenses by the state was good or bad and what it meant for the society rather the main concern was technical in nature.

This normative approach to dealing with the issue of homosexuality within the news media is something that McNair says has lead to cultural chaos. He uses the term ‘progressive dissolution’ to show how what were once oppressive taboos and discriminatory moral standards are changing. McNair states:

...in the past coverage of celebrity homosexuality would have been framed in overtly homophobic terms almost everywhere in the media...[it] has often become

the vehicle for an expanded and largely non-judgemental public discussion of homosexuality. While homophobic and other reactionary eruptions occur from time to time...even tabloids such as the UK *Sun* have grown up and learnt to live with the presence of gay men and women in most walks of life (2006:11).

As the meeting progressed and all of the facets of the story were analysed, one of the managing editors for the website came in and suggested the key to covering this story was to make sure people were able to go from element to element quite easily. The group decided it would have been best to have a specific 'Gay Marriage' landing page but that it was now too late to create one. On top of the technical problem of a lack of a Landing Page, the new video player that was still being built was not ready. The video player had been commissioned to be ready in time for this particular day as those working for the website knew the story would be a big national draw. However, the focus became the video player that was still not ready as opposed to the ideological line of the content.

These types of technical problems were a salient feature of much of the journalism *latimes.com* was trying to accomplish. The web team was always quite ambitious in trying to keep up with creating new platforms for displaying content. But time and time again this seemed to be easier said than actually done. During the election, the Web Deputy on the politics desk constantly found herself having to fix technical glitches, especially when it came to the video function on the website.

The meeting did not lead to any conclusions but rather was adjourned as some of the managers had other meetings to attend. I learned later on that in a senior staff

meeting the executive editor, after heavy lobbying from the multimedia video team, gave video the main spot. However, she told the team that in the future she was going to use blogs as headers and main storytellers for breaking and developing news as it gave them more flexibility and timeliness.

The coverage given to this story was typical of the way the website team worked and the fragmentation of much of the news-gathering operation. There was no one in charge or a single streamline approach of how to cover a story on the website. Rather, it was much more common to see impromptu meetings and frantic phone calls when something occurred. While video ended up getting the top spot for this story, during the election this was not usually the case.

6.4.2 SALON.COM-THE SUPREME COURT AND OBAMA'S BABY MAMA

Entering the newsroom at *salon.com* one will find quite a different scene from the one above. If the *latimes.com* has an unlimited number of voices and sections that want a say on their website, Salon's lack of voices is eerie. There is very little chat between cubicles, very few people talking on the phone and lots of faces staring at computer screens. When a news story breaks, things are a lot less complicated than what happened above.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the coverage done by *latimes.com* and *salon.com* is that the net native site is unapologetically presenting a more voice-infused viewpoint to its readers. A site like the *latimes.com* claims, based

on its newspaper background, simply objective fact-based storytelling. This viewpoint journalism again shows the lack of control in an online environment with bloggers and users creating a conversation that is virtually impossible to be in command of.

Salon's editor-in-chief can frequently be seen on cable news shows, primarily on MSNBC (which is also known for its more left viewpoint), but the site editors feel that it is still firmly based in the idea of objectivity when it presents its news. The value of objectivity is still crucial to establishing credibility which an established website such as *salon.com* knows (McNair 2006). According to the managing editor:

But I think that's part of what, certainly it's part of what a magazine does, a magazine provides a viewpoint. It's an organizing principle that people, they don't have to agree with it but it's something that they can engage with. So you know if you come to Salon you're gonna get a certain approach to the news and a certain kind of thinking. Sometimes even a certain political point of view. But within that we're of course still objective, in the sense of objectively reporting whatever we're reporting (June 11, 2008).

This type of journalism, which is often seen in pessimistic terms, can actually contribute positively according to McNair.

The internet has permitted an expansion and a democratisation of opinion journalism...While this approach to journalism is hardly new in itself...it may be regarded as unwelcome in excess. At the same time, quality control arises from the inevitable competition for access and influence engaged in by bloggers. In the

absence of a major scoop...only the best written and most reliable become consistently influential in the mainstream of the public sphere (2006:133).

The autonomous process that journalists go about writing articles and blogs on the website and the quick editorial decision-making, make it very difficult to observe a news story from inception to dissemination. Various editors usually called in from their homes to the morning editorial meetings making it impossible to examine. When the managing editor and I met one morning of observation I was informed the Supreme Court had made a decision regarding Guantanamo detainees. She and the news editor quickly made a decision during their morning meeting to call up the blogger Glen Greenwald and have him write a piece for the site. He completed the task within an hour and they instantly made the story the cover for the site. Additionally the editors decided to put the full text of the Supreme Court decision on the website. The story remained the cover for most of the day.

This quick form of news judgment and dissemination was typical of how *salon.com* worked. The various section editors and bloggers were always very aware of how their stories and posts were fairing on the website. The editors were very quick to commission pieces on topics they found suited the website or were doing well in a blog post. The longer-form investigated pieces however, were commissioned much further ahead of time but as these were done on a much smaller scale than the analysis or straight-forward news pieces they proved to the exception, not the rule.

Another example of this quick form of editorial decision making and dissemination happened after the Joan Walsh blog and the War Room blog put up posts about a graphic on Fox News calling Michelle Obama ‘Obama’s Baby Mama’. The managing editor decided she wanted a follow up article as it was proving to be a popular talking point for their users on the blogs. The life editor and managing editor then discussed via instant messenger writing a cultural based article on the term ‘Baby Mama’. The key staff writers that would have been in a position to write the article were not available and so the life editor settled on soliciting some freelance writers the site had used in the past to write an article for the website. It was decided and the next day a feature piece appeared on the website by one of their freelance writers. This story in particular was an example of *convotelling* journalism that used different web platforms to continue the conversation and story that users of the website were thoroughly engaged with at the time.

6.5 DISSEMINATION

6.5.1 *LATIMES.COM*-PUBLISH NOW

The news homepage team at *latimes.com* is primarily in charge of the dissemination of content on the web and of highlighting particular stories on its homepage. Content on the homepage that is included in the ‘Guide’ or ‘Entertainment’ boxes are not handled by this team, but the rest is. The team not only orders the look of the page but also adds roadblocks to stories, adds search terms to the coding in order to enhance Search Engine Optimization, fixes

mistakes made at various desks in titles or text of stories, and tracks the traffic on the website.

The team consisted of about six people but fluctuated as cutbacks were made. Depending on the time of day, there could be one web producer or up to five. However, at any given time only one team member 'had the page', which meant only one person at a time was in charge of the layout of the homepage and choosing its stories. Changes were usually made with the input of others and it was a very collegial atmosphere amongst the group, who was on the whole quite young.

The homepage team also meets every afternoon at 5pm Pacific Time to discuss the story budget it has been given by the newspaper for stories that will be put up on the website later that night from the various desks. The team is also very aware of what the Associated Press and other news gathering organisations that the *Los Angeles Times* buys into are covering and are open to using those just as much as the original *Los Angeles Times* content.

There were no hard and fast rules for what deserved high placement and what did not. It was more about keeping the page fresh and adding as much content as possible. On one of the days of my observation I sat with a homepage producer who 'had the page' to see the decision making process. The headline at the time I began observing was still the speech given by Barack Obama accepting the Democratic nomination for President.

Instead of changing the article headline as the story was still relatively new, the producer decided to put up an updated picture. He then updated the homepage with the latest blog headlines to match the new posts on the 'Top of the Ticket' blog. Soon after, he was scrolling through the list he was given by the various desks of newspaper articles that would be uploaded onto the website that evening to see if anything looked interesting. The business stories had already been uploaded to the website but the others were still being copy edited or held.

During this updating process, he was sent an email by a user who noticed a misspelled headline in the Metro section of the website. All the headlines and sub headlines were written by copy editors at the various desks and so although the homepage team would receive the complaints it was often the desks themselves that were responsible. These mistakes are brought up often by critics of online journalism who see the need for speed as a sacrifice in quality and declining journalism standards (Sessions Stepp 2009). However, it is debatable whether the speed of doing journalism on the web will ever be able to compete with the precision given to stories that are produced for journalistic formats that do not require this level of transparency and swiftness.

The producer finished the evening by changing some of the highlighted stories in the 'More News' section which was a list of headlines that sat just below the main blocks of stories. He realized that most of the headlines were crime related and wanted to take away the 'doom and gloom' so looked elsewhere on the website for interesting content to highlight. He also was aware (via the tracking

software) of what users were still clicking on and tried not to take down any headlines that were still getting ‘traction’.

This focus on trying to add content to stories and making sure that users are getting what they want was a huge focus for the homepage team. They are trying to accomplish *convotelling* through prominently displaying stories that adhere to this type of journalism.

6.5.2 SALON.COM-ONCE A DAY

The dissemination process at *salon.com* is not up to a team of producers, but is rather group effort with editors having the final say. The website sees itself as an online daily magazine and in that has created some publishing routines that are very magazine-like. The various section editors coordinate content within their framework. Overseeing them is the managing editor and editor in chief, who has recently taken a less day to day role in the content. The managing editor, in coordination with the various section editors, works on the ‘cover’ story for each day.

This process of disseminating the ‘cover’ story which gives top editors a large say in the distribution of pre-produced article content is very traditionally based in that they have ultimate say in the story selection process. However, it is a highly diffused process once you take into account that there are only a few people who have a say in the progression of the content versus how magazines are traditionally structured. For example, in *Deciding What’s News* Herbert Gans

describes the process of story selection at national news organisations as going through many people including: ‘policy makers, top editors (or producers), section heads, reporters and writers, and researchers. These are complimented by various supporting staffs, some of which play an indirect role in story selection’ (1979:84). Even the most highly edited stories on *salon.com* will go through a maximum of four people: the reporter, a copy editor, a section editor and possibly another managing editor. In addition, simply because a story is highly edited and used as a cover story does not mean it will remain a featured piece on the website for a long time.

The cycle the website has chosen to work in, begins in the evening which is when they have decided to put up the next day’s cover story. The site publishes additional content throughout the day, as news stories develop and within their blogs. However, their news, feature or opinion articles are held to publish in the evening, which is when they put the ‘cover’ story for the next day up. This is not a hard rule and often if they feel they missed something or a very important story breaks they will try to get something up sooner. They change out the cover story about three times per day as a general guideline. They may decide to keep an article up longer if it is doing really well or put up a new blog post or opinion article the editors feel should be highlighted.

One of the first things the managing editor does when getting to the office mid-morning is to check the number tracking system to see how all the stories on the website are doing. On one morning of observation, I was told a story that had

been chosen for the cover the evening before, about genetic modifications on farms, was not doing well based on a low number of hits.

The editor in chief soon entered the managing editors office and they began an informal discussion about how the cover story was not doing very well. The editor in chief suggested changing the ‘cover’ to a post from the Beyond the Multiplex blog. The post was a deconstruction of a feud that was being created between the film directors Spike Lee and Clint Eastwood³⁶. It was getting a lot of hits on the website and appeared to be creating some discussion within the ‘letters’ or comment feature of the website. Without much discussion, the managing editor agreed. She then went over to the desk of an assistant editor and had her physically change the cover story immediately. McNair notes the newly found focus on the importance of the user and how it shapes media output saying: ‘More media, in the context of more democracy, means that what people think, and in particular what they think as a result of consuming media, becomes of greater importance, other things remaining equal’ (2006:61).

6.6 CONCLUSION

This new hybrid form of *convotelling* journalism being created by these news organisations is reshaping the goals and transforming the nature of online journalism. The traditional ideologically understood journalism that is top-down, objective fact-telling is being replaced by something that is more conversational in nature and gives a greater role to the interests of its user.

³⁶ http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/btm/feature/2008/06/11/clint_spike/index.html

Additionally, it exploits the chaotic nature of online journalism. The process of news-making on both of these websites is very different beginning from their physical layouts which ultimately shapes the news outcome. As McNair points out: ‘The chaos model stresses unpredictability of outcome in media production processes, a consequent uncertainty around the quantity and quality of information flow, the importance of feedback loops, and enhanced volatility in the management of both communication and power’ (2006:49).

The physical spaces created by these two organisations provide a contrast between the old and the new. *Latimes.com* news hub is intertwined with its newspaper counterpart in a mammoth building in downtown Los Angeles that provides little in the way of efficiency. Similarly its internal structure is diffused by the lack of a singular goal and focus on the newspaper. It also has extremely different interests, as much of the news gathering and dissemination is under different management. In contrast *salon.com* has chosen to house its journalists in small office buildings around the country and give them autonomy as far as work schedules and many even work from home. The internal structure is extremely streamlined with very little conversation and much autonomy for the journalists and flexibility within blogs and sections.

The actual covering of a news story provides a snapshot of the quick and chaotic nature of online journalism. Both websites are looking to be on top of stories through speed and using various platforms. The technical problems and lack of cohesive vision within the larger news team presents a problem for *latimes.com*

however the sheer amount of coverage it is able to provide on a story and the focus on the interactivity for users makes the news gathering more comprehensive. Meanwhile *salon.com* often has less to offer and simply sticks with what it does best, a few articles a day and many blog posts from various authors.

Chapter 7-The 2008 US Presidential Election

as *Convotelling*

We may well look back at 2008 as [a] milestone in the history of the Web as a news destination (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009).

Barack Obama, the son of a father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas, was elected the nation's 44th president Tuesday, breaking the ultimate racial barrier to become the first African American to claim the country's highest office (Barabak 2008).

There are moments in history that redefine how we understand institutions. The election of Barack Obama to the highest office in the United States was certainly one of those moments. He was able to break through a racial barrier that existed within the United States of America since its inception to become President of the country. This historic moment provided a backdrop to another institution that has been going through a redefinition of its own in the last decade: the news media.

One of the largest narratives of the Presidential election had just ended when I began undertaking this research. Hillary Clinton had conceded that Barack Obama had won enough delegates to be named the candidate for the Democratic ticket. It was a hard fought race that had dominated much of the news about the election up to that point (PEJ Campaign Coverage Index 2008). John McCain had won enough delegates to seal up his bid to be the top contender for the

Republican side much earlier and with much less of a fight. The story quickly shifted and it was now Democratic candidate Barack Obama versus Republican candidate John McCain. The Presidential election narrative was informally spoken of many times during my observation. It was also a continuous homepage story for most days on both of the websites.

This chapter seeks to set out the process of covering the election based on the knowledge of how each newsroom is setup, which was described in the previous chapter. It analyses the resources both news gathering organisations decided to invest in this story in contrast to how it usually covers a news story. Each website had meetings to try and pre-plan how they were going to cover the election narrative, which shows the contrasting styles in the decision making process. The chapter goes on to show what occurs in both of the newsrooms/hubs when news is happening. Finally, there is an analysis of what the two websites actually produced in terms of election content on a random sampling of days.

Despite all the plans and discussions around election content, ultimately two things defined choices that were made: speed and public interest. McNair addresses the desire for control which applies even more specifically when speaking of politicians running for the highest office. He says:

Effective elite control of how media messages are received is the holy grail at the heart of cultural chaos—always aspired to, occasionally glimpsed, but never certain. No actor can know in advance what spin will be put on an event by the media and then the public, or what impact news coverage, from the individual

news item to the totality of journalistic discourse about a particular event, will have on the life a society (2006:49).

7.1 RESOURCES

7.1.1 *LATIMES.COM*-THE BIG PLAN

The three biggest overarching storylines during the five months of my research at the *latimes.com* were the Los Angeles Lakers NBA basketball team, the Beijing Olympics and the 2008 Presidential election. These seemed to be the stories treated with the most pre-planned and thoughtfully executed precision on the website which I deduced through observation and content analysis. And they were also the stories that were given the most resources from all areas of the site according to interviews I did.

The reason for the high prominence given to all these stories was that these storylines brought people to the website. When I began my observation and did some of my early interviews all anyone could talk about was the huge amount of hits the Lakers Blog was getting due to the Lakers being in the NBA Finals. According to one of the copy editors on the AM copy desk,

Our belief is people like Lakers news and it's verified by the hits we get. And when we do the Lakers people hit on it... so if you check out every one or two in the afternoon during the NBA playoffs there's been a Lakers story up on the site. It's like a daily update on practice or whatever's going on. If there's no game that day, there's still a story so they really put it up and people read it (June 4, 2008).

Although the story of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team is not of importance to this particular thesis, it is another example of *convotelling*. The website knew that people were interested in this topic and followed it in their blogs, text-based stories, pictorials and video posted on the website. It is also indicative of how the website chose to allocate resources and give prominence to certain stories over others.

The NBA season ended at the end of June and by the beginning of August, the Olympics were all over the site and the sole concern of the homepage team. Finally as August drew to a close, the Conventions came into play and the race between the two candidates became more competitive. According to one of the homepage producers: ‘I would say since the primaries started in January, I am inclined to say we’ve had a major presence on the page almost continuously that whole time. There are some times when it might drop to just a one line headline but that’s pretty rare and that’s when there’s a real lull in the campaign’ (June 4, 2008). He went on to add: ‘There’s a lot of newsworthy stuff that’s happened. Yeah, I mean but there’s definitely a strong, consistent presence of political coverage on the page. Again because it’s newsworthy and because our readers really pick up on it’ (June 4, 2008).

The National desk had many reporters covering the campaign from numerous angles. They had a reporter travelling with both Barack Obama and John McCain almost all of the time. In addition, they had a full team of at least a dozen reporters in Washington DC as well as a smaller presence in the Los

Angeles bureau. Most of the coverage provided by the National news desk was planned around the newspaper and then the website put up whatever was published. However, this traditional newspaper article format was just one way the website covered the election.

The *Top of the Ticket* blog (which will be addressed in much greater detail in subsequent chapters) was a key platform for content in the *latimes.com* coverage. It not only got a lot of play on the homepage but became a presence in its own right in the blogosphere. The blog was kept up to date by two reporters, one based in Los Angeles and one in Washington DC. In addition to that, a National desk researcher added posts. Other reporters, who primarily worked for the newspaper, would put up posts but that was usually to tease a story they were working on.

The photo galleries were given huge priority on the homepage and in fact used many times to tell a story, such as the debates or a day at the conventions. Despite having a multimedia video-producing staff, video was rarely used as a centre piece to a story but rather as an add-on to other more prominently featured content. The team did stream live video during the conventions for prominent speeches but you had to link to it and it was not embedded within the site. The Interactive team produced maps, speech cloud bubbles and voting registration platforms for users of the site to engage in the process, however except for on election day these were not featured as prominently on the homepage or landing page as the original *Los Angeles Times* newspaper articles, the blog posts or photo galleries.

The way the news-making team at the *Los Angeles Times* went about covering this story as opposed to other news was quite similar. It was very fragmented, divided by sections, and the newspaper remained the focus for reporters. The biggest difference was the amount of resources the national/politics desk gave to news gathering on the topic as well as the emphasis on the *Top of the Ticket* blog. The blog became central to the online coverage as it provided a reason for users to come back to the website on a regular basis to see what new pieces of information were being updated throughout the day.

7.1.2 SALON.COM-FLEXIBILITY

As with *latimes.com* before, the big narrative at *salon.com* had switched from a tight Democratic primary race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to the general election battle between Obama and Republican candidate John McCain when this research began. The Presidential race had a huge presence on the website both because it was a definite part of the Salon brand (according to its editors) but also because it did well for the site in respect to hits.

Several of the editorial staff mentioned to me that the ‘bread and butter’ of the site was its political coverage. According to a project manager: ‘I think most of our traffic tends to go to political stories or sort of the things that we are most known for and that we come up with the most often in terms of search results, which is somewhat related to traffic is political coverage particularly in like this year’ (June 11, 2008). This sentiment was echoed by many others in the team

who said that their coverage of Hillary Clinton versus Barack Obama and most of the stories they did about the Democratic competition did really well.

The bulk of the political coverage was handled through the news and politics editor. He was primarily in charge of the three correspondents who were based in Washington DC but found themselves travelling across the country much of the time. One of the things Salon prided itself on, that I heard over and over, was that it still did original reporting and was not merely a content aggregator, news analysis website or even blog site (although it contains all of these elements as well) as many popular net native newssites are.

The news editor also worked with the key War Room blogger who was based in the New York City office and any additional freelancers who wrote for the blog. He would also coordinate with weekly or monthly columnists who wrote pieces for the site and would edit and commission stories by freelance writers.

The two other key blogs that regularly handled political coverage were the Joan Walsh blog and the Glen Greenwald blog. Walsh's blog was updated regularly throughout the week but rarely more than once a day. She often gave her opinion on developments within the campaigns and the larger Presidential race.

Greenwald's blog on the other hand often focused on legal issues surrounding the campaign. He normally extensively researched an issue before posting and also regularly did original reporting talking to various sources. The other blogs also served campaign news but on an ad hoc basis. Their purpose was not to keep users abreast of the latest developments as the candidates were on the

campaign trail but rather addressed stories in respect to the topic around which the blog was created such as technology or economics.

The economics blog ‘How the World Works’ in particular, became heavily politics infused in the latter part of the campaign. As the economic crisis hit in September, the blog increasingly posted about how the candidates were responding to the downturn and analyzing their solutions to the problem. The blog, which is always available on the website, was given higher prominence on the homepage and often given ‘cover’ status as well.

7.2 MEETINGS

7.2.1 *LATIMES.COM*-PLANNING THE CONVENTIONS

The conventions are a curious political event because they are pre-planned and you know exactly what the politicians are going to say, which is nothing revolutionary to what has been said in most of the campaign speeches beforehand. There is rarely anything spontaneous or what could be termed ‘breaking news’. Yet, is a must cover event for news organisations as it is the official nominating ceremony for each parties’ Presidential candidate (Smolkin 2004).

This type of event provides political actors a forum to present their spin on their candidate and party. This could seemingly present an opportunity for control by political elites as existed much in the past (Curran 2002). However, the entire political process has become much more transparent which makes straight spin

and control over narrative virtually impossible today, even at an event that is clearly routinised such as the convention (McNair 2006:64).

The National desk web deputy was in charge of coordinating the convention efforts for the website. She worked with the desk reporters and editors, the bloggers, the homepage team, the photo and multimedia editors, the interactive team and all the technicians in the building to make sure that on the convention days there would be plenty of content and that everything would run smoothly on the site. She received a budget plan from the news and photo desks early on indicating who they were sending and what stories each would be working on, on a daily basis.

The plan was ambitious with the news organisation sending ten reporters, one editor, one blogger, two people from visuals, and two Denver based correspondents to the Democratic convention. Similarly the Republican convention saw the organisation sending nine reporters, one editor, one blogger, two photographers, one television columnist and one national correspondent. The budget proposal averaged about four stories a day, with mention of side stories that might come up during each convention.

The Thursday final convention planning meeting was one of the largest. All of the key players who would be contributing in some form or another to what the website was doing were there. This included some editors at the National desk, who I was told do not usually attend Web meetings as well as people on the

marketing side who were interested in promoting the web coverage of the Conventions.

The meeting began with a look at the proposed landing page design for each convention. They would use the same uniform system for both. The Web Deputy in particular felt strongly that they should be fair and objective, giving each party as much prominence and display as the other. She was one of the few I found in all my observation who constantly mentioned objectivity throughout various conversations. She would always check to see what the website had done previously and then try and make sure it did the same in whatever the current context. This rarity in pursuit of public service political objectivity was a sign of the transforming nature of online news. As Quandt et. al (2006) pointed out in their study most online journalists now see themselves as neutral disseminators of news and interpreters rather than watch dog or as a public service.

The discussion then turned to the importance of hyper-linking within stories to the blog in order to increase traffic to it. Google search was experiencing a high number of searches for the word 'Convention' so the group was encouraged to include that word as much as possible in the blogs and story headlines in order to increase hits.

It was decided that on the Monday that each Convention began the Campaign '08 Landing Page would begin with big biographies on each of the candidates. These biographies were being written by staff primarily for the newspaper but it was felt by the Web team that they would provide a strong beginning to their

comprehensive coverage. As the conventions wore on, there would be photo and video galleries added to a scrolling player, created specifically for the convention. Each reporter and blogger would be given a small Flip Cam to record any interesting sound bites or events they came upon at the event.

The top headline would be changed out three times a day and stories updated as much as possible. The business side was interested in getting some of the reporters at the convention on television shows in order to promote the *Los Angeles Times*. There was again mention of the importance of interlinking between different platforms and promoting across sections.

What the *Los Angeles Times* news gathering organisation was trying to do is what many call convergence journalism. According to Mark Deuze the institutional characteristics of it are: ‘... companies developing partnerships with other (journalistic and non-journalistic) media organisations to provide, promote, repurpose, or exchange news, and the introduction of cross-media (integrated) marketing and management projects’ (2009:88). The website was trying to increase their users through cross-promoting with other media outlets their reporters, online presence and journalistic enterprise.

Most of the staff agreed on all the decisions being made but two issues were vigorously debated. The first was when the official convention homepage layout would go up. The Democratic Convention (which came before the Republican) coincided with the ending of the Beijing Olympic Games which the *latimes.com* had covered quite extensively. Some felt the homepage should start headlining

with Democratic Convention beginning on Saturday, others Sunday and some felt strongly that it should not go up until the actual convention began mid-Monday. One of the homepage producers made a strong case for beginning coverage on Sunday night to show that ‘we are on it’. It was decided by the team that at least a small box should appear on Sunday evening to show that the *latimes.com* website was prepared to cover the upcoming convention.

The second dispute revolved around the use of video on the site. The multimedia editor felt very strongly that the website should provide live video of the key speeches at both conventions. This view was not shared by everyone, especially the website’s managing editor of operations. He felt it was not that important and a lot of effort for how little the potential audience would be. The multimedia editor voiced her opposite opinion quite strongly and said she would handle all the linking and setting up of the live video. It was agreed that the live streaming would be done for certain speeches and headed up by the multimedia director.

The meeting ended and a few people lingered talking about the technical issues related to how the site was going to handle all of the proposed coverage. Below is a picture of the Landing Page layout that was decided upon. A box did go up on Sunday evening on the homepage teasing the Democratic Convention with some stories that had already been done for the newspaper. Additionally, there were links to the Campaign ’08 Landing Page that had been created and the Top of the Ticket blog. The Democratic Convention became the headline story around mid-day Monday. The convention as a story would vacillate between the

headline story on the homepage, usually in the evenings: to a smaller box in the middle of homepage, during the day.

Figure 7.1- latimes.com Democratic Convention Landing Page

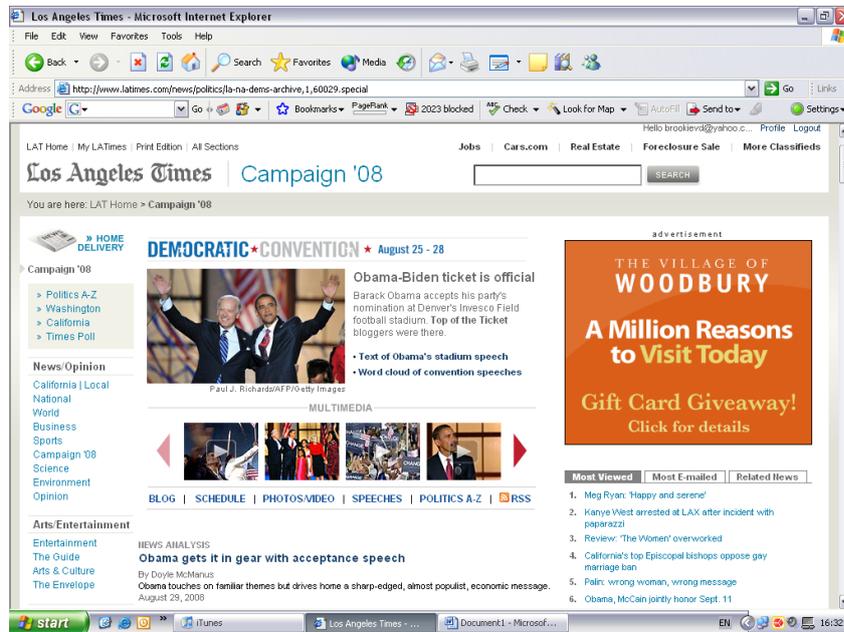
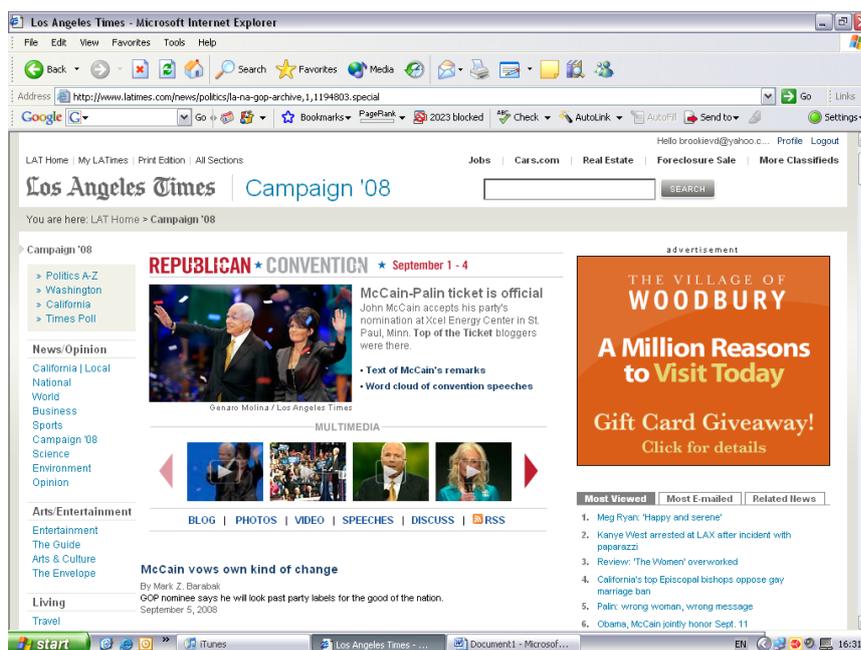


Figure 7.2- latimes.com Republican Convention Landing Page



7.2.2 SALON.COM---WEEKLY 'NEWS' MEETING

Due to the focus on particular types of news by *salon.com* (politics, environment, arts & entertainment), the small editorial team within which it worked, and the location stratification of the team, big meetings to plan out coverage like what happened at *latimes.com* did not occur.

The weekly 'news' section meeting that took place on Fridays was the best way to observe the decision making process. The meeting was not a roundtable, agenda-driven affair but rather occurred over a phone-in conference call system. Even those in the meeting who were located in the same building called in individually from their desks. The meeting I was a part of consisted of the news editor, the features editor, two Washington DC correspondents, the assistant managing editor and the War Room blogger, who also did long form article reporting on occasion. The conference call moved very fast and was hard to follow as I did not know everyone's voice and there was a tendency for those participating to talk over one another.

The team began right away talking about political coverage. The Washington DC bureau chief said he was going to call some Republicans to find out what they were hoping to see at the Democratic convention which was a couple of weeks away. The other DC based reporter was working on a story about the politics of offshore drilling, tying it in to a new Obama advertisement about

energy. There was a brief discussion about writing an essay about why people haven't been asked to sacrifice when it comes to energy. The War Room blogger noted that Bush was asked to encourage people to conserve but didn't feel that was important. As the discussion was going around there was not sense of dictating storylines or controlling a narrative. It was rather a discussion about what the journalists were already doing or thinking about doing.

The conversation went back to what the team deemed the 'overly optimistic' Obama energy advertisement that had been running on the television. It was eventually decided that there would be a reporter piece on energy policy which was already being worked on by the DC correspondent. And further to that the DC bureau chief would write a more opinion oriented piece which combined elements of the current Republican policy in place.

The features editor chimed in saying he was working with a freelancer on a piece about myths related to offshore drilling. He said it would not be ready until next Friday at the earliest. The DC bureau chief said his story would be ready for the next Wednesday and would be light on policy and heavy on politics.

The news editor moved the conversation to a *Harper's* story he had read about the deconstruction of anti-Obama emails. It was noted by the assistant managing editor that there was a freelancer already working on the story. This brief moment in the conversation brought about two key points about sources of content for these online news organisations. First of all, the ideas for stories can often come from other news outlets which can then be built on. This is explored

further in the next chapter but using other media as a source is one of the biggest changes from the highly competitive and insular way of going about news that was a common feature of offline traditions (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007:232).

The second is the independent nature of the news gathering at *salon.com*. One editor was already working with a freelance writer for a story about offshore drilling and yet the rest of the small ‘news’ team was not aware. This was not uncommon. Blog posts would often overlap in subject matter as they were all working independent of each other. The lack of bottom line editorial dictation about what to cover or what not to cover created a sometimes disjointed nature to content that could be more interconnected however, it also proved the lack of a control paradigm in news dissemination that previously existed.

The conversation turned to stories related to the conventions and upcoming Vice Presidential announcements. The news editor asked the DC bureau chief about doing a round table piece about the upcoming Democratic Convention. He said he could have a story on that ready to put up Thursday night but mentioned that there could be a Vice Presidential story then as well. The news editor said he was leaving a space on the site and in the schedule for when the Vice Presidential nomination story broke.

The other DC reporter said he was going to Saddleback Church in Southern California to attend the Presidential forum with Obama and McCain, moderated by Pastor Rick Warren which was happening that weekend. The news editor said he wanted the story put up right away after the forum ended. He also wanted to

know if the pastor made any unofficial endorsement or leaned a certain way. The reporter noted that the pastor's brand of theology was not pushy so he doubted there would be any bias or endorsement. The reporter felt he was more of a self help guy than a culture warrior. The news editor felt it would definitely be one solid story but depending on what happened at the forum was open to two articles from the reporter. He then asked if there were any more politics that needed to be discussed.

The DC bureau chief brought up the Democratic platform and asked the others how the website wanted to cover the story. The entire group noted how boring the platform topic was and how no one would read it. After speaking about it for a minute or two, no one wanted to volunteer to actually spend time reading the entire document. One of the group said that they might fall asleep trying to get through it. No decision was made as to whether or not the topic would ultimately be covered but the general lack of enthusiasm did not bode well for a future story.

This brief conversation highlights an issue that Herbert Gans succinctly addressed in a book chapter entitled 'Can Popularization Help the News Media' (2009)? There has been much discussion around the dumbing down of news media with the onslaught of cable news and online news websites. This was also mentioned in the previous chapter in regards to convotelling journalism. However, simply because an organisation such as Salon does not cover the Democratic platform in detail does not necessarily equal a dumbing down for two reasons.

First of all, the platform of the Democratic Party is available to users on the official Party website.³⁷ In that, citizens interested in finding out what the party stands for in order to inform their vote have a direct line to it. They are not necessarily reliant on the news media for the information.

Secondly, although there is a certain segment of the audience who likes the minutia of party political platforms, it is not something audiences wanted to consume (as the Salon journalists knew from past numbers related to such articles). So instead of covering the story the website chose to devote its resources to articles it felt were more accessible and interesting to its audience. This way of going about journalism is heralded by Gans as he believes that journalism should not be driven by class or education level.

The news audience's "need to know" as citizens should not vary by taste culture or class: after all, facts and explanations are the same in elite as in popular news media...If the aim is to reach the parts of the news audience with limited education, the words used to report the news and complexity of analysis cannot be the same as that used for graduates of selective colleges. If keeping to a single set of the "highest" presentation standards means losing a significant part of the audience, then the public's need to know cannot be properly satisfied (2009:21).

The discussion then turned to other non-political stories. The War Room blogger mentioned a story about cops who killed a mayor's dog in the state of Maryland was getting a lot of traction on the Web. The news editor said the mayor should

³⁷ <http://www.democrats.org/a/party/platform.html>

go on the cable show Nancy Grace³⁸. There was discussion of the story and the larger implications of cops' power in the drug war. It was finally decided by the news editor that there wasn't enough people to do the story. A few other topical stories were mentioned but nothing was picked up by the group and a few minutes later the meeting ended.

As soon as the phone meeting ended, the War Room blogger and news editor informally chatted through what had just been talked about. The blogger then began catching up on his work. He had a desk computer and a laptop, at one point between the two computers he was writing a blog post, chatting with three people on instant messenger and writing an email.

7.3 AS NEWS HAPPENS

7.3.1 *LATIMES.COM*-THE NOMINATION OF JOHN MCCAIN

The final day of a party convention is the moment when the nominees formally accept their nominations for President by their respective parties. An event like this, with planned coverage by the journalists and desired control of the narrative

³⁸ 'Nancy Grace' is a nightly news program on CNN's Headline News cable station. According to the show's website, "Nancy Grace" is television's only justice themed/interview/debate show, designed for those interested in the breaking crime news of the day. Grace challenges guests on the most high-profile legal issues of the day by drawing on her unique perspective as a former violent crimes prosecutor and as a crime victim herself. Nancy Grace provides viewers with a clear understanding of not only the top crime stories, but also the cases often overlooked.' More information is available on the website: <http://edition.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/nancy.grace/>

by the politicians, provides a backdrop to see how a live unfolding story plays out in a newsroom. The nomination of John McCain in particular highlighted the competing factors that lead to an uneven and highly chaotic atmosphere of news production.

The previous weeks' nomination of Barack Obama for President was not simply a routine process due to its historical nature. He was the first black man nominated for President of the United States by one of the main political parties in the history of the country. In addition, his speech accepting the nomination was given on the same day as the 'I Have a Dream' speech given by Martin Luther King Jr., during the civil rights movement 45 years earlier.

In contrast, the nomination of John McCain did not have the historical nature behind it but the event did produce some interesting storylines of its own. The entire four-day convention was delayed by a day due to Hurricane Gustav which threatened the Gulf Coast that was still recovering from Hurricane Katrina three years earlier. Second, McCain had chosen a virtual unknown national figure, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, as a running mate which was giving the journalistic community a new election narrative.

A pre-packaged news event such as this with a desire on the part of PR professionals to put their own spin on it would seemingly be a very controlled environment with an easily set out plan that could be reasonably well executed. However, as chaos theory points out, there are many external and internal factors vying for control of the news narrative along with unpredictable factors (such as

Hurricane Gustav) that lead to unplanned outcomes (McNair 2006:49). This was certainly the case as *latimes.com* set out to cover the nomination of John McCain.

At around 2pm Pacific Time the day McCain was accepting the nomination and the final day of the Convention, the web deputy still did not have a schedule from the Republican Party for that night's speakers. She told me this had been the case for most of the convention and that the reporters were forced to have conference calls with Republican officials each morning in order to find out the schedule of events. The Party would then send email updates throughout the day changing the schedule or highlighting something previously unknown. This was in contrast to the Democratic Party who had a highly organised timetable during the convention which it sent to the press the day before so they would have ample time to decide how they would go about covering whatever events were on offer. This in turn made it much more difficult for the *Los Angeles Times* to cover the Republican Convention in comparison to the Democratic one, which was highly organised and catered to the media.

The Web Deputy noted the prominence given to the Democratic Convention on the homepage versus the Republican. She felt as a journalistic organisation the web team should strive for balance in what it highlighted on the homepage and provide an equal amount of space and prominence to both. This sense of balance and proportion which traditional ideologically understood journalism (Deuze 2005) strove for is not a prominent feature of *convotelling* journalism. This journalism gives prominence to stories that have many interesting dimensions

and engage the audience. The *latimes.com* Web team placed the nomination of Obama higher in its placement not because of political bias but rather because it was a better story that the users wanted to hear about and engage in.

However it was not simply Obama that received this added placement and featured content on the website. The blog editor decided to create a discussion blog during the Republican Convention because of the increasing amount of engagement users had with the McCain/Palin ticket. The story of Sarah Palin will be explored more in subsequent chapters but the amount of *convotelling* journalism created around her gave the Republicans very high placement on the website throughout the final months of the campaign.

Besides this ideological journalism debate, there were many technological issues that played into the election coverage on the day of McCain's nomination. The Web Deputy informed me that after purchasing Flip Cams for the reporters and bloggers, most of them were not being used. There was a constant sense of frustration by much of the Multimedia team and Web editors with the lack of embracing other platforms by the news gatherers on the National/Politics desk.

This lack of enthusiasm for multiple-platform journalism also created workload problems. The web deputy found herself having to handle a lot of the website coverage during the conventions because the reporters and editors at the National desk were not focusing on the Web. They were consumed by newspaper deadlines and therefore chose not to contribute to Web coverage. The

Web Deputy remained in the office until 4am many nights in order to update coverage on the website and to ‘fix the kinks’ as she would say.

The question of how to disseminate information that the team had not prepared to cover became an issue when Sarah Palin was being nominated as a Vice Presidential candidate. The National news desk had no content prepared for this formality, the blog was not covering it, and there were no specific multimedia pieces or interactive features available. The team was unsure whether or not it was worthy of putting up a breaking news alert on the website and to mobile phone users. One was against it, one was for it and the others were indifferent. Someone then realised they had not done a breaking news alert when Senator Biden was nominated on the Democratic side, so they decided to stick with protocol and not do an alert.

The team of homepage producers had a clear focus on getting news to the website as soon as it was humanly possible. As each convention day progressed the frustration with the National/Politics desk became stronger. One of the producers confided to me that they had a problem most of the week with the speed of stories being delivered. They were not getting stories or blog posts quick enough to put up on the site and often to keep up had to put up a quick photo from a photo agency or an article from the Associated Press. He felt that speed was not at all a focus of the newsgathering operation but that the quality of the content was good. This was echoed by a second homepage producer who said there was a need to increase speed so as not to get beat on a story

There was also a sense of frustration within the web team regarding how many people a story had to go through when it came from one of the desks downstairs. One producer noted that the amount of people that have to touch a once sentence story is ‘crazy’. It became such a problem that the two senior homepage producers, the executive editor for *latimes.com* and the web deputy for the National desk decided to have an impromptu meeting to discuss the problem. They talked about the expectations of instant stories and how to compete with other seemingly faster news websites such as *nytimes.com*.

The group also brought up that the previous night there was a backlog of too many articles available at the exact same time which coincided with the evening newspaper deadlines. The homepage producers who worked throughout the evening and later into the night felt it was hard to sift through the amount of content when just one or two homepage producers were working. The meeting produced no conclusions as the team had no control over when the content could be finished.

This debate between the news gatherers and disseminators was a constant theme during all of my observation and has already been mentioned before this point. It is part of a larger debate happening within journalism circles about the need for speed versus accuracy online. In the 2009 State of the Media Report, a survey of online journalists found that twenty five percent saw the biggest change in journalism on the web was its emphasis on speed. According to the report: ‘While some noted positive implications like getting news to people faster, most spoke of immediacy becoming more important than accuracy. As one writer and

producer of stories described it, misinformation “gets spread faster than a bad sexually transmitted disease” (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009).

The web team tried to solve this breach on its own on the night of McCain’s nomination. Three speakers would be taking the stage before McCain’s speech would begin. Senator Lindsey Graham, former Governor Tom Ridge, and Cindy McCain would all be introducing the Republican candidate and the National/Politics desk had already told the web producers that they would have no content for them during those successive speeches. It was decided by the executive editor of the website, the web deputy and two homepage producers that they would attempt to live blog the three back-to-back speeches that were occurring that evening. The consensus was that way there would be constantly updated content for the homepage team to feature.

The Web Deputy instantly began trying to recruit a National desk reporter to live blog the speeches that were starting in less than a half an hour. Everyone on the National desk told her they were too busy and told the Web Deputy to have the web people do it. The two main bloggers who wrote for the site could not live blog according to the Web Deputy as they were working on other blog posts. A young researcher for the National desk who had been a frequent contributor to the blog posts told me as an aside that she thought it was funny that on the last day of the convention they would suddenly start live blogging. After exhausting all her resources, the Web Deputy called upstairs to one of the homepage producers and told her that they would have to split the duties between the two of them even though both were producers and editors rather than reporters.

Soon after, the sole breaking news reporter for the Web told the Web deputy that he had written the McCain story, based on pre-speech text, and that as soon as the Senator's speech began the Web team could put it up. Various people then began coming up to the Web Deputy and in the midst of several conversations she looked up at the television screen on her desk and realized that Senator Lindsey Graham was taking the stage. All of the sudden there was a bit of confusion from the deputy as to what to do. She and the homepage producer upstairs began to send instant messages to each other to try and figure out what to do. The homepage producer quickly opened the Typepad account for the *Top of the Ticket* and began blogging. The Web Deputy then went into the post and found a live video link to attach and was trying to add speech text in order to get it published and up on the blog. As she was trying to do this, the *Top of the Ticket* blogger who was in St. Paul began calling her cell phone numerous times as the video he was trying to upload to his blog post was not attaching and he was very frustrated. One of the other Web technicians came down to help the Web Deputy with the video problem the *Top of the Ticket* blogger was having.

The Web Deputy went back to the live blog but by now Senator Lindsey Graham was off the stage and Governor Tom Ridge was about to walk out. She quickly published the Graham live blog even though it was no longer live as he was not speaking and set up the next live blog for Ridge's speech. She used Wikipedia in order to write a quick Ridge biography prefacing his speech. She spent a lot of time trying to sort out what to say and finally published the post mid-way through his speech. After this was completed, she went back into the Graham

post to take out the live video link and fix some grammatical errors. She then told me that she felt this maybe was not the most efficient way to go about things. It was too much information too quickly for one person to write about in any meaningful way. So instead of updating the Ridge blog she began straight away on the Cindy McCain speech constantly coordinating via instant messenger with the homepage producer upstairs.

Once Cindy McCain was done speaking, the Web Deputy called upstairs to one of the homepage producers in order to make sure they were on the same page as John McCain was about to go onstage. As mentioned earlier, the National desk had produced an updated story that was ready for the website as soon as Senator McCain walked out. He did so at approximately 7:15pm Pacific Time and it appeared to go much more smoothly than the blogging had gone.

After all of that was settled and John McCain was giving his speech, the Web Deputy began updating the Campaign'08 Landing Page with new pictures and headlines. In addition, she formatted a transcript of the Cindy McCain speech to put up on the site with an attached speech tag cloud, as she had done with the Obama speech. The breaking news reporter added more to his previously updated McCain story.

After the convention was over I went upstairs to see how the homepage team on the fifth floor felt it all went. It was very quiet in the room and the homepage producer who 'had the page' was updating pictures. He noted that the homepage team was scrambling for a while during the 'live blog' portion. He felt that the

latimes.com website was not in a position to cover the event properly given that there was no protocol and the site was lacking resources. The producer also noted that other sites were constantly updating their byline articles as each speaker went along and they were not. He noted the site had problems covering breaking news and he felt the precedent of producers live blogging was a dangerous one to set and hoped it would not happen again.

7.3.2 SALON.COM-THE JOHN EDWARDS AFFAIR

The atmosphere in the news hubs of *salon.com* contains much less discussion. Watching an election story unfold is almost impossible to capture because of the amount of communication happening over the computer. At one point during observation in the New York office, two editors who were sat a few feet from each other suddenly started chatting in what appeared to be the middle of a sentence. They had been having a conversation over Instant Messenger and then for whatever reason just began speaking out loud instead of writing it out.

There was very little in terms of pre-planned election coverage (such as the Conventions) that I was able to observe at Salon. However, during the New York observation period former Presidential candidate John Edwards became at the forefront of the narrative again when he admitted to having an affair. The process of covering that affair showed the quick nature of *salon.com*'s decision making as well as their slower more traditional approach to writing full-length articles or 'cover' stories.

The newsroom was eerily quiet, as usual, when the New York editorial director came out of his office and into the open area of desks and announced loudly that: ‘John Edwards admitted he cheated on his wife. ABC News just posted it on their website.’ The small news staff began casually chatting about the story that had originally been given no serious bearing by most of the mainstream press, even though the tabloid newspaper *National Enquirer* had been reporting it for months.

The ‘War Room’ blogger soon after this brief discussion posted the information on the blog, linking to the ABC News story. As soon as the post was up, it was highlighted on the homepage by another editor. The news editor then called the Washington DC Bureau chief to inform him of the breaking news and told him to follow up on the story.

The dissolution of political and personal boundaries within the coverage of politics has been an increasing feature of journalism in the late part of the 20th century and the early part of the 21st. It is another feature of cultural chaos that McNair addresses as proof of the lack of control by elites.

...the news is increasingly irreverent and lacking in reserve towards elites. If political scandal (or any other kind) is not unique to the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, the speed with which scandalous information spreads and reproduces certainly is, fuelled by the commercial imperative of news organisations to compete with one another in being first with the story. The public-private distinction which has traditionally maintained a separation between news coverage of the affairs of the state and the affairs of statesmen (for men they usually are) has been eroded (2006:10).

There was then discussion amongst the small group about the legitimacy of the *National Enquirer*. The weekly tabloid newspaper, is known as ‘America’s premier scandal sheet’ (Mahler 2008). According to a profile of the tabloid: ‘It uses methods scorned by the mainstream media—rifling through trash cans, stalking subjects and, most of all, paying for information. And it pursues the sorts of seamy stories from which most newspapers and magazines tend to recoil’ (ibid). However, despite its tabloid status the publication continues to break stories that the ‘mainstream media’ does not cover. It not only was the first to uncover the Edwards affair but it also led reporting with the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, the extramarital affair of politician Gary Hart and gained huge readership during the O.J. Simpson trial. As *Newsweek* author Jonathan Mahler puts it: ‘Yet the Enquirer lands too many big scoops for the mainstream media to ignore—or, more accurately, that they ignore at their peril’ (2008).

Despite the story being uncovered on a Friday, the news editor decided that further article coverage and angles on the story would be discussed the following week. The news team conducted a conference call a full five days later. The news editor and two feature editors in New York were each at their desks dialled into the phone network examining further stories the website might explore related to the scandal. The team brought up questions about how much his wife knew, how Edwards had managed to limit knowledge of the affair in the media, disappointment from supporters about his long denial of the affair and even looking at the affair in comparison to that of New York governor Elliot Spitzer. They spent a long time contemplating the role of the *National Enquirer* but

ultimately none of these ideas became articles as most of the team felt the story had been covered extensively on the website and elsewhere already.

Many of the above questions had already been addressed in posts on the *War Room* blog. The only longer form articles Salon did were a piece by the DC bureau chief about as a reporter being deceived by Edwards³⁹ and a piece by a freelance writer about the mistress at the centre of the scandal⁴⁰.

This incident was indicative of much of the streamlined approach *salon.com* had to doing all of its journalism. With such a small team, they were able to post elements of a story quite quickly which left the bloggers with a lot of autonomy. The underpinnings of *salon.com*, which was set up by former journalists for the purpose of creating a place for discussion, bled into much of the autonomy it gave its reporters and bloggers. There was no mistaking that although the editors were in charge to a degree, the reporters were not being told what to do.

It also shows the importance of other media as a source for information and the networked versus hierarchal structure of information sharing that exists in journalism McNair compares the flow of information on the web with storms.

He says:

...the network structure of the World Wide Web, in combination with the 24-hour presence of real-time satellite news, produces an environment where information cascades become more unpredictable, more frequent, and more difficult for elites

³⁹ <http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2008/08/14/edwards/index.html>

⁴⁰ http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2008/08/16/rielle_hunter/index.html

to contain when they begin. News storms develop without warning, placing power elites on permanently reactive, defensive mode (2006:202).

7.4 ELECTION CONTENT ON THE WEB

The ambitious nature of the both the National desk and the Web team at *latimes.com* in covering the Presidential election has already been mentioned. Within the newsroom, the feeling of a lack of speed related to articles and lack of vision related to video was strongly felt. But what is represented within journalist politics is not necessarily reflected on the Web. There was a lot on offer on the *latimes.com* website.

Salon.com felt it ‘owned’ stories like the Presidential election. The story itself was told mainly through blogs, as I had been told it would in interviews. The amount of pieces, if combining articles and blogs, was similar on both websites. However, the *latimes.com* provided much more on other platforms such as video, photo galleries, and interactive features. The following is what appeared on three content analysis sampling days on both websites.

- August 25, 2008 (Democratic National Convention)

The first day of the Democratic Convention turned out quite a bit of content for those searching for information on *latimes.com*. The website began the day with seven text-based articles, which was fourteen by the end of the day. *Salon.com* however, only posted three text-based articles for the entire day. The combined blogs on *salon.com* posted eighteen different times that day on election related issues. Similarly, the *Top of the Ticket* blog posted eighteen times throughout the

day. However, four of these posts were either highlighting full-length text-based articles or simply listing articles available on the website. The *latimes.com* website also provide a Guide to Denver, A-Z of Candidates, an Electoral Map, three photo galleries, three originally produced videos, as well as video content from other partner-sources in their embedded video player. *Salon.com* had two cartoons produced for the day and embedded videos within their blogs.

The subject matter of the articles and blogs varied. Fifteen of the seventeen articles were about the Democratic Party in some capacity. They revolved around the candidates, the Convention, party leaders or donors. The blog posts were more mixed in their subject matter providing peripheral information related to the election generally (such as a You Tube embedded video of the history of conventions), behind the scenes information regarding the convention, key insiders statements, as well as speeches made during the evening's events. The *salon.com* blogs additionally focused on some protests going on outside the convention as well as various parties taking place throughout Denver.

- September 2, 2008 (Republican National Convention)

The second day of the Republican Convention produced almost as much content as the Democratic one on *latimes.com*. Although it might not have received as much prominence on the homepage, as brought up by the Web Deputy, it was fairly equal in content. The small gap could have been due to the fact that Hurricane Gustav caused the convention to begin a day later than planned and so what was the second day of the Convention was essentially the first. The website began the day with seven text-based articles but by the end of the day listed

twelve it also had seventeen blog posts throughout the day. In contrast *salon.com* had much more content compared to the Democratic Convention with four text-based articles and twenty four blog posts throughout the website related to the election. The additional content on *latimes.com* (Guides, photo galleries etc), mentioned above, was also available to users of the website. It also added a discussion blog as well as a link to the podium schedule for those interested in the proceedings.

As when it was the Democratic convention, most of the text-based articles revolved around the Republican Party during the Republican Convention. All of the articles on *salon.com* were about Sarah Palin or her family. One subject area that was not covered in the previous content analysis that came up several times here was the media. *Latimes.com* posted several articles and blog posts around media coverage of the convention as well of Governor Palin.

Latimes.com also added video to many of the articles and blog posts, which was not a significant feature of the previous analysis. Much of the subject matter of the blog posts was about Sarah Palin or what was ahead for the convention regarding speakers or various attendees. Only three of the twenty four blog posts from *salon.com* were about the Democrats or Obama.

- October 7, 2008 (2nd Presidential Debate)

The second Presidential debate provided a good opportunity to see how the websites covered an event that was equally geared for Democrats and Republicans. *Latimes.com* provided six text-based articles in the beginning of

the day and by the end had eleven. *Salon.com* began the day with four and ended with six. The *Top of the Ticket* blog posted eleven entries, with one being a Live Blog which was constantly updated during the debate itself. Similarly, *salon.com* used the War Room blog to create a Live Blog of the debate. Overall, *salon.com* provided users with twenty one posts on the various blogs. *Latimes.com* also provided users with an electoral map (which was also a feature during the conventions), a discussion blog, a debate schedule, and originally produced videos. Additionally, after the debate had ended the website had a full transcript put up as well as a 'Vote' feature in which allowed users to vote for who they believe won.

The themes of the articles on *latimes.com* were primarily about the debate however, there were a few that revolved around external people to the campaigns who had become controversial for various reasons (William Ayers, Charles Keating and Jerome Corsi). The *Top of the Ticket* blog focused its narrative primarily on the debate but also picked up on what various Republican and Democratic strategists were saying about the opposing candidates. The blog also features a 'Debate Day Reading List' as well as a 'Debate Transcript' after the event.

In contrast, all six of the text-based articles from *salon.com* were about the GOP, Sarah Palin or John McCain rather than the debate. They featured titles such as 'Palin's un-American activities', 'GOP back to ugly roots' and 'Low Road to the White House'. The blog posts were more broad in scope than the articles but McCain and Palin still featured heavily.

The two websites provided a vast amount of content for users to intake on all of these days. But even with all the content, there was very little overlap in the subject matter of the various articles and blog posts⁴¹. In those three days there were eighty six articles and blog posts by *latimes.com* and seventy six by *salon.com* relating to the election. Of all these narratives, only eighteen overlapped in actual content as well as both of the websites choosing to do a Live Blog of the debate.

These findings do not match one of the key points Hall et al. (1978a) make in their analysis on the influence of news values in determining content. Granted, this research merely focuses on one story so does not deal with selecting news on a larger level, but within this single story there was very little in the way of cross-consensus of what was news by these journalists. According to the previous study:

...it is sufficient to say that news values provide the criteria in the routine practices of journalism which enable journalists, editors and newsmen to decide routinely and regularly which stories are “newsworthy” and which are not, which stories are major “lead” stories and which are relatively insignificant, which stories to run and which to drop. Although they are nowhere written down, formally transmitted or codified, news values seem to be widely shared as between the different news media...and form a core element in the professional socialisation, practice and ideology of newsmen (Hall et. al. 1978b: 250).

⁴¹ As *salon.com* did not provide much content on other platforms there was no cross analysis of photo galleries, video content, or other interactive elements.

This idea of widely shared news values across different news media clearly does not hold in the case of these two online journalism news websites. Additionally, proponents of control theory would argue that public relations and other forms of media management are key in manufacturing consent and often control the media narrative (McNair 2006). However, in these two cases there was very little in terms of narrative similarity even though both news organisations were covering the same campaigns and had similar access to information.

7.5 CONCLUSION

This contrast in coverage, even though the central story remained the same, shows the evolving nature of *convotelling* journalism. With both websites providing so much coverage, there is not a single narrative voice on either website. The websites found different stories and angles within the election cycle but none was a dominating force, either on the individual websites or between the two with one exception on *salon.com*, Sarah Palin. In the final day of analysis, Palin was the central figure around all of its news, feature and analysis pieces. She also figured in to three of twenty one blog posts, even though the debate that day was between Barack Obama and John McCain.

This is a critical point for journalism according to Bird (2009). She says: ‘Multiple narratives now appear to compete with mainstream journalism to define the day’s stories. News audiences pick and choose what they want to believe, from a seemingly endless supply of information from which to assemble their own versions of reality’ (2009:46). The news-making process, and its

subsequent dissemination onto the Internet, is no longer defined by deadlines and ideologies and is now more dictated by speed, interaction with users and the technical aspects of telling a story. It is negotiated by a variety of actors who do not singularly shape any narrative but rather seem to autonomously combine to create content output on the web.

The following chapters take the knowledge of these news-making processes and specifically address the central questions that define this thesis. How do these newly defined relationships within journalism affect the process of news-making? Is there a difference between the net native and parentage online news website? And finally is online journalism distinctive or simply journalism on another platform?

Chapter 8- Redefining Relationships: With the User, Between Sources and Journalists, Within the Newsroom

Every writer since the printing press has longed for a means to publish himself and reach—instantly—any reader on Earth. Every professional writer has paid some dues waiting for an editor’s nod, or enduring a publisher’s incompetence, or being ground to literary dust by a legion of fact-checkers and copy editors. If you added up the time a writer once had to spend finding an outlet, impressing editors, sucking up to proprietors, and proofreading edits, you’d find another lifetime buried in the interstices. But with one click of the Publish Now button, all these troubles evaporated.

Alas, as I soon discovered, this sudden freedom from above was immediately replaced by insurrection from below. Within minutes of my posting something, even in the earliest days, readers responded. E-mail seemed to unleash their inner beast. They were more brutal than any editor, more persnickety than any copy editor, and more emotionally unstable than any colleague (Sullivan 2008).

It is a cacophony of voices all vying for a say in what you consume on these websites. Voices from within the newsroom at various levels of prominence and placement. Voices talking to sources and the sources themselves. Voices that consume the news and yet also feel they have a viable stake in what it is.

The most profound change the World Wide Web has brought to the field of journalism is the redefinition of relationships that so long defined it. This chapter explores the shift in these relationships. First with the audience as the authoritative, top-down monologue to the masses no longer exists online. The second is the relationship between sources and journalists, which is being redefined as sources have direct access to the public through the web (Schudson 2009b) and as journalists broaden their definition of who is a source. There is also a change in the power structures that existed within the newsrooms, which are slowly dissipating and creating a more networked environment. However, one development more than any other has changed the entire framework of journalism, the blog.

8.1 INTERACTIVITY WITH USERS

As already mentioned earlier, interactivity between the reader and the creator is one of the biggest changes that has occurred in an online environment (Bardoel 1996, Pavlik 1999, 2000, 2001). This form of interactivity has been so profound it has even made its way into television broadcasts as well as newspaper and magazine content. It is now commonplace for CNN hosts during afternoon telecasts to check in with what people are saying on the Web. The *Los Angeles Times* newspaper also will publish ‘from the blogs’ columns, which sum up some of the recent interactive blog content on their website.

But how does this new two-way relationship work itself out in the newsroom? And even though there is feedback, are the journalists actually listening? After so long simply writing for editors and other journalists (Sullivan 2008), how big of a part does the reader actually play in the content that is produced for the websites?

Before analyzing the results, it is important to understand the technology restrictions that prevent interaction on these two websites. The *latimes.com* website does not allow for commenting within its text based articles or its multimedia content. The site does provide each author's email address.

However, within the blog format, which is supported by TypePad one of the largest blog format sites, commenting is allowed and indeed encouraged. The comments must be approved by either the blogger or someone on the web team who has access to the account. The website also has an Opinion LA blog and a Your Scene photo section which are extremely popular and allow the users of the website to upload the information they want to be seen by anyone who enters the site.

The *salon.com* website started a 'Letters' commenting function on all of its article and blogs in the last two years. Users have to register on the site, but once that is completed, there is no limit to how much commenting is allowed. An intern, or sometimes the article's author, will go through and monitor the letters to make sure there is no obscenity. This approval is done after the letters are posted, not beforehand as with the *latimes.com* site. In addition, the writer of an article or blog post can go in and star a letter and make it an 'Editors Choice', which will make the comment appear higher in the list for others to read.

According to Guidelines given out by Salon for monitoring letters there is no quota for number of Editors' choice letters. They say that they merely serve as a filter for readers weeding out letters that are repetitious and vacuous. There is no feedback function on the multimedia parts of the website. However, the email addresses of most of the writers, editors and bloggers on *salon.com* are provided at various places on the site.

Both *salon.com* and *latimes.com* reserve the right to delete comments they find inappropriate. Everyone involved in these processes assured me that it was not a matter of philosophical disagreement but rather of profanity or intolerable comments about the personal life of the writer. I asked one Salon writer about her ability to delete comments: 'I can do that and I do occasionally... Because it gets like incredibly misogynistic comments like things I'm not even sure I would say into your tape recorder... They say things just to be provocative. They say things about writers, not just the points they're making, they speculate about their personal lives, they call them incredibly misogynist names' (June 12, 2008).

I noted comments being approved several times during my observation at the *latimes.com* and I never saw a comment deleted due to its ideological position. In fact, rarely did I ever note comments being deleted. The few exceptions were in regard to what was deemed inappropriate language and/or rude, abusive comments about the candidates which were completely off topic. Additionally, in doing a content analysis of some of the blogs at *salon.com* the variety of responses posted on the website showed that there did not appear to be a

problem with authors deleting comments simply for the reason of ideological disagreement.

8.1.1 'LETTERS', EMAILS AND COMMENTS

There is no mistaking the importance of email in the newsroom centre of *latimes.com*. Email is the primary way that the producers of the *Los Angeles Times* website communicate not only with each other but also with the readers and users who are increasingly a part of the makeup of the site. On any given day, one of the reporters at the Times told me, he receives seventy five to one hundred and twenty five emails from people who have read his content, either in the newspaper, on the website or through the *Los Angeles Times* syndication service. This number was similar to other reporters I talked with, although it did definitely depend on what they were writing about at the time.

Most of the reporters who work within the Times building, as noted in previous chapters, are working to create content for the newspaper. Most of the days I visited the building, it was in the late afternoon and evening and most were sat at desks typing away or on the phone confirming stories. It was hard to tell if there was actual interaction occurring but in interviews one reporter told me he tried as much as possible to reply to readers. 'I respond to reader emails. I guess somewhere between dozens and if I really excite or piss people off I sometimes get hundreds of them. So obviously I don't respond to all of them, that's another thing that takes up too much time' (September 11, 2008).

The website's political blog 'Top of the Ticket' gained visitors as the campaign wore on and with the increasing audience a level of importance was given to constantly approving comments. On the two nights of the Presidential debates that I observed the website decided to Live Blog the event. The main blogger, as he was live blogging, did not have time to approve comments during the one hour and half long telecast so the web deputy and one other homepage producer made sure that the blog's comments were constantly updated. The popularity of the Live Blog meant that even with two people approving comments they had more than they could handle. It took at least ten to fifteen minutes for them to catch up with all the comments being posted on the site.

One of the stories that got the most responses, as soon as it was posted, was the *Los Angeles Times* editorial endorsement of Barack Obama for President. The website decided to allow comments on the article, as it was an editorial piece and not produced in the newsroom. It received a near record number of responses as soon as it was posted. However, not all of the content was deemed suitable for posting. According to a blog posted by the Opinion Page Editor: '[T]he outpouring of reader response to our endorsement of Barack Obama for president...has been overwhelmingly and, for the most part, highly gratifying' (Newton 2008). He goes on to say:

A couple of readers complained that their replies were not posted...I did delete some responses. Some were profane. Some were racist. Some were threatening to me, the board or to readers who submitted comments. I did not delete any message because it criticized the editorial itself unless the same message was objectionable

for other reasons... We especially like to give space to opposing views (Newton 2008).

Salon.com on the other hand, relies heavily on its 'Letters' feature to interact with users of the site. All blog posts and text based stories have the ability for a person to comment directly on the site and once this was introduced emails to individual writers went down significantly. Not everyone was happy about this change. According the DC bureau chief:

I find the people that respond to the letters are for the most part a chilling example of reader democracy gone amuck. I find that as I write about politics, the level of shrill, ideological, un-thinking, cloud cuckoo pieces/letters are tremendously high. I find that exceedingly dispiriting... I would much rather [interact via email]... And what I enjoyed, writing back to individual readers even when they were attacking me. You can generally find a point of agreement. But one of the frustrations with the way the letters are set up at Salon is you can't respond to individual writers (September 26, 2008).

This was not to say that he didn't read the 'Letters' in response to his article. In fact almost without exception every journalist who created content for either website read emails, blog comments or 'Letters' about what they had done. It was a mixed bag as to whether or not this was a positive thing. About half of the people I talked with felt there was no value in this newly created dialogue while the other felt this new interaction was a great thing. The one person who interacted most with her readers according to most of her staff was Joan Walsh, the editor in chief of *salon.com*. She told me:

...when I think something is really important I will get in and engage with readers. It's who I am, I like to argue. I think it's important to acknowledge how much insight readers bring us. And I think that does make us different, made us different.... You know I think that readers help you see when you're not being clear. And when you can sharpen your argument or sharpen your storytelling (June 11, 2008).

This sentiment was echoed by another *salon.com* news feature writer:

...here it's like you work on a story really hard, you're really engaged by the issues, the story is published and you have all these people discussing your ideas, your take on it, the ideas of the people in your story. It's like incredibly stimulating. So that and you do feel like when you get a big response it's really exciting. So in that sense it's extremely gratifying. Plus people will always think of something, a point you didn't think of, they always bring up information you didn't know. It is like the wisdom of crowds, that idea. It's like there's always somebody who knows something you didn't know. And that, if you're really engaged about the topics you write about that's really great. So in that respect it's very, very gratifying I think. And it makes it hard to go back to print in some ways because you're just not getting that kind of response like you get used to feeling you're having this real dialogue and like conversation with people (June 12, 2008).

Reader interaction with content saw huge upticks at both websites when any story related to Sarah Palin and/or Barack Obama versus Hillary Clinton appeared. One *Los Angeles Times* journalist told me: '[T]he largest story...probably was about a hundred and fifty, two-hundred [emails received]. And that was the Sarah Palin, my daughter's pregnant and she's gonna marry Levi. And that was interesting because it was basically over the Labour Day

holiday and you would not expect people to be plugged in. But there's so many methods of distribution that it could be any time' (October 7, 2008). Another blogger at Salon said: '...generally across Salon, Obama is popular. Writing about Obama either in a negative or popular way, or positive way it's kind of a big thing with our readers' (June 18, 2008).

8.1.2 'HIT WHORES'

The newfound knowledge of the reader was also reflected in terms of Web traffic. One of the *salon.com* Washington correspondents said: 'Like I mean when Palin was breaking, they were loving the Palin stuff. When I wrote about the Democratic primary it would start these fights in the letters section. I mean Hillary versus Obama and then it would sort of drive a lot of traffic' (September 11, 2008). This was seconded by one the *Los Angeles Times* national correspondents: 'I mean one good example right now is the whole Sarah Palin phenomenon. If you look at our most viewed and most emailed stories, pretty much anything you write about Sarah Palin because she's an object of fascination' (September 11, 2008).

It is a newfound source of excitement for many journalists who never knew who or if anyone was reading their stuff. According to the *Top of the Ticket* blogger:

I've spent 26 years at the *New York Times* and another 7 here [at the L.A. Times]. Outside of my family, I've never witnessed seeing someone reading my story in print. So I'm looking at the numbers for my blog post, and for nearly seven hours, we had seven new readers arriving on our blog every second. We've had days since then that have been several times that. You tell that to print people who wait six

months to look at circulation figures, they're usually down, and who can tell which stories added to the circulation figures (Glaser 2008)?

The natural question becomes how does this new found knowledge of what people want to read affect what's produced by the website? Most everyone I chatted with and producers I observed were constantly looking at and aware of numbers for their stories or the in the case of editors what was doing well on the website. They were all also quick to point out that it did not directly affect what they decided to cover or not cover however it did affect the prominence given to a story. According the *salon.com* managing editor:

We're a commercial magazine. And you know we're trying to make it in the open market and we're all extremely conscious of how well things do and don't do. And we kind of have an internal phrase that we use that we're all 'hit whores' because we know how important this is. That said, we also of course have commitment to a certain kind of editorial project we're involved in. And just because certain environmental story or international story didn't get a lot of hits or traffic doesn't mean we're gonna give up doing that kind of coverage. But you are having to take it into account and a lot of what you're trying to do is figure out how to cover these things in a way that reaches out to readers, excites them (June 11, 2008).

In observing the Salon newsroom I frequently noticed the managing editor tracking the numbers. In fact they have a daily email sent out in the morning in order to gauge what was big on the website the night before. As mentioned in chapter 6, the first day I was there the homepage cover story was changed because it was not getting the hits the editors had hoped for and so they switched it out for something they thought might bring in more traffic.

The use of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) was crucial to both websites in their pursuit of new users. SEO uses various technology (usually purchased from a software company) to make articles or blogs more attractive to search engines. These must be text based and so does not include picture galleries or video. Both of these sites were constantly aware of what was being searched on Google and Yahoo and tried to frame their headlines accordingly in order to get the hits and optimize search potential.

The *latimes.com* executive editor explained her position on trying to balance what is popular, in terms of hits, with the journalism focus of the website.

I don't see it as popular OR journalism. I see it as all journalism right because you can write about, just about anything within reason for a news organisation, you can write just about anything in an insightful, intelligent way. And that's our challenge. We know that celebrity and sex and all that stuff. It just does. We don't write about it solely for that reason. We write about it because (a) it's Los Angeles and this is a huge popular culture centre, so we do cover celebrity. It's been a challenge for the organisation, every week there's usually some instance where somebody is asking the question do we really want to do it, do we really want to say this kind of thing. But those are healthy debates to be having. So I see it as it's just something that we have to write about intelligently and with insight, just like everything else. And just because it's popular doesn't mean it's bad. It usually means that there's a reason it's popular and it's often times worth covering (September 25, 2008).

This position can get a lot of heat from journalists who feel the most important aspect of a journalist's job is as watchdog for those in power (McChesney 2004) and not merely chasing numbers. They do not see the website, because of its

focus on hits and Google trends, as viable as its newspaper counterpart. This view is confirmed by many in the newsroom when they observe how the homepage producers of the *latimes.com* choose to treat stories. All of the homepage producers constantly monitor how content, via hits, is doing on the homepage and will not be afraid to give prominence to a story that may never have received placement in the main section of the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper. The website *laobserved.com*, which is a blog by a former *Los Angeles Times* journalist, is constantly critiquing this formula of displaying news⁴² but despite this, the number of people visiting *latimes.com* keeps going up.

However, as outlined in Chapter 6, this debate of what journalists ‘should’ be doing versus what they are doing online has no weight in terms of both the cultural chaos theoretical model or in terms of *convotelling* journalism. The content they are creating is news and the engagement they have with their users is reshaping the dialogue around definitions of journalism.

8.1.3 ‘OPEN SALON’

During my observation and interviewing process at *salon.com*, they decided to launch a new website called ‘Open Salon.’ Open Salon is a place where anyone can set up their own blog but also interact with other user’s blogs. It is edited by two staffers at Salon who do not interfere with content but work as moderators. On the homepage of *open.salon.com*, certain blog posts are featured based on either editor’s choice, top viewed, or often times a featured topic of the day. The

⁴² <http://www.laobserved.com>

site also includes a peer-to-peer payment system called ‘Tippem’, which allows any member to tip another whose content they like. The editors for the site will also often put out ‘Open Calls’ for specific content they are looking to feature in the future.

The sister site, fully funded currently by *salon.com*, was in response to the massive amounts of ‘Letters’ they got in reply to articles on the website.

According to the Director of Open Salon:

It’s really important as this big next step for Salon, in allowing readers to really actively participate in the product, they’re not just commenting or writing letters at the end of stories. But they’re actually producing their own content... It’s been a really encouraging experience in freeing your audience and kind of letting them into the process. So ‘Open’ is sort of the next step in that but it’s also I think a way to bring in interesting new content (August 13, 2008).

One of the things I was keen to find out during my content analysis part of *salon.com* was whether or not Open Salon content would be featured on the homepage for *salon.com*. The Director of *open.salon.com* told me in an interview that they would be amenable to featuring stories on *salon.com* but that it would be based on content that was relevant and good enough to go on the homepage. He had hoped that this might occur one to two times a day. Indeed *salon.com* did feature Open Salon content however, in the days that I did website content analysis, Open Salon stories related to political content were only featured twice. The stories included one entitled ‘Dispatch from GOP’S Denver War Room’ and another called ‘Nevada: Photos of voting machines left

unattended'. In this case the content revolved around location specific events that the Salon staff would have no way of covering due to its smaller staff and resources.

This use of what is commonly referred to as 'citizen journalism' was a new way for *salon.com* to engage with its very involved users. It was not seen by the management as a new way of doing journalism or as a way to get free stories. But rather was created to be more of a 'social network' with a platform for people invested in *salon.com* to essentially create their own blogs and interact with other users of the website.

8.2 DEALING WITH NEWS SOURCES

The source/journalist relationship has been much analyzed in past literature as theorists sought to understand who was controlling the news narrative (Ericson et. al. 1988, Manning 2000). In *Negotiating Control*, Ericson et. al. argued that the relationship is a highly complex one and the market is regulated and controlled in complex ways. According to the authors: 'It is best to assume that there is relative autonomy between reporters and sources, varying by type of source organisations and news organisations... Reporters have multiple and varied sources of knowledge, and sources have multiple media outlets to convey their preferred versions of what appears to be the case' (1988:16).

While this is still often the case in relationship to these two news organisations, two things have now shifted around the news-making process, as this and other

studies have shown, that impacts the ultimate control over the news narrative. In addition the definition of ‘who’ is a source by the media is slowly shifting. So even though the relationship between the source and journalist remains a game of power and control, the external affects the ultimate output.

8.2.1 THE TWO EXTERNAL SHIFTS IN THE SOURCE/JOURNALIST RELATIONSHIP

The first shift, as mentioned in chapter three and the previous chapter, is the lack of control over the news agenda that occurs in an online environment. In an informal survey of the 2008 Presidential campaign as seen through the window of the *New York Times*, Michael Schudson (2009a) noted how new media were sponsoring a ‘new intensity, ubiquity and anarchism’ in the mediated public world. According the Schudson’s findings: ‘What it has shown is that the new media have provided a source for an anarchistic, populist element to insert itself visibly and vocally into political campaigns as a disorganizing force playing off against the most ambitious, organized efforts at mass mobilization, apart from war, that Americans ever engage in’ (2009a:85).

The second shift is the ability of the source to have direct access to the same people the media try to reach. Graeme Turner states: ‘One aspect of this challenge is that the once privileged position occupied by journalists has been reclaimed... The media, from their [user] point of view, is no longer required to mediate any more: they can now choose to get their news directly from the sources they choose to consult’ (2009:391). In an article looking at the last ten years of journalism Michael Schudson again notes this changing

source/journalist relationship. ‘We are in the midst of an epochal transformation in the news media...The internet, of course, greatly enhances the capacity of these organisations to reach citizens directly without the intervention of professional journalists’ (2009b:369).

8.2.2 REDEFINING ‘WHO’ IS A SOURCE

The idea that ‘real’ reporting is all about picking up a phone and making calls to sources is still spoken of in both newsrooms and in that, relationships with sources has not changed much. The articles written for the *Los Angeles Times* and subsequently featured on the website are traditionally reported as are ‘feature’ and ‘news’ articles done by *salon.com*. Official campaign sources were still used in news articles related to the election and the campaigns themselves still tried to dictate much of the narrative surrounding their candidates.

All of the reporters and editors at *salon.com* and any reporter or editor dealing with politics in the *latimes.com* newsroom, were on email lists for the campaigns and received frequent updates in their inbox as well as via text message. Within a few hours of spending my first day at *salon.com*, I noticed a large stack of papers in the fax machine all from political sources. During one of the debates I was sitting directly behind one of the blog writers, at *latimes.com*, who had to constantly check her email in order to keep up with the influx from both the Obama and McCain campaigns.

But while these campaign sources remained the same and tried to dictate coverage of the Presidential election, two things had definitely changed when it came to acceptable sources for stories on the websites.

Competition as Source

First of all, the competition was now seen as a useful source of information instead of a hindrance when it came to stories. In his article on news organisations, Charles Bantz (1985) likened the competition between news organisations to ‘warfare’. He said this intense competition can even lead to inter-organisational conflict. This was not the case for either of these online news gatherers.

I asked most of the journalists who they viewed as their competition and no one seemed to have a quick answer. It took time for each one to think whom they would name. The reality I uncovered during my observation was that these ‘competing’ news organisations often were sources for the websites themselves rather than competition. Journalists were constantly checking other websites to see their news headlines. On two occasions I observed the large flatscreen televisions that were positioned throughout the *Los Angeles Times* newsroom, switched to the BBC News website and Google News website respectively. If the *New York Times* was reporting a story instead of just getting beat and moving on, often blogs on both sites would report that the *New York Times* was reporting the story and link to it. In that way, instead of becoming a competition they were a source of information for the users of these sites.

I asked the bloggers and reporters who were covering the Presidential election what their sources for stories were. A *salon.com* blogger told me that in addition

the campaigns, publicists and his own sources: 'On a daily basis I'll be checking The NY Times, the Washington Post, the LA Times...Drudge Report, Huffington Post, Hot Air which is a similar aggregator. I have breaking news email alerts sent from MSNBC, CNN, ABC News, The NY Times. And then I have an RSS reader, probably over a hundred now, including blogs' (August 8, 2008). This type of statement was similar to what I heard from most journalists. The 'competition' was online and posting the new and so became a source for those trying to cover a campaign that essentially never stopped.

Pablo Boczkowski spent time in Argentinean newsrooms and found that the growing intensification on monitoring has meant there is far more knowledge of competitors than ever before. According to the author: 'One of the most repeated and intensive work practices among staff in charge of producing breaking and developing news content was monitoring competitors and a wide spectrum of other news outlets, from cable television to wire services to news sites from around the world' (2009:59).

The competing news sources can even, quite easily, become the stories themselves. On the second day of my observation at the *salon.com* San Francisco office two bloggers at the website, Joan Walsh and the War Room blogger, had noted that a segment of Fox News had referred to Michelle Obama as 'Obama's Baby Mama'. They picked up the story and wrote opinion-oriented blog pieces about them. The managing editor of the site began discussing with the New York-based Life editor if the story warranted a piece about the term

‘Baby Mama’. They decided to commission a piece from a cultural perspective. It appeared two days later on the site⁴³

The John Edwards extra-marital affair proved to be an interesting case for the *Los Angeles Times* bloggers. *The National Enquirer*, a supermarket tabloid (discussed in Chapter 7), was reporting in late July that they had proof Edwards was having an affair and even had fathered a love child. At the time, Edwards was still a legitimate contender for Vice President on the ticket with Barack Obama. The blogosphere was suddenly abuzz with chatter that this story may actually be true and various sites, including Drudge were featuring the story. However, most of the mainstream media was not reporting the story as they did not feel the *National Enquirer* was a legitimized source. On June 24, 2008, the blog editor sent out an email to all the bloggers at *latimes.com* saying: ‘Because the only source has been the National Enquirer we have decided not to cover the rumours or salacious speculations. So I am asking you not to blog about this topic until further notified’ (Kaus 2008). The memo was linked to popular blogger Mickey Kaus at *slate.com* who quickly lambasted the *latimes.com* stance on sources of information.

Is the Times’ edict **a**) part of a double-standard that favors Democrats?...Or does it **b**) simply reflect an outmoded **Gatekeeper Model of journalism** in which *not* informing readers of certain sensitive allegations is as important as informing them—as if readers are too simple-minded to weigh charges that are not proven, as if they aren’t going to find out about such controversies anyway? I’d say it’s a mixture of both (a) and (b). **This was a sensational scandal the LAT and other MSM papers passionately did *not* want to uncover...** (Kaus 2008).

⁴³ http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2008/06/13/baby_mama/index.html

Unfortunately, for the *latimes.com* blog editor, a blog had already been posted about the story on the Opinion LA blog the day before.⁴⁴ The blogger had simply quoted a number of other blogs in the post and spoke about the controversy. The only ‘comment’ made by the blogger was the hope that the story was not true.

The *slate.com* story was picked up by the Drudge Report and Gawker, giving it a huge audience. The day after the memo was sent around by the blog editor (July 24), the executive editor of the website felt the need to address the issue with the bloggers at the site further. According to the executive editor’s memo,

I made the decision that while we are working on verifying if this has any truth to it, we should stay away from joining the fray...I should have first not encouraged posting on this topic, but if any of you feel that you have a post you really need to write, to please discuss it with Tony and myself first since we must always tread carefully on unverified stories. And I should have explained the thinking behind the decision. The idea was not to muzzle any of you and then walk away- that is never a recipe for success (Roderick 2008b).

It is interesting to note that this controversy actually gave legitimacy to the story and created more content around it. The content had already been shared in a blog post and with most online outlets speculating the truth to the story, not using or at least referring to the *National Enquirer* was not helping the *Los Angeles Times*. Online the rules are different and sources can be other news gathering outlets. The story turned out to be true and John Edwards went on television to confess to ABC News what he had done.

⁴⁴ <http://opinion.latimes.com/opinionla/2008/07/john-edwards-af.html>

Blogs and the Net Native News Organisation as Source

This leads to the second change which is that large offline news organisations are not the only new sources of information, blogs (and other net native content) are as well. Granted, most of the times blogs were used as sources were in other blogs. However, with the blogs themselves being presented as headlines on both websites, it all ended up being content to the user.

One of the largest net native sites that provided information for blogs (and nominally articles as well) was YouTube. On most days of content analysis of the *latimes.com* political blog *Top of the Ticket* as well as various *salon.com* blogs, a You Tube clip could be found in at least one post. The original sources of these clips could be the election campaigns, lobbying groups, mainstream media, alternative media or other user created content. *Salon.com* also relied heavily on websites like *Politico.com* and bloggers like Marc Ambinder⁴⁵ and Andrew Sullivan⁴⁶ for their blog posts.

A study by Messner and DiStaso (2008) found that that: ‘... weblogs have emerged as an important topic and source in the traditional media in what can be described as a process of news source legitimation. While overall the public has not taken widespread notice of weblogs, the traditional media have clearly increased their attention to this new journalistic format’ (2008:455). They studied over two thousand articles, over a six year period from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. This led them ultimately to conclude that,

⁴⁵ <http://politics.theatlantic.com/>

⁴⁶ http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/

‘reporters became increasingly used to viewing them [weblogs] as legitimate sources rather than unusual and therefore a newsworthy phenomenon’ (2008:456).

Net native news website *Politico.com* became a huge source of information during the election. In an article by one of its reporters and bloggers, Josh Kraushaar, he noted: ‘The year 2008 marked the first presidential election year when upstart Internet publications upstaged their print counterparts...’ (2009:435). After laying out the case for these new upstarts, he concluded with an interesting piece of research. According to Kraushaar: ‘[N]ew media are increasingly filling in the vacuum created by many traditional print outlets. Newspapers across the country have been regularly picking up stories that *Politico* breaks. A Lexis-Nexus search shows that even the *New York Times* cited *Politico*’s reporting over 100 times throughout the course of the election cycle’ (2009:438).

On the night of the Presidential debates *latimes.com* used the Top of the Ticket blog to ‘Live Blog’ the event as it occurred. The live blog provided the headline throughout the night and was the lead story as the debate went on. This provided their users with up to the minute information about what was being said and who was doing well or poorly. The same was true for *salon.com* on the night of the election. They decided to use the War Room blog as their lead headline to announce the returns and information as it was coming in. The sources for their results were the *Associated Press*, MSNBC, Fox News and CNN. The War

Room blog was the platform the site used to announce Barack Obama as the President-elect of the United States.⁴⁷

Figure 8.1- *War Room* blog announcement of Obama the winner



8.3 POWER WITHIN THE NEWSROOM

Another key relationship shift that takes away that dominant control that news organisations were seen to have had (Bantz 1985, Gallagher 1982) was that of the power structure within the newsrooms themselves. Most of the studies done in newspaper or television newsrooms of the past show a clearly defined power structure that was very top-down (Schlesinger 1978). One would work their way up to the top but that was not the case when it came to either of these news websites.

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http://www.salon.com/politics/war_room/2008/11/04/obama_wins/index.html?source=rss&aim=/politics/war_room

First of all, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the entire method that content gets on to the *latimes.com* website is very complicated. All of the people working to create content for the site all have different managers and sections they work through and although Artley is the executive editor, she is not the technical boss of all those creating content. She is the leader of the interactive team, the blog editor, the homepage team, the various web deputies as well as other technical staff. Anyone working to create visuals (video, photography, graphics) has their own editor, the main news gatherers and reporters work for their individual desks, the copy editors all work under the copy desk manger, and the bloggers usually work for the desk within which their blog category falls but also coordinate with the blog editor. All of this stratification of management creates a diffused power structure.

The homepage producers also have a lot of power within their roles as they are the ones choosing what will be featured on the website and how prominently. The homepage team is quite young and most have not been at working for the *Los Angeles Times* for a long time. This in no way discounts what they do for the website but simply shows that those with the power are not necessarily the ones in the corner office working their way up to the top after years of toiling away. According to one homepage producer:

I mean I just obviously feel a lot younger and less experienced. It's also kind of weird to me that we're making these decisions about what goes up on the page when pretty much no one at the Web has experience reporting... I interact with the editors who collect the news because they're making kind of the same decisions about what goes on the Front Page but then I think about it and those people have

spent years and decades moving up to this position and they don't really do that much writing because they've already done that and become editors and then head editors (December 18, 2008).

Additionally, bloggers, who often get the biggest numbers for the sites are working fairly autonomously or in some cases are even freelancers. The *Top of the Ticket* bloggers, who brought a huge amount of traffic to the *latimes.com* website during the election, worked from Los Angeles and Washington DC. Although they were reporters for the National desk they created their own schedule and wrote about whatever they felt was important to the election narrative. One was sent to the Democratic convention and the other to the Republican convention and 'let loose' as the Web Deputy told me, to get stories for the website.

The other power shift in the newsroom of the *Los Angeles Times* came in the form of the continuing mass layoffs and financial uncertainty from the Tribune Company. Sitting in on one weekly Metro meeting just a few days after a round of massive layoffs, the editor began by saying: 'Well we survived another week'. Every single time I visited the building, someone would comment on the uncertain future or make a joke about the company and it was completely independent of how high up they were in position or time at the company.

The lack of power structure within the newsroom at *salon.com* had less to do with a confusing management structure and more to do with a much smaller staff and a strong sense and even calling toward the journalist's autonomy. There was no time for babysitting or looking over shoulders within Salon. Each person had

a specific role and they performed it or it did not get done. The reporters all felt very free to write what they wanted within their given editorial framework and the bloggers in particular pretty much did whatever they wanted. One blogger told me: ‘That’s what I mean in that it’s a blog in that I kind of manage the whole thing, there’s not that much editorial oversight over what I do, which is an extremely unusual kind of situation... I have editors and I can ask people to read my stuff but most of the time it’s me coming up with the idea, doing all of the work on it and then just posting it’ (June 18, 2008).

This directive came from the top down as the editor in chief moderated her blog and did not like to interfere with what was being said in the other parts of the site but left them to the editors and reporters she had hired. The managing editor told me that Salon is ‘lean and mean’ and therefore relies on its staff to do a lot. This is not to say that the editors did not give story directives or handle the process of output on the Web. I observed definite direction from the managing editor and the news editor when it came to specific articles it wanted written. But they had their role and were willing to listen to the reporters, bloggers and visual people who had their role. It was a definite team effort and no sense of power usurping the autonomy of the each editorial person on the staff.

When it came to story ideas related to the Presidential election both Washington DC reporters I spoke with felt an extreme sense of autonomy in being able to write what they wanted. According to one: ‘You know occasionally we’ll get an assignment from an editor but that’s pretty rare. Usually I could do mostly whatever I want, which is kinda nice’ (September 11, 2008). This was also seen

in the Friday meeting which I listened in on one of my observation days. The group of editors and reporters and agreed on the eventual stories but there was a definite sense that the journalists were able to contribute what they wanted and wrote to their strong suits.

This matches the model Mark Deuze proposes in his book chapter ‘Technology and the Individual Journalist’ (2009). According to the author: ‘The shift towards an individualization of labour counters the historical trend towards socialization and solarisation, instead favouring more fluid and flexible notions of work—ushered in through rapid developments in technologies of communication, a decentralization of management practices and the fragmentation of markets’ (2009:90). All of these factors explain much of the diffused power structures within both of these newsrooms.

8.4 THE BLOG

The greatest single change that is still in the midst of shaping what online journalism is and will be is the blog. Technologically speaking, the web-log is not that revolutionary in what it can do. It is simply an online diary that allows people to post information and for the readers to comment on what is being written. The posts can be as long or short as the writer would like but usually tend to be short. This, according to journalists I interviewed, is due to the fact that people are only looking to blogs for quick hits of information and often will not follow it if it is longer than a page or if they have to click for some further information. There are many places that provide platforms for anyone who

would like to create a blog the most popular being Blogger.com and Typepad.com. In fact, the *latimes.com* website uses Typepad as the platform for its bloggers, while *salon.com* uses one created by its own system.

There are no standardised rules or guidelines in the world of blogging. It is essentially up to the person, or team of people, to create a set of policies for how they are going to do their posts. Posts can be written or embedded with videos and pictures or contain polls. You can even Twitter⁴⁸ directly to your blog. And in fact, much has been made of the lack of journalistic credibility bloggers have.

The biggest complaint by many in journalism is the nature of the ‘blogosphere’ to merely speak to itself. It is as one *latimes.com* journalist put it a system that is ‘autopoetic’. In one Gawker post the writer points out the ‘Secret Journoblogging Method’.

1. Look at a blog in your beat. Find something there that looks interesting.
2. Chew pen for a few minutes
3. Rewrite the item you stole, taking a slightly different angle than the original blogger.
4. Send what you wrote back to the original blogger, in search of a link.
5. Celebrate newfound internet fame. (Nolan 2008)

The successful blogs (usually deemed so by the Technorati Top 100 by Authority⁴⁹ or by hits) are a combination of networking with other bloggers in

⁴⁸ <http://www.twitter.com>

⁴⁹ According to Technorati (<http://support.technorati.com/faq/topic/71>) Authority refers to ‘the number of blogs linking to a website in the last six months. The higher the number, the more

the ‘blogosphere’ and writing posts that create discussions and draw people into the blog. According to one of the highest rated bloggers, Andrew Sullivan⁵⁰: ‘I realized that the online form rewarded a colloquial, unfinished tone...I’d often chaffed, as most writers do, at the endless delays, revisions, office politics, editorial fights, and last-minute cuts for space that dead-tree publishing entails. Blogging—even to an audience of a few hundred in the early days—was intoxicatingly free in comparison. Like taking a narcotic’ (Sullivan 2008).

In her analysis of Iraq war blogs, Melissa Wall (2005) found three things have shifted in blog journalism form versus ‘traditional’ journalism. The first shift is the detached, neutral tone that exists in traditional reporting to a more opinionated, personalized, one-sided tone in the blogs. The second is the traditional inverted, structured story format which in blog form does not exist. Wall argues that when it comes to blogs the stories are often fragmented and incomplete but are also an open text to the readers and users. This openness to the user is the final shift that Wall says is different in a blog storytelling form than in traditional reporting. According to the author: ‘In terms of audiences, the traditional role was that of passive recipients. On blogs, audiences are often invited to contribute information, comments, and sometimes direct financial support. In effect, audiences sometimes co-create content and also serve as patrons’ (2005:161).

The blogs on both *latimes.com* and *salon.com* serve different purposes according to editors of each site and thus exploit the blog format in different ways. The

Technorati Authority the blog has. It is important to note that we measure the number of blogs, rather than the number of links.’

⁵⁰ <http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com>

blogs on Salon, while often offering commentary and analysis, are also a form of doing breaking news that they are not able to do with their traditionally reported 'magazine' style stories. According to the managing editor: 'We found it to be a very good tool to have journalists working their beats, day after day on a blog, keeping up with things. It can be a very agile format for dealing with breaking news or covering a beat without having a full department' (June 12, 2008).

In this way Salon uses it as both a way to have journalists covering beats such as technology or economics that they could not produce due to the smaller nature of their staff but also essentially as a way to do breaking news. This was very evident during the election campaign, as the War Room blog consistently appeared atop the homepage with the latest in the campaign news.

The executive editor of *latimes.com* felt the blogs were a central piece to what they were doing on the Web.

Blogs are the centre of gravity for original content on *latimes.com*. We do a lot of updating throughout the day, where we get new stories on the bailout or the status of the debates or whatever it is but the blogs are really where we have a lot of people... On the Web, the blog platform is sometimes a really great way to give people a quick hit right: to let them know what's going on: to allow them to dive in deeper. You can comment right there and then you can scroll through and see other posts, so it's very serendipitous that way (September 25, 2008).

Just as the War Room blog was the centrepiece for election news on Salon's website, so too was the Top of the Ticket blog on the homepage of *latimes.com*.

Almost every day of my content analysis included a headline with a link to the blog. It provided the most updates on the election throughout the day and continually increased its number of hits and unique users as the weeks went on. One of the main bloggers for Top of the Ticket blog also created a Twitter feed during the summer.⁵¹ The Top of the Ticket Twitter feed was advertised all over the website and at the end of every traditional blog post.

In this way the best comparison for blogs on these more text-based sites (*latimes.com* coming from a newspaper and *salon.com* claiming to be a Web magazine) is something akin to cable news channels. When CNN first debuted it was a constant 24 hour stream of information that could be agile and follow news as it broke. This was in stern contrast to the pre-produced half hour nightly network programs that had ruled the airwaves for so long. This is essentially what blogs do online. They are quick hits for stories that are breaking or pieces of information that maybe do not deserve a full half hour broadcast. They provide the user with information they want as a story is developing happening. And often times, in the most successful cases, with a voice. This often flies in the face of a traditionally ideological approach to journalism that values objectivity over giving a piece voice or tone (Schiller 1981).

Jane Singer argues that television and online journalism are converging whilst print and online journalism are diverging. She notes three complementary strengths of online and television journalism: ‘immediacy, brevity and visual impact’ (Singer 2009:375).

⁵¹ Twitter is a micro-blogging website which users can subscribe to and get constant updates as soon as the Twitterer posts them.

The biggest problem these two websites face when using blogs as headline content on their sites is the alleged lack of legitimacy that continues to come from journalists toward those who blog. The chief complaint is that blogs do not contain original content but are simply stealing other people's original reporting and commenting on it (Fine 2008). This is one part of the blogosphere as noted above by the Gawker columnist. In fact, most of the blog posts I looked at on both websites during the days I did content analysis were using other websites and news organisations as a reference point for their stories. However, very rarely was it just a reposting of original content found elsewhere. They did often move the story forward or point to some existing background knowledge to give the story context.

The best example of a blog that combined both analysis and original reporting in a blog is the one produced by Glen Greenwald at *salon.com*. Greenwald, a constitutional lawyer, was already blogging when Salon hired him to write a blog on their site. His specific focus is politics and law and although he has a definite viewpoint, he still continues to do original reporting and interviews which are weaved throughout his posts. When I began keeping tabs on what sources bloggers were using for their posts, I found it hard to do on Greenwald's blog because he had so many news sources, government sources and source information he had gained himself. Almost every post was not only addressing debates on other blogs and news sites but also producing original content.

The lawyer has even taken to his blog to defend the credibility of all bloggers against claims of merely using other's content and not providing anything

original. He even goes so far as to critique ‘real journalists’ for their use of blogs. According to Greenwald in a post titled ‘The myth of the parasitical bloggers’:

I raise this only to illustrate how one-sided and even misleading is the complaint that bloggers are "parasites" on the work of "real journalists." Often, the parasitical feeding happens in the opposite direction, though while bloggers routinely credit (and link to) the source of the material on which they're commenting, there is an unwritten code among many establishment journalists that while they credit each other's work, they're free to claim as their own whatever they find online without any need for credit or attribution (2009).

Greenwald’s efforts have paid off as his blog is one of the most highly trafficked on *salon.com* and is regularly in the Top 50 blogs of the Technorati 100.

The frustrations of the alleged lack of original reporting in blogs were brought up by two reporters I interviewed. According to one columnist at the *Los Angeles Times*:

The blogs are mostly asinine and lame and people think they’re going to take over the news... if you read the NY Times, LA Times and Washington Post every day you’d be a hell of a lot better off than if you went to, you know name them. Try to name me three blogs where you’d get the same information. And blogs you would get the same information you got in those only because they link to all our stories. And that is still there raw material (September 11, 2008).

A similar sentiment was echoed by a Washington reporter at Salon: ‘I have decided that I personally think that blogging without doing reporting is not

something I'm comfortable with. So I don't write blogs' (September 26, 2008).

These sentiments were much more of a minority opinion in all my interviews and were not necessarily divided on lines of age or past platform use. One of the most frequently mentioned divisions within parentage newsrooms is that those working primarily for the web are young while older journalists tend to be the ones working for the traditional newspaper or television strand of the newsroom (Sessions Stepp 2006). While I would argue that in my observations that appeared to be the case, I did find some of the most ardent supporters of Web content to be more seasoned journalists who had spent years working at newspapers. One of the Top of the Ticket bloggers is 64 years old and after years of newspaper reporting had this to say about blogging:

If you distil it down, what I liked about being online was it was like beachcombing. You never know what you'll find. And that's the opposite of what newspapers have tried to do over the years...Early on, some of my colleagues were distressed that some of the items in the blog would never have appeared in the newspaper. My point was, "You bet," and "What's the circulation now?" It's going down (Glaser 2008).

The opposing philosophies of blogs came to a head during one of the Presidential debates when I was observing in the *Los Angeles Times* newsroom. I was sat with the Web Deputy for the politics desk. The website had chosen to use its blog as the headline story during the entire debate and immediately following, until it had a written story from one of the politics reporters who

wrote for the newspaper. One of the homepage producers, toward the end of the debate decided to upload the Live Blog post on to their mobile site for those on mobile phones to access and read.

Soon after, Google News picked up the Live Blog headline and it was on top of its news section bringing loads of traffic to the story, which was actually an elongated blog post. The Web Deputy voiced her frustration that she did not feel it was a good idea that the homepage producer had posted the blog as a story for mobile users. The homepage producer asked about the user and what they were supposed to do as the website did not have a proper ‘story’ to give them. She then asked the Web Deputy what was the real difference between a story and a blog. The Web Deputy agreed with her saying that except for the comments allowed on blogs and the headline, it was not much different. The deputy argued that the biggest problem was that the blog post went into Google News as a story, which could essentially be false advertising. The homepage producer defended her position and said it was not her fault that Google picked up the story. She ended by saying this is a larger debate that the whole team needs to have.

Whether or not these blogs are ever legitimized in the larger context of mainstream journalism does not matter in a sense, because at this moment in time they are both used as journalistic content for these two websites. An editorial intern at the *latimes.com* was forced to bridge this supposed gap between blogging and ‘traditional reporting’ in her role at the *Los Angeles Times*. She described the difference this way:

I personally think the traditionally reported stories could benefit in a lot of cases from that blogging voice. Because for me a traditional news story, it doesn't, it's not my language. Like and from a reporting aspect, when you take all this information you gather and cram it into this pyramid structure that you're taught you know in News School or wherever, it just is totally unnatural. And it's not as honest of a way to relay information than it is in a blog kind of. Because in a blog you're just talking to people and you're just sharing. And you're acknowledging your subject...you're not acknowledging your lack of subjectivity but you're acknowledging that you have a voice and you are not...like you're a person telling a story. Which you are in a traditional news sense also but with a blog it's like you're acknowledging that and in a traditional news story we're all kind of pretending we're not (October 27, 2008).

8.5 CONCLUSION

These reshaped and redefined relationships are defining both how these websites function and make news as well as how users are consuming and using news. The newly defined two-way dialogue between the journalist and user is opening up a new type of *convotelling* journalism. This journalism takes into account what the users are watching and reading but also what makes them want to comment and interact.

The source/journalist relationship is also shifting online. The expansion, by both websites, of what constitutes a news source as well as news sources themselves being able to appeal directly to the user, makes for a re-negotiated online space. The relationships within the newsroom are also being more networked rather than hierarchical. Within the *latimes.com* a lot

of this has to do with the extreme variety of managers and lack of streamlined news-making process. *Salon.com* has created a networked environment through journalistic autonomy and its emphasis on blogs. The blog itself incorporates all of these redefined aspects and due to the prominence both websites give them, is shaping much of online journalism today.

Chapter 9- The Net Native v. The Parentage

The distinction between the online net native news organisations and the parentage news organisations has rarely been made (see Introduction). *Salon.com* and *latimes.com* are both creating original content, utilizing blogs, adding multimedia, and using other news organisations stories as headlines for their sites. They are also engaging in a new form of *convotelling* journalism (introduced in Chapter 6) that highlights the unique voice of the Web and conversational nature of it. But even though the goal of output is similar, the way these two go about it is quite different and the road that leads to the finished product is distinctly uncommon from the moment you walk into each of the newsrooms.

One of the most unique questions I was interested in answering through these two case studies was to look at the differences between an organisation that only had to worry about creating content for a website and one that was trying to produce content for two outputs. In the midst of my direct observation and interviews emerged five key things that provided the biggest contrast between the two news organisations. The first is size, which proved an uphill climb for both news organisations but with one having the clear advantage. The second is communication styles, which were distinctly different between the two organisations. Branding and voice driven content was the third key difference between these two websites both in philosophy and output. The fourth issue was

the most obvious one, the constraint of the newspaper on the *latimes.com* website that *salon.com* did not have to deal with in any way. Finally, the economic structures of the companies were quite different. Although both had to deal with the same larger struggle of monetising online content, they had different obstacles to running their organisations.

9.1 SIZE

The bottomless newshole that the Web creates (Boczkowski 2004) provides an interesting dilemma for news organisations producing content for their websites. They are always understaffed, no matter how big the journalistic team they may have put together. In that sense the parentage has a definite advantage over the net native and in particular the parentage website of one of the largest newspapers in the United States.

The size of the Los Angeles Times news gathering operation changed drastically in the five months I was observing the operation. However, it still remains a large group of journalists with correspondents all over the world. The team was at a bit more than eight hundred when I began and dwindled to about six hundred by the time I was done in the newsroom. It was an expansive operation that required a structure that would allow for communication to flow between the different desks and key editors. Add on top of this large amount of news gathering taking place, the Tribune Company newsgathering the website has access to both in their text-based and multimedia content as well as other

subscription services and you realize there is a lot of information available to a user of the website.

The largeness of the operation is also felt in the size of the building and the fragmentation of different bureaus around the state, country and world. One could work at the news organisation for years and never even meet some of the key writers and editors who work for the masthead. And it is not just the correspondent in London, not knowing the homepage producer in Los Angeles. I spent most of my time with either those working specifically for the website or the politics desk. Since, at the time of my observation, there was a significant number of reporters and editors working at the Washington DC bureau, many had not met the homepage producers who were featuring their stories on the website.

In contrast to this was the news gathering operation at *salon.com* which hovered around twenty to twenty five people, not including freelance writers who were often brought in for feature pieces. The team had to be very specific about what and how they were going to cover something. When the John Edwards affair story broke, the news editor expressed to me his frustration in not being able to cover it more extensively as he would if more resources were available.

The biggest challenge therefore came in the breadth of coverage the site could do. Whereas due to the larger amounts of resources, the *latimes.com* news team could do more in-depth, investigative pieces as well as add content on different technological platforms, Salon had to rely on doing a few things very well and

promoting it a lot. The team had to remain focused on what they were good at and let go of the rest. The *latimes.com* wanted to be on top of most every story that was unfolding in the Southern California area, the National arena and the world news front; Salon simply focused on its key target areas (politics and arts and entertainment) and tried to do their best within those content areas.

This was seen explicitly at *salon.com* in how the editors decided to cover the two conventions. The Democratic convention was seen as their ‘bread and butter’ by the news editor, meaning that was what people were coming to their site for information on. Subsequently, the team decided to send ten out of the approximately twenty five person editorial staff to Denver to cover the week-long event. The Republican convention was viewed as less of an interest to their core readers and thus the editors had decided to send half the amount to Minneapolis for the big event.

This matches what David Domingo found in his study of both parentage and a net native Catalan news sites. He noted that although there were many similarities in aims of these sites because of the size difference the net native had to be more specific. According to Domingo: ‘[A]t LaMalla.net, the only-online only project, reporters had assumed they could not compete with the bigger media outlets and only applied the immediacy rule in the biggest of breaking news. They tried to develop an alternative news agenda to attract their own public and produced those stories without the pressure of time. (2008: 115)’

9.2 COMMUNICATION

The most startling thing I discovered in my observations was the lack of verbal communication in the *salon.com* newsrooms. Newsrooms are seen in popular culture as bustling places of noise and activity. All you have to do is watch ‘Broadcast News’, ‘All the President’s Men’ or even the once popular ‘Murphy Brown’ television programme to understand the perception of the newsroom as the hub, full of excitement and constant action. Indeed, even in the seminal studies of newsrooms mentioned in the literature review, there is a sense that something is happening in one central place in order to create a news product (Schlesinger 1978).

What I found at *salon.com* was much different. I had been warned by the managing editor that observing the newsrooms would be very boring and I would not see very much, even before I began this research. And she was correct. Almost all of the communication that happens at Salon occurs over email or instant messenger. There is good reason for this, with the majority of the staff evenly distributed on opposite sides of the United States and a bureau in Washington DC, there is a natural communication barrier to talking in person. However, there is some verbal communication that occurs. Every morning there is an 8am Pacific Time phone in meeting for the editorial team as well as various phone-in meetings during the week for the news team but these are few and far between compared to the amount of work being done and decisions are being made. The majority of the days I spent in the newsrooms were marked by little talking and interaction and a lot of watching people type at a desk. This way of

doing work was confirmed by most of the people I watched. One blogger told me that he only came into the office maybe once every other week. He communicated the rest of the time with his editor over email.

Mark Deuze consistently addresses what technology is doing to the work of the journalist in his writings (2007, 2008). This study echoes many other ethnographic studies of online newsrooms (Paterson & Domingo 2008) and appears to be a pattern in online news organisations. As Deuze puts it:

Online news professionals do practically all their work at their desks, using their connections to the wired world as the primary source of all things. As this also seems to be increasingly the case in other areas of news production, a picture emerges of an atomized profession, isolated and connected at the same time, yet also blind to each other (and thus itself), and the wider society it operates in (2008: 204).

During an interview with the managing editor, her email inbox began to get so full that she had to stop our conversation in order to begin answering them so that she did not get too behind. In addition, she was trying to have multiple conversations over instant messenger with the news editor in New York and other various editors about stories that were in progress. I was located, during my observation in San Francisco, just outside of her office. I sat at one of the cubicle desks with many of the other reporters and photo editors etc... The room was very quiet and there was almost no interaction between the different people. Everyone just appeared to be quietly typing at their desks.

One of the most interesting cases of this lack of verbal communication and interaction was a photo editor who had just been hired. Her job was to choose photos to accompany stories and occasionally take photographs for original stories Salon did (although that was rare due to monetary constraints). She had been working for the website for about six months and had only met her direct boss one time. Their primary correspondence, as with others mentioned above, was instant messenger. The photo editor's day-to-day work in corresponding with various news editors and with her boss was almost never face-to-face but was all on digital communication.

This mode of communication is in stark contrast to the *Los Angeles Times* communication style. The news team there was in constant one-on-one communication with each other and the phones never stopped ringing. There was, however, a difference between the amount of noise and chatting done on the third floor (main newsroom) and the 2nd and 5th floor multimedia and Web hubs respectively. The communication styles were still similar but the third floor was one of constant movement and voices while the other two were a bit more subdued and saw more people sat in front of computers typing.

One of the best illustrations of the importance of one-on-one communication to the news organisation was the day before the state of California began issuing gay marriage licenses. I had decided beforehand (without knowing the news story would be on the agenda the following day) to spend time the multimedia team to sit in on their meetings and observe what it is they do. After a weekly afternoon meeting I attended, the two top editors of the team decided it was

important for them to go upstairs to talk to the homepage team about the upcoming story which they were sending several videographers to cover. They both mentioned to me that it was important to talk face to face with the homepage producers if they wanted proper feature coverage from the website.

The senior editor of the homepage team seemed very busy but admitted it was probably important to talk about a strategy for the next day. Suddenly, multiple players including interactive team members, other homepage producers, the top web photo editor and other top senior web editors were weighing in on the best way for *latimes.com* to cover the multiple events that would be taking place all over Southern California. The discussion lasted about twenty minutes and the multimedia team walked away at least satisfied that their voice had been heard, even if they were not given as big of play as they had hoped.

The second prime example of the importance of verbal face-to-face communication the organisation gave was the sheer amount of meetings leading up to Election Day. Every time I spoke with a member of the web team, they had just come from an election meeting or had one planned soon. The web deputy for the national/politics desk held a weekly Tuesday meeting for anyone involved in the coverage for several weeks leading up to the big day. In addition, most of the separate teams (Interactive, Multimedia etc.) held weekly meetings to discuss election coverage. There were endless amounts of face to face meetings for groups to sort out how the Presidential election was going to get covered.

9.3 PICKING SIDES, BRANDING AND PERSONALITIES

One of the distinct aspects of news on the Web, especially when it comes to blogs and politics, is the predisposition of searchers to look only at stories that reinforce their already existing beliefs (Sides and Lawrence 2008). The rise of blog-based sites such as *The Huffington Post*, *Daily Kos* and *Little Green Footballs* shows that when it comes to news about the election, the partisan does quite well. The numbers for these sites, of course does not come close to those of the major news operations such as *CNN* or *New York Times* but in the political arena they hold a sort of political capital that cannot be ignored (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2008b).

These sites are a challenge to the idea of the objective truth-teller journalism that gave it much of the authority that it held to for so long. Jane Singer argued this point in an essay on the future of journalism (2009). According to Singer:

Reporters filing for the internet, regardless of the media platform most closely associated with their employer's "brand", are expected to follow a breaking story much as cable television reporters have done for a generation. Many of these same reporters, especially ones with topical expertise, also will be expected to develop their *own* online brand, comparable to the market-driven personality of television journalists. The blog (or its progeny) will become a significant journalistic branding device, and it will be not just acceptable but desirable for online journalists to have an identifiable viewpoint or "voice", much like the talking heads on today's cable news channels. The internet takes to new levels cable's assault on the nation of objectivity as a journalistic virtue (2009:376).

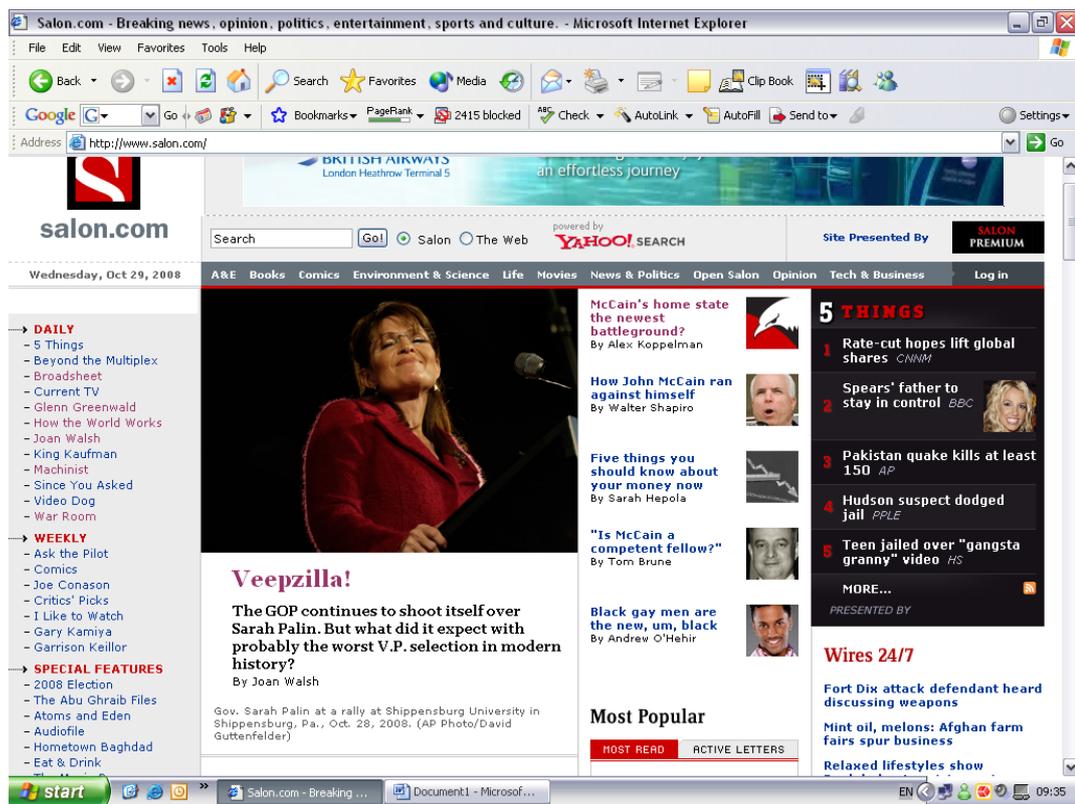
It is one of the chaotic features of the changing media landscape that is reshaping our definitions of journalism. According to McNair:

The fact that in a pluralistic media market there are advocates of many different positions on the issues of the day, and that most of if not all of these will also claim to embody virtues of objectivity, illustrates the fact that truth—or at least the true interpretation to be derived from the known facts—is indeed, relative...to note this relativism is simply to acknowledge the possibility that different observational positions imply different interpretations of phenomena, and that more than one of these interpretations may be ‘true’ at the same time (2006:99).

Salon.com began its site in 1996 with a focus on the liberal side of the American political landscape. According to the news editor: ‘We didn’t want to take sides, we don’t, that’s the story, what we do. I mean we’re on one side of the divide pretty much, but we’re still objective pretty much and we’re not gonna necessarily pick a candidate...’ (August 12, 2008).

As the Presidential campaign was closing in on its last few weeks the point of view became even more pronounced. The choice of Sarah Palin as a Vice Presidential candidate for Republican John McCain brought about particular disdain from much of the Salon writers and bloggers. One of the most clear cut examples of this disregard for Palin came on Wednesday the 29th of October. The cover article by editor in chief Joan Walsh looked like this:

Figure 9.1- *salon.com* ‘Veepzilla!’ Cover October 29, 2008



The parts of the Salon website that pull in a lot of reader ‘letters’ and hits are undoubtedly the personalities. Its editor-in-chief Joan Walsh not only writes frequently on her blog but also appears regularly on cable channels to give her viewpoint on various political issues. Glen Greenwald, a former constitutional lawyer and book author, also writes for his self-titled blog that brings in a large audience to the site. His opinions and viewpoints focus naturally on a lot of the legal issues surrounding politics but are nonetheless, definitely his viewpoint. During the election, Greenwald was regularly in the Top 50 blogs in the world based on Technorati figures.⁵²

⁵² <http://www.technorati.com>

Salon.com also works with columnists like Camille Paglia, Gary Kamiya and Garrison Keillor to produce weekly or monthly opinion columns that also do well for the website. Paglia is a liberal columnist who writes monthly but often she will bring the biggest numbers for the site each month. This is because she is heavily featured on the Drudge Report. According to the man who handles all the site statistics:

We get a monthly referral from the Drudge Report which is demographically a much more conservative audience. And for whatever reason loves the columnist we have, Camille Paglia, so once a month she has a monthly column and he links to her... And it's often times the biggest traffic day of the month. These are all sort of informal deals they're not like contractually obligated to give us anything. But regular enough that we kind of count on it (June 12, 2008).

In contrast to this is the *Los Angeles Times* who still claim the objective, fair and balanced style of journalism that has come to define newspaper journalism over the last fifty or so years in the United States. Because almost all of the original *Los Angeles Times* branded content is produced for the newspaper, this philosophy is cohesive. The journalists are sticking to a formula they know and staking their reputations on the backbone of people knowing and understanding this brand.

The brand '*Los Angeles Times*' became very important as I conducted most of the interviews. The idea of the news gathering organisation as a well established and trusted source of news and information was a huge sense of pride for the team of news gatherers. However, the interviewees had a harder time describing

exactly what the *LA Times* brand meant. One of the most senior editors I interviewed, who had been at the company for many years put it this way:

Well the brand is *The Los Angeles Times* which you [stumbles]...incredibly thorough, hopefully unbiased (although it depends on who you talk to, we're biased all the time}, quality journalism and then beyond that it's that 'news you can use' category that we do a fair amount of but we probably need to do more of. It's a trusted source of news and information which I think may be one of our marketing lines, I think it may be one at least. I think it really has to be that because again in a world where you figure everybody online is lying to you for the most part and you've got all these gossip things and bloggers and people throwing facts around that aren't true.... I think there's gonna have to be value in truth and honesty and integrity and that's what we have and that's what people maybe come to us for. Because they know that these guys are gonna tell it straight (July 21, 2008).

The problem with this objective ideologically understood detached 'brand' is that it could be said of many newspaper parentage websites. The *latimes.com* had neither a political viewpoint nor a specific subject niche in which they were trying to carve out a place for themselves on the Web. They were relying on the ideology of journalism and their established newspaper brand of this ideology to create success for themselves on the Web.

Walter Pincus (2009) calls it 'Newspaper Narcissism'. In his essay on the topic he writes that today's mainstream print media have become obsessed with being neutral, as if referees of a game. He says they have 'become common carriers, transmitters of other people's ideas and thoughts, irrespective of import,

relevance, and at times even accuracy...At a time when it is most needed, the media, particularly newspapers have lost their voice' (2009:4).

This ideological problem between voice-driven journalism and neutral objectivity became a problem for the website and for the larger news gathering operation many times but specifically on two occasions during the Presidential election.

The first instance occurred in mid-October when the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board decided to endorse Barack Obama for President (*LA Times* Editorial Board 2008). It was of particular note because the newspaper had not endorsed a Presidential candidate since 1972. In an interview the Editorial Pages Editor explained the evolution: 'We stopped doing it because of the [Chandler] family's relationship with Nixon and that the family was so wrapped up in Republican politics and the paper's political coverage was heavily Republican in those day' (Mitchell and Strupp 2008). The editor James Newton went on to say that then publisher Otis Chandler 'wanted the paper to have more of a neutral voice. It was a smart thing to do then, but no longer. We are not part of a political party and we have an editorial board that has all kinds of opinions' (Mitchell and Strupp 2008).

In a Reader's Representative blog the representatives spoke with a member of the editorial board who explained the differentiation between the news and opinion.

As for the reader who is concerned about our endorsing. I would remind her that making election recommendations has always been and continues to be a fundamental role of a daily newspaper. Just as with all of our editorials, endorsement decisions are made with complete independence from our news operation. Editorials are written by staff that reports directly to the publisher, not to the editor or the newsroom. Likewise, the newsroom does its work independently of us and is untainted by our advocacy and opinion (Gold 2008).

In all my time in the newsroom, I found this to be the case. I never met anyone from the editorial team nor were they on a day-to-day basis interacting in any form from the political correspondents covering the campaign. However, most of the journalists personally knew those on the editorial board and appeared to have a quite friendly relationship with them, particularly with the main Editor James Newton.

What is of note here is that online everything is posted on equal footing as the other. As argued before, it is all simply content. And so to the readers who found the endorsement online the idea of 'objective' journalism next to opinion journalism becomes a bit confusing and vague. On the day of the endorsement the website posted its editorial endorsement on the front page with most of the other day's news, various blogs and entertainment guides.

The second case of specific branding problems the site had was when the Republican Party in October 2008 picked up on a late-spring article written by the *Los Angeles Times* and archived on its website. The article by Peter Wallsten (2008) was titled 'Allies of Palestinians see friend in Barack Obama: They

consider him receptive despite his clear support of Israel.’ It describes Obama’s relationship with the Palestinian community, particularly in Chicago where he began his political career. It goes in to detail about a party Obama attended in 2003 for international Palestinian scholar Rashid Khalidi, in which he paid special tribute to the man who had challenged his thinking. The article did not receive national notice when it was originally published but was picked up by someone on the McCain campaign in late October thanks to its archival on the *latimes.com* website.

McCain and his Vice-Presidential counterpart Sarah Palin were suddenly very vocal that this relationship between Obama and Khalidi must be fully disclosed. They accused the *Los Angeles Times* of not releasing the video of this party, which was the centrepiece of the article. Palin was very vocal about what she thought of the *Los Angeles Times*’ position. According to a speech by Palin at a rally in Ohio: ‘Maybe some politicians would love to have a pet newspaper of their very own. In this case, we have a newspaper willing to throw aside even the public’s right to know in order to protect a candidate that its own editorial board has endorsed. And if there’s a Pulitzer Prize for excelling in kowtowing, then the LA Times, you’re winning’ (Rainey 2008).

In the days following this controversy, I was told informally by journalists at the Times that there was a constant presence outside of the building picketing the *Los Angeles Times*. The deputy video editor also told me he had received emails and phone calls from friends and colleagues asking about the tape. He said unless the *Los Angeles Times* had a secret video vault as far as he knew, the

source of the story was the one who didn't want things to come out, not the *Los Angeles Times*. According to an article about the controversy: 'The reporter's editor said the paper would have preferred to be able to post the video on its website but could not get the source to agree' (Rainey 2008).

There was no evidence to me of overt bias by the political newsgathering staff at the *Los Angeles Times* towards Obama but in the world of online journalism Palin has a strong point. Online, both articles, the endorsement and 'controversial' Palestinian article, appeared together and were accessed by users in the same manner. Essentially they were all content and while the ideology of journalistic objectivity and autonomy was what the Times clung to in order to defend themselves, it is easy to see that without a distinctive voice the users could deduce whatever they wanted by picking and choosing.

9.4 BAGGAGE

One of the most frustrating issues for all those creating news for the *latimes.com* was *The Los Angeles Times* Pulitzer Prize winning newspaper. To be sure, this news behemoth was also the reason most of those working on the website were employed but it was a source of endless frustration for numerous reasons which I will go into below. On my first day of observation, there was an instant knowledge that I was in a place that published award winning newspaper content. There are shrines everywhere to the newspaper and even the way the building is set up (see Chapter 6) is around how the newspaper sections appear in final form.

In contrast, *salon.com* was able to set up its operation solely around the Web. I asked each of the interviewees if they felt in any way constrained by being a solely net native news organisation and most did not feel a huge amount of constraints. The two biggest complaints were lack financial resources (which is something that parentage websites are not immune to) and people not knowing who they were because of their online only status. One editor commented that she was still constantly shocked when she told people where she worked and they had not heard of the website or thought it was a place for hairdressers. Another mentioned it was hard to compete with known entities such as *nytimes.com* but that they had their struggles as well.

But most sentiments echoed that of one deputy editor:

I've worked at three different places before here. And every one of those places it was hard to implement changes... And I feel like that's not as difficult to do at Salon. I feel like every publication there is a certain bureaucratic bottleneck that changes have to go through and it becomes hard. I mean you know, Kevin just introduced this new section, a whole new section on Science and Environment, yes that was in the works for a long time but you know that's hard to do...I did this random thing called 'Pork Week' which was just like a whole week on stories devoted to Pork. It was one of those things like in print, I don't think you'd get a chance to do that. The Web just gives us a lot of flexibility in that (August 12, 2008).

One political reporter added:

...before that I was writing mostly for papers that, I was Washington correspondent for papers that are nowhere near here. So I was kind of used to seeing my stuff online anyway. I think most of the people that I deal with professionally get, would read most of my stuff online. And I think at this point sort of the political world has gotten used to online journalism so I don't feel as though there's any kind of hindrance in dealing with sources or you know campaign officials or governmental agencies from being online (September 11, 2008).

Conversely the *latimes.com* website had the name and the backing of a huge media conglomerate but the problems created for the journalists by the publication of a daily newspaper were many.

(1) There seemed to be among the newsgathering staff a lack of respect for the Web generally.

The first sign of this was when I entered the building and the staff who worked solely for the Web, were relegated to a different floor. They were not a part of the main news gathering floor with the hired reporters. This spatial issue was remedied during my tenure at the Times but there was still a divide. The second moment I realized the Web was not given as much credence as the newspaper was during the morning Web meeting. I attended the first day of the meeting and although every news gathering section had a representative there, the main editors were not; nor were any of the top editors of the *Los Angeles Times* masthead. A few hours later at what was titled an 'A1 Meeting', almost all of the section editors and top editors were present but the focus of this meeting was the newspaper.

One of the writers for the National desk put the problem this way:

Well I mean people who have spent their lives writing stories are always going to view with a certain degree of scepticism the fact that a blog has a hundred and twenty characters and that that's a substitute. I mean they both go into the same rubric of journalism and the same newsroom. That's not a healable breach, that's just not gonna change. From the websites point of view, look there are people on the website who honestly don't really care what any of these stories say. I mean they simply have no idea, they can't read that many words and they're not going to. And they really think that ten pictures of Paris Hilton is just as good as a story about Paris Hilton being in jail because it generates the same number of hits on the website. In their world, that's fine. And no one's going to convince them otherwise and why waste one's time to do that (October 7, 2008).

Mark Deuze (2008) puts the status of the online journalist in a parentage news organisation this way: 'In a way, online journalists undergo a typical migrant experience: not part of their "home country" anymore, but also never fully accepted by their "host country" either. Just as their news is liquid, they have to come to terms with a distinctly liquid, as in: unfinished, professional identity' (2008:206).

(2) There was a definite problem with technical ability and enthusiasm of various journalists throughout the organisation.

The company was constantly trying to fix this problem by having training sessions but that took time and the interest level was varied. This barrier was noted by sociologist Roel Puijk (2008). He said: '...we have to be aware of the

fact that not everyone is very confident with using all the possibilities the software provides for and that people make their own standardized routines' (36).

During the convention coverage this barrier became a problem for everyone involved in trying to get content on the Web. It had been decided by the Web Deputy to do blog posts while several speeches were being given during the Republican Convention (see Chapter 7). She queried the half a dozen or so journalists sitting at various desks in the designated National Desk area. She could find no one to complete the tasks because no one readily knew the Typepad system or was busy doing things for the newspaper. The Web Deputy eventually was forced to blog several events on her own even though she was not a reporter. Additionally, she was not able to keep up the blog with the speed of the events as they were happening so quickly and she had other duties to complete while completing this task.

The problem was not simply related to Web blogging systems. The news organisation had decided before I arrived that would begin training reporters how to use video cameras. The thinking was that a reporter could possibly use this knowledge while they were out reporting in order to get additional content for the website. However, many of the newspaper reporters did not have the skill set to be able to learn properly the broadcast medium. Additionally, there was a lack of enthusiasm for the project as well as a question of direction of the website as far as using video. Ultimately, the project to train reporters was scrapped and the full-time video team was left doing the video based content.

Mark Deuze in his book *Media Work* (2007) specifically addressed the issue of the impact of new technologies on the news industry. The first is that journalists are forced to increase their skill set to produce more work in the same amount of time. The second is that technology is not a neutral agent in the way organizations and journalists do their work. According to Deuze: ‘...hardware and software tend to amplify existing ways of doing things, are used to supplement rather than radically change whatever people were already doing, and take a long time to sediment into the working culture of a news organization’ (2007:155).

The environment created in *The Los Angeles Times* newsroom reinforced the idea of journalism predicated upon a newspaper outcome. The journalists were all forced to obtain a variety of technical skills that they did not previously possess but the actual long-term integration was not happening. This was due to both lack of enthusiasm and the idea that in working for a newspaper many of these skills were not of primary importance or concern for the journalists.

(3) The deadlines for written stories were predominantly based on newspaper production schedules.

On the last day of the Democratic Convention the Web Homepage team held their daily 5pm meeting. The five homepage producers were there as well as the executive editor of the website and the Interactive Technology Editor. The first thing on the agenda was every person’s frustration with the various copy desks

as well as the lack of stories. They all spoke of the night before and how their stories were available so much later than most other websites. The producers felt the copy editors were not concerned at all with speed and that they were only looking toward the print deadlines. The team also felt that they had so few stories to work with regarding the Convention. It was due to the fact that the newspaper budget had not set up many stories in comparison to the bottomless desire of the web audience. The executive editor told the team to start using *Associated Press* articles on the homepage and even to lead with those stories if the various desks were not able to get their content to the web people in an appropriate amount of time.

The frustration was once again on display in an impromptu meeting I observed when doing an interview with the executive editor of the website. The managing editor of visuals walked into the office with the acting head of the politics desk. They wanted to know what the executive editor of the website wanted to do for coverage during the debate the next day. The executive editor of the entire *Los Angeles Times* wanted to have a piece up during the debate. The three discussed and decided that was not the best way to do it because the writers could not get something up fast enough and they also had to focus on the newspaper piece they would be writing. It was decided they would do a 'Live Blog' in order to follow the debate best. A piece would follow after the debate was over and was copy edited and ready.

And it was not simply content coming out of the National desk that was a problem. I sat in on a weekly Metro Section meeting. I attended the gathering

with one of the members of the multimedia team who was keen to show me how ‘newspaper focused’ the newsgathering operation still was. It was a short meeting, lasting approximately twenty minutes. There were about eight to ten associate editors sat around the table with the Metro Desk editor leading the discussion.

After initial pleasantries were exchanged, a quick note was made that on the previous Wednesday the Metro section had eight-hundred thousand page views. There was nodding of heads and then it was on to the stories various reporters were working on. The main desk editor kept referring to the story budget which is the financial system put in place to keep track of how much the newspaper is spending on each story. The story budgets are constantly being updated and the Web homepage and multimedia team are aware of these budgets and changes but they have little to no input on the deadlines or when they will receive the content. It is up to the desks themselves which are very much focused on newspaper timelines and content space.

The man who ran the AM copy desk put the problem this way:

When you’re trying to publish a story for the paper it’s like okay I made deadline, published, go home, wake up, here’s the paper. It’s a different mindset. You know being first might mean having a story on Monday’s paper whereas everyone is going to have to chase that story on Monday for Tuesday. With the Web, you’re chasing in real time and it’s so much more heightened. People are actually watching to see who is the number one person online. Who had the breaking news alert first, who had the first story etc. So it is different. It is now and never but it’s really more NOW (August 29, 2008).

According to McNair this fits well within the chaotic environment that exists in media today: ‘Journalists have more and better news-gathering technology to work with, but less time to develop stories, and more space to fill’ (2006:205). He goes on to call for researchers to look at choices these journalists are forced to ultimately make in coverage. In the case of *latimes.com* stories, they have decided to stick with newspaper deadlines and already adopted copy editing routines while leaving the instant to the blogs.

(4) Every single person in the newsroom was aware that the biggest portion of revenue for their operation came from the newspaper not the website.

The financial state of the Tribune Company was probably the most common topic threaded throughout all of my visits to the *Los Angeles Times* building. The exact turmoil occurring during my visit is chronicled throughout this thesis but the importance of the newspaper as a revenue generating stream was known by every person in the building I spoke with or encountered. On one of my early days of observation I was told by a manager: ‘We have to feed the core [newspaper] because the core is our lifeblood right now. And we can never forget that the core is keeping us alive. The Internet is making money but the Internet is not feeding us. We are surviving on the core product. And we need that core product to sustain us for a very, very long period of time’ (June 16, 2008).

Another columnist told me it was the bread and butter of the *Los Angeles Times*. While yet another editor said that taking the brand and monetizing it online was

still a great challenge for the Los Angeles Times. ‘Now whether we can ever be as successful as we were in print, I don’t know. You know because I don’t know how you make money from it. You know, I certainly know we can be as journalistically successful, probably more successful but monetizing that, that’s not my world so I don’t know’ (July 21, 2008).

The problem at this news gathering organisation is occurring all over the country as a successful online business model has so far eluded the large media companies.

(5) The biggest single problem the newspaper/online news gathering operation had was a lack of cohesive vision or plan.

If you asked the head of the website if she felt support from the company she would say ‘Yes. A lot. A lot.’ Or if you read an interview with the Editor in Chief of the *Los Angeles Times* (Hirschman 2008) he was one hundred percent behind the website and its operation but in real life it was much more complicated.

I asked many people throughout the many months at the *Los Angeles Times* what the greater goal was when downsizing decisions were being made or restructuring within the newsroom. No one seemed to have any cohesive answer. One of the key people I interviewed, who was the Director of Multimedia for the website, eventually took a buyout in one of the last rounds of layoffs. She told

me: 'It was a very tough decision, but I'm afraid I'd lost the faith and you can't be a manager if you don't believe' (November 13, 2008).

One of the first decisions the news gathering organisation made in a round of layoffs in June was to fire the editor in charge of breaking news for *latimes.com*. On my first and second visits to the newsroom he had been a key person involved in managing most of the decisions about what went on the homepage of the website or was featured on various levels. On my next visit and in informal conversations with others working for the website, no one understood the decision to lay him off or why it was made.

Later on, in a round of October/November layoffs the managers decided to let go the video person who was in charge of training reporters and editors in using multimedia equipment. The management also decided to dissolve most of the Web deputies. These decisions all came as the website posted the largest gains of any online newspaper from December 2007 to December 2008 (Saba 2009). One journalist confided to me that it was frustrating to people working on the Web because they had been doing everything they could to make the website numbers go up with great success and yet there was no praise or greater vision but rather just more layoffs for the web team.

It was not just the layoffs that were indicative of the greater vision for the Web. I rarely saw the larger editorial masthead (apart from the executive editor for the website) engaging with homepage producers or making sure the online coverage was going well. In fact, on most of the debate nights and convention evenings

the top editors had left their offices before or during the big speeches of the night. One could argue that it is not their responsibility to hold the hand of the journalists hired to do the job but the lack of interest was a bit surprising, especially as the website did so well (in increasing its user base) over the time I was observing.

Also, the multimedia team with whom I spent a lot of time felt specific lack of direction as to the point of their department. The editors felt it was important enough to hire video journalists to create content but not enough to promote the video content. Nor did they give them any direction as to what kind of video content they should create. The team was left doing a few weekly pieces and some added video content to things like the conventions. Occasionally they tagged along with reporters but most did not just want to be camera people.

This problem was exacerbated by the fact that most of the video content that was easily accessible in the main video players on the website was AP, Reuters or KTLA content. But despite that most of them were still upbeat:

Then I think, I don't want to judge people who are in management because I don't know what they're being asked to do. I think it's too easy to be like 'they're jerks and they want the fast buck' because I even see for myself I'm kind of sort of maybe changing some of my standards to kind of fit, give people what they want here. So I imagine management would be the same way. They're trying to manoeuvre, trying to figure out how do we make this work? (July 21, 2008) said one video journalist after a round of layoffs.

9.5 ECONOMICS

The economic status of both of these news organisations is in no way robust. However, the *Los Angeles Times* (owned by the Tribune Company) finds itself in a much more precarious situation than Salon (owned by Salon Media Group). The largest problem facing any website in today's economic climate is how to monetize all of the viewers and hits. This is the dilemma facing both sites that are to varying degrees increasing their user numbers and interaction on a monthly basis.

What these two websites with contrasting economic structures prove is that even though there may be financial troubles that does not necessarily equate to loss of power in the realms of culture and political clout (McNair 2006:203). In fact, as mentioned throughout this thesis, these websites increasingly retained a solid focus on reporting the 2008 Presidential Election in spite of financial difficulties. This is similar to other findings in regards to economic structures and news work.

Research does not suggest that either locally independent or corporate ownership is a significant predictor of quality in news reporting. Case studies on the influence of ownership on newswork in multinational organizations...suggests that while owners or directors can be powerful influencers of decision-making processes throughout the company, the daily management of specific divisions or departments allows for some degree of autonomy. Researchers tend to find multiple and proliferating styles of control and decision-making being tolerated in different parts of such globally networked news companies (Deuze 2009:87).

Both websites use advertising as their primary means of creating revenue in order to keep these news organisations producing content. However, this is where the similarity ends. Salon Media Group is a publicly traded company that has been able to stay afloat through various private investments throughout the years (Fost 2005). The stock is traded on the Over the Counter Bulletin Board (OCTBB). Its stock holdings show that the company has never been able to generate huge revenues but it has been able to stay in business since 1995.

The dot com burst of 2000 provided a tough moment for Salon as it felt the economic collapse of many other web based companies. According to the editor in chief: '[W]hen things were really bad the only reason we stayed alive was that we created a subscription program and we turned to our readers and they kept us alive. I feel, indebted is the wrong word but I feel like I owe them some of my time and my thinking' (June 11, 2008). The paid subscription service gave full access to the website for those who subscribed and only partial access to this who just visited the site without the pass. The initial pay wall set-up only lasted about a year until 2002 when they required a user to either to sign up (free of charge) for a site pass or subscribe. This system remained intact until a few years ago when according to the editor in chief:

But it was really burdensome in terms of our traffic just plateaued, well our traffic dropped and then plateaued and really didn't grow. I mean we had these peaks around the 2004 election we had a peak but it was completely flat and so we really needed to kind of untangle some of that. But we still find value, I mean financial value, but I think also brand loyalty and readership loyalty value in having these

core members who test out new products and help us think about new direction
(June 11, 2008).

Today there are two ways to view the site. You can simply just go to *salon.com* and view it with various ads weaved throughout and many that pop up as you navigate around. Or the site still provides a subscription service called Salon Premium, where you can view the site without ads, get invited to special events, receive special book offers and other various giveaways. There were about 30,000 Salon Premium customers at the time of observation and membership plans start at three dollars a month⁵³

None of the editors were willing to talk specifics of budgets but I never got the sense during any of the interviews I did or during observing that the editorial team felt under financial pressure. However, immediately after the election the site announced it was letting go nine people in total all over the site. The only name I was able to get was that of the Washington Bureau Chief who sent an email to the website *Politico.com*, telling of his firing (Calderone 2008). While the ultimate fate of Salon Media Group is in doubt their immediate future seems fairly secure and thus the journalists never felt under immediate threat and were able to do the type of journalism they wanted to do.

The economics of the *Los Angeles Times* are much more complicated and affected the news workers much more than Salon. *The Los Angeles Times* newsgathering operation is part of media behemoth Tribune Company. Tribune is America's largest employee-owned media company. It includes eight metro 7-

⁵³ Based on advertisement on *salon.com*

day newspapers, over fifty websites, twenty three stations and other various media holdings. The company claims that eighty percent of its publishing operating revenue comes from advertising, fourteen percent from circulation and the rest from other means.⁵⁴ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the company filed for bankruptcy on December 8, 2008.⁵⁵ According to the company: ‘We simply have too much debt in light of the dramatic and unexpected decline in revenues, which has been amplified by the current recession. All of our major advertising categories have been dramatically impacted’ (Tribune 2009). The company went on to say that this will not have any sort of impact for readers/viewers of its content: ‘Our readers, viewers, listeners and advertisers should see no interruption of service or difference in quality during the debt restructuring process’ (ibid).

However, this reassurance from the company that it was simply restructuring debt and was not going to shut down operations was not felt by employees. From the first day I stepped through the halls (before the bankruptcy was even announced) the idea that this Los Angeles institution would not be around in a few years was very prevalent. Almost all of my notes include someone at some point referencing ‘if we’re still here’ or ‘if I don’t get laid off’. The overall mood in the newsroom was one of constant realisation that the fate of the larger company was in peril.

This mood and overall outlook was exaggerated with each round of layoffs.

There had been a round of spring cuts before I arrived, then in late June/early

⁵⁴ <http://www.tribune.com/about/factsheet.html>

⁵⁵ <http://www.tribune.com/pressroom/releases/2008/12082008.html>

July there was another round. As the election was winding down another round of cuts was announced and in late January of 2009 the organisation announced it was laying off people again. The editorial team felt under constant threat and with every cut came restructuring of divisions, which created a more chaotic environment for the team to work on.

The ultimate fate of the *Los Angeles Times* is still very unsettled both due to the poor management of the Tribune company and the economic crisis that made the problems worse. I was told by several members of the staff that they were being told in meetings that Sam Zell could not make his payments. It remains to be seen whether the bankruptcy restructuring will fix some of the problems for the news gathering organisation but they continue to produce news. *Salon.com* is by no means secure in its revenue stream but for the foreseeable future, there does not appear to be indicators they are going under.

This ‘crisis of capitalism’ however has not slowed down the news output of these two websites. And even with reduced staff, both are producing journalism that is being consumed by an ever increasing audience.

9.6 CONCLUSION

The net native and the parentage news websites have much in common in both their focus on *convotelling* journalism and their push to disseminate information to the users on the Web as quickly and efficiently as possible. Their focus on those who use their websites and their more networked rather than hierarchical

newsrooms are also similarities between the websites. However, even with these shared elements there is a contrast to be provided between the two.

The smaller size of the net native organisation as well as the lack of verbal communication within the news hubs at *salon.com* are in stark opposition to the large news-gathering operation and newsrooms at the *Los Angeles Times*. The branding and voice that flourishes in online news provides a unique space for *salon.com* while causes problems for an objective offline brand that wants to compete online. This offline baggage *latimes.com* possesses creates a lot of tension with the larger *Los Angeles Times* newsgathering operation. *Salon.com* has only to think about the Web when constructing their news. Finally, the economic realities of both websites are dissimilar with the *latimes.com* being owned by one of the largest media corporations in the country and *salon.com* running itself as an independent company that is privately financed.

In contrasting both of these websites what emerges is that although goals can be similar there is very little in the way of control in either the small company route of Salon Media or the large corporation route of Tribune. They communicate on different levels and have contrasting views on the subjectivity of news but in the environment of cultural chaos they are still remaining competitive and contributing to the journalistic community.

Chapter 10- The Distinctiveness of the Online

Because we aren't just people who use language to communicate, there's this variety of ways that we actually do that as humans. So it's cool because it's [the Web] kind of acknowledging that. And you know just giving people a variety of ways to take it in (October 27, 2008).

That online journalism is different, is a non-negotiable starting point today.

According to Deuze and Dimoudi : '...due to the emergence and proliferation of online news sites which generate both shovelware and original content for the World Wide Web, the internet has created its own type of journalism: online journalism' (2002:87). But to what degree that difference is and what it is doing to our collective understanding journalism is up for much debate.

This research has shown various examples of how what is being done online is different from how news was previously constructed, filtered and disseminated. The real question remains however as to whether or not what is occurring online is actually a new type of journalism or simply journalism on a different platform but with the same tenets and rules.

Much of the time I spent in observation and even the structure of my questions to journalists centred on trying to answer this query. It is a large and comprehensive question but through observation, interviewing and content analysis this study is in a good position to try and respond to it. The answer turns out to be as complex as the question itself.

10.1 HOW OFFLINE AND ONLINE ARE THE SAME

There is much happening online that is still the same as what is being done offline both in actual content and in its process. The best case in point of this is the *Los Angeles Times* news gathering operation which is still primarily focused on its newspaper output. The journalists are grouped according to sections within the newspaper fold both in where they sit in the newsroom and their deadlines. The editors within each division meet regularly (usually on a weekly basis) to discuss stories reporters are working on for the newspaper.

In this, most of the written story content that appears on the *Los Angeles Times* website that is done by *Los Angeles Times* journalists, was created for the newspaper and simply put online. These types of stories have been called ‘shovelware’ (Pryor 2002). It is rare that the Metro section would create a budget for a reporter to go out and cover a story that would only appear online. When the online preparations were being made for the 2008 Party Conventions, the National/Politics desks story budget were central to what the producers were planning on doing on the Web. The team producing the homepage for the website and linking content did not have a say on what stories would be covered but they relied on the desk’s budget document for a huge portion of their content.

Logging on to the *latimes.com* homepage on Tuesday morning (9:15am), August 26, 2008 a picture of Michelle Obama was seen accompanied by two stories and

a blog post highlighting the night before where she had spoken at the Democratic Convention. After moving to the Convention landing page a list of stories and blog posts appeared. All of the new stories that were put up late the night before and that morning could also be found in the August 26, 2008 edition of *The Los Angeles Times* newspaper. There were no additional text-based articles on the website from *Los Angeles Times* staff that did not appear in the paper version.

The artificial article timelines that the editorial team at *salon.com* has created for their content is also a more offline approach to publishing. The team has set up a system where their originally reported stories and pre-packaged opinion pieces are put up about 7pm (Pacific Time) each evening. Most of those in the higher masthead positions came from a background of newspaper or magazine journalism and this very much informs the daily publishing idea. They see themselves as a ‘daily Web magazine’ and in that are putting up their magazine content on the site every evening for the next morning.

In addition to these very offline aspects of the websites the terminology used by the journalists throughout both buildings was more offline than online. Those using the websites were almost always referred to as ‘readers’ rather than users or other more interactive terminology. The length of articles, written by reporters on both staffs, was often referred to in terms of lines or inches, which is print terminology. The titles of journalists, with a few exceptions, were the same as what they would be in a print newsroom such as editor in chief, managing editor, copy editor, writer etc... The term for the main story highlighted on the

salon.com website every day is the ‘cover’ story, which is a magazine term. The A1 meeting is the most important of the day at the *Los Angeles Times* newsgathering operation. A1 refers to the front page of the newspaper.

The idea of reporting as a journalist picking up the phone, calling sources and checking the facts with other pieces of information has not changed in an online environment. It is not necessarily occurring at all times but the definition by journalists at these websites remains unchanged. Many of editors were quick to point out that their bloggers were ‘real reporters’ and did ‘real reporting’ not like those hearsay bloggers who just take other people’s information and comment on it.

However, even though this is still the ‘norm’ in reporting it is being challenged. As brought up in the previous chapters there was a cyclical nature to what was being reported and journalists often did use information obtained from other blogs or news websites as a subject for their posts or articles. In addition sources themselves were increasingly using their own means to reach the public, leaving journalists to search various websites for information.

This will eventually lead to a new model of reporting, according to Clay Shirky (2009). ‘The ability to get out of the “phone call” model of reporting—one paid journalist talking to one source at a time—and to instead bring in everything the internet has taught us about automation, syndication, parallel efforts, and decentralizations will increasingly characterize successful new models of journalism.’

10.2 THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ONLINE AND OFFLINE

10.2.1 SPEED

When I asked each of the journalists if they thought online journalism was a distinctive type of journalism there was usually a brief pause. This pause was normally followed by a list of answers showing how it's different and similar which could become contradictory quite easily. For example, the number one answer for how online journalism was different is the speed and quickness with which information is disseminated. This was the difference picked up by almost all of the journalists whom I interviewed and the most distinct observation I made for those focused on creating Web content. As the content editor at *salon.com* put it: 'I think that the factors the Web makes different are you know that we publish daily and we can turn things around really quickly. So that might make us more timely and it also make us feel more pressure to be timely because the Web is incredibly timely' (June 11, 2008).

If this was the number one change, what others were quick to point out was the similarity of reporting in the online and offline (mentioned above). The New York editorial director at *salon.com* began his statement on online journalism by saying 'It's totally different.' He then ended his diatribe saying this: 'In terms of how journalism actually works, I think it's not really any different now. I mean in terms of actually reporting or how you present reporting, I don't think it's any different' (August 13, 2008).

If reporting, which takes time and a building of source relationships, is still done exactly the same online then surely that contradicts with the constant need for speed which journalists in these environments find themselves under. In these two case studies, both were occurring but the constant need for the new highly outweighed the importance of in-depth reporting. This could be seen through observation of developing news stories, through the conversations with journalists themselves and in the content analysis of the homepages, which showed that the featured political story headlines were the newest. This also matches up with other ethnographic studies in newsrooms which highlighted that ‘the new’ trumped all other values of journalists in online environments (Domingo 2008).

10.2.2 INTERACTIVITY IN NEWS CONSTRUCTION

This was one of the key differences, in my observations, that does not play into any of the findings that previous ethnographic studies that still hold weight in journalism research today (Schlesinger 1978, Gans 1980, Fishman 1980, Tuchman 1978, Epstein 1974). In fact one of the key conclusions from those studies was that the audience rarely comes into play when journalists construct news. This is a total shift.

Offline news has traditionally been constructed at a firm distance from its audience. Online however, the news user becomes a crucial part of the news-making process. Journalists are instantly aware, through various technologies, of which stories do well and which do not. They can see if a subject sparks interest

in its users and creates a conversation in their blogs or article posts. And then they can act on this knowledge: either adding more content, or following a story further or adding additional platforms that might engage someone further.

What is most interesting about this new type of journalism is that even though I observed the journalists being constantly aware of the number of hits their stories were getting and email and 'letters' received about posts, it was one of the least noted changes during the interviews. When asked specifically the question about the user coming into play when constructing news the answer was a resounding yes but when asked to name the differences in online journalism only a few noted how this was a distinctive online trait.

10.2.3 AUTONOMOUS NATURE OF THE NEWS-MAKING PROCESS

The next identifiable change was the making of news which is discussed in detail in the previous chapters. Besides the quick and interactive nature of the Web, just mentioned, the idea of space provided the ability for unlimited content on both websites. This gave *latimes.com* an advantage, as they have a significantly larger editorial staff than *salon.com*. They were able to utilize interactive elements, photography, and video segments to a much greater degree. However, their strategy was not executed through a streamlined process and there was not a distinctive routine that dictated coverage every time a news event occurred. In fact, the lack of procedural routines and process was a distinct feature of how the website covered stories. Their decisions about how to cover a

story was variable being dictated by different needs and different decision makers at different times.

What this unlimited news hole also did for the journalists was create a working environment in which bloggers, Web deputies, homepage producers, and various columnists were working fairly autonomously. The *latimes.com* lack of vision or direction gave those working for the Web a lot of autonomous decision making. While at *salon.com* the focus on the journalist and the smaller news staff created an environment where beyond copy editing and a few highly edited pieces, most content was done by the journalist and sent out. The news-making on both these websites became less and less about a controlled atmosphere with gatekeepers and highly edited content and became more about getting the most amount of stories out to the user in the technological medium that made the most sense.

10.2.4 MULTI-PLATFORM NATURE-CONSTRAINTS & POSSIBILITIES

The multi-platform nature of the Web was the third big change mentioned in Chapter 2 and duly noted by the journalists I spoke with. However, in practice this became much more complicated and much harder to execute than in principle. The Web is essentially all previous platforms (print, television, radio) in one. It can also interlink elements with each other which is something that was virtually impossible in other mediums. Additionally, the Web allows users to sign up to receive content on other platforms such as mobile phones. These

sites did engage in all types of different dissemination platforms however, both of their focuses still remained on the text-based article format.

Part of this had to do with speed. If a story was developing then it was much quicker to put up a blog post (in the case of *salon.com*) or a short story from the AP (in the case of *latimes.com*). It takes time to go out and film a story, or to record audio for a piece or to build interactive platforms for the user to engage with. However the written word still provided the quickest way to get the news to the user. According to Jane Singer: ‘The online journalist is an information provider, the rapidly updating online form of journalism requires adeptness at gathering information quickly, packaging it into easily digestible elements, and disseminating it in a way that maintains a coherent and engaging story line’ (2009:376).

The other part had to do with the way these newsrooms were set up. As explained in depth in Chapter 6, the setup of these sites is still centred on the written word. However, a lot of video content was available online at *latimes.com* and to a lesser degree on *salon.com*. The *latimes.com* web team was increasingly focusing on new and innovative databases and interactive features for the site. *Salon.com* was using partnerships with other websites (Big Think and Current TV) to create more video content and interlinking. It also has Radio Salon, which does regular audio interviews that it posts on its website and iTunes.

The platform that addresses the speed of the Web with the quickness of the written word best is the blog. According to the managing editor at *salon.com*: ‘We found it to be a very good tool to have journalists working their beats, day after day on a blog, keeping up with things. It can be a very agile format for dealing with breaking news or covering a beat without having a full department’ (June 12, 2008). The quickness is also what both sites saw as the most important thing in bringing people back to their sites on a regular basis. Blog traffic was very important to both sites and as with everything else closely monitored.

Additionally, picture slide shows were replacing many traditional stories on the website as they were more popular with viewers and had much less text to deal with. One of the key bloggers at *salon.com* made this point when discussing the distinctiveness of the online.

I think it’s a distinctive type of journalism. I mean as I was saying with the way the Web constrains me from writing long stories, there’s other benefits of the Web that you can’t do in print. You can use video and linking is a huge part of it, you can link to your sources, you can link to what other people are talking about and it’s more immediate and faster than you could in print...Slate has a feature called ‘Slide Shows’ where they talk about a subject only by having a series of pictures about it...You couldn’t do that in the old format. You couldn’t do that in a magazine say. But I think it works much better online and it’s a new format that may only have been possible because of the Web... (June 18, 2008).

10.2.5 BREAKDOWN OF CONTROL

The final change spoken of in the second chapter was the breakdown of control in the online environment. The lack of centralization of power within the

newsroom and control over the news agenda were also brought up in the previous data chapters. But another aspect of the loss of control occurs in the authoritative voice that has been lost in news. Previous ethnographic studies taught us about the importance journalists placed on objectivity and balance when constructing news (Epstein 1974). It gave them authority as ‘truth tellers’ in the midst of competing interest. However, this is not what is occurring in the online world of journalism (Robinson 2007).

According to an editor at *salon.com*: ‘It [the Web] frees, there’s not time to stick to a planned objectivity’ (June 11, 2008). Besides the speed of the news on the Web, the other thing that journalists mentioned as distinctive to online journalism was the style and voice in this new atmosphere. The tone of news coverage is different online and hits are often rewarded when spunk and personality appear.

McNair (2006) says it’s ultimately a debate between established professionalism and iconoclastic amateurism. In his argument the central problem lies in:

...the distinction between, on the one hand, journalism aspiring to the ethics and standards espoused by print and broadcast news media for centuries and, on the other, journalism...founded on alternative principles having less to do with the values of objectivity and reliability than with subjectivity, immediacy, and independence from, even rejection of established journalistic institutions (2006:119).

10.2.6 THE RISE OF THE VOICE

This emphasis on fact based journalism, but with a voice is a feature of online journalism thanks to both blogs and the searchable nature of the Web. The Web is a place where you can go online and search for any piece of information you want and increasingly people are going back to the voices or brands that they like. As journalist Michael Wolff (2009) noted in a blog post: ‘Who wouldn’t want their news delivered in a form that was searchable, saveable, resendable, which you can talk back to, which is linked to other relevant news, which allows you to read as lightly or deeply as you wanted to, and which combines text, pictures, and video?’

With information everywhere (AP Report 2008), the thing that makes a user continually get news from one place is the voice or the brand. The best examples of this are two of the most successful net native websites, *The Huffington Post* and *Drudge Report*. Both of these sites are not just successful in numbers but in influence as well. According to a blogger at *salon.com*: ‘I think the left bloggers hate that but it’s true. You know everybody checks Drudge. And if he’s got something it’s news. Same thing goes for Huffington Post or other names like that...that’s in terms of who sets the agenda’ (August 8, 2008).

The Huffington Post broke stories on Obama during the election and even became a platform for the Presidential candidate to address the public as he did in the case of the controversy surrounding his former pastor. Obama wrote a blog post on the site before doing a press conference which many felt helped

change the direction of his campaign (Obama 2008). *The Huffington Post* was further legitimized as a journalistic force when one of their bloggers was allowed to ask Obama a question during one of his first Presidential briefings (Luscombe 2009). The *Drudge Report* is still a defining aggregator for content both within news organisations (noted in all my observation) and related to hits. Drudge manages to breathe life into stories that may otherwise be buried or forgotten, but his bent is ideological. He is an outspoken conservative and champion's stories and favourite authors from the right. Both of these sites are very unapologetically ideological in how they approach news but have found this works to their advantage on the Web.

Both the *latimes.com* and *salon.com* were focused on their brand and finding an audience for that product in the uber-competitive web environment. This key difference of voice and tone were mentioned by many journalists I spoke with in finding out how online is different. My observation of the both the *latimes.com* web operation and *salon.com* showed me how important these voices and brands were. I was constantly being made aware that 'this' was the type of journalism each organisation did well. 'This' was often many different things but it gave these sites an edge and a particular point of view.

10.3 WHAT IS ONLINE JOURNALISM?

It is important to begin this argument with the renewed emphasis on what we understand as journalism and news. The definition from Brian McNair claims it

is: 'any authored text, in written, audio or visual form, which claims to be (i.e. presented to its audience as) a truthful statement about, or record of, some hitherto unknown (new) feature of the actual, social world' (1998:4). This definition leaves a very broad interpretation for newsmakers and leaves out a key ideological premise that informs much theoretical understanding of journalism and the way journalists see themselves. The premise that, according to Deuze, sees journalists in a democracy providing a public service as a sort of watchdog or newshound for those in power in the government or business (2005).

This basic premise of journalism informs much of the theoretical debate about how it functions and what its purposes are (Gans 2003, Schudson 2008).

However, this debate about what media should be providing from a standpoint of its role in democracy was not on the forefront of any journalists I encountered in either my observations or in-depth interviews. It did creep up when I asked more broad questions about what journalism or news is but never in the context of what the individual journalist was doing on a daily basis. The role of each journalist in the context of what I observed was as more of a convoteller. The goal was to create either lively conversations or great stories to engage those using their websites.

Overall, online journalism can be seen as three concepts in one. This is due to its nature as aggregator of information from many different platforms and sources, its speed, its emphasis on the user, and its unashamed rewarding of voices and brands. These distinctive online traits of journalism create news organisations that disseminate many different products all under the heading 'news' and

‘journalism’ as broadly defined above. They are all forms of the same thing but with different goals and outcomes.

The first is traditionally understood objective investigative journalism that has been done in newspapers, magazines and to a degree on television for the past sixty years (Schudson 2008). This type of journalism, usually done for offline outputs and then put on the Web, spends time with the story, uses many legitimised sources, is highly edited and is usually done as sort of a public service or in its watchdog role. The ideological journalism that is described by Mark Deuze (2005) falls under this umbrella and is a central theme described in Michael Schudson’s book ‘Why Democracies Need An Unlovable Press’ (2008) as well as Herbert Gans’ ‘Democracy and the News’ (2003). The role of the journalists in this concept of journalism is to keep those in power accountable and to serve democracy through informing the people what is actually happening in politics and big business.

The second concept that encompasses part of what online journalism does is tabloid entertainment (as defined in Chapter 6). The tabloidization of news been a main feature of academic research (Sparks and Tulloch 2000) and its reach has only increased online. The news organisations that have an online presence are definitely aware that entertainment or soft news does well online and boosts traffic. According to one homepage producer at the *latimes.com*: ‘I mean and then of course there’s the celebrity gossip part of it you know. I remember that’s how I was introduced to the homepage by [another producer]. Like on my first day, she’s like anything with Britney [Spears] we put it up there because she gets

into the Top 10' (December 18, 2008). This type of sentiment was echoed by an editor at *salon.com*: 'But we also know that when we write about sex or breasts or women's issues, those things get a lot of traffic and a lot of really, really contentious reader response. So there is that too, although that's not as much our focus because it has to be handled really well to be worth publishing at all kind of thing' (June 11, 2008).

In the content analysis portion of my analysis I never noted either of these sites putting a tabloid or entertainment story as a main headline. However, these types of stories all figured in to the coverage they provided on a daily basis. For example, at approximately 3pm Pacific Time on November 3rd, 2008, the day before the election this is what appeared on both homepages.

Figure 10.1- *salon.com* Homepage November 3, 2008

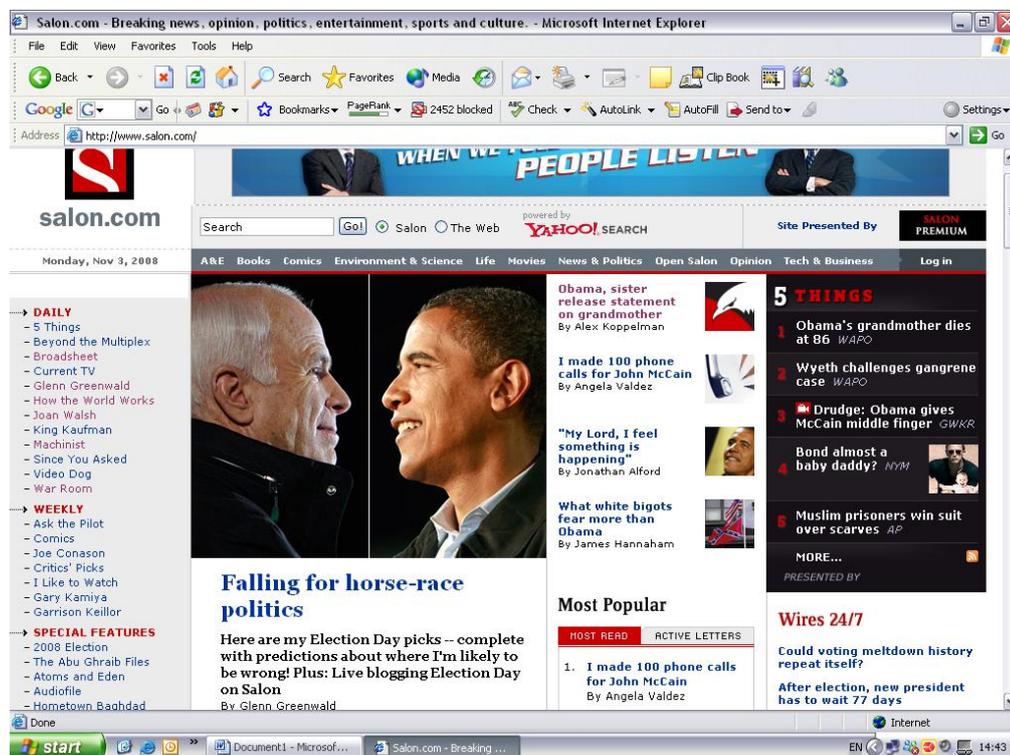


Figure 10.2- *latimes.com* Homepage November 3, 2008



The Presidential election is a prominent feature of both websites homepages with stories, blogs, video, comics, analysis etc... Also featured high on these homepages are more tabloid style stories. The star of the 'Twilight' movie, Kristen Stewart is featured at the top of the *latimes.com* as well as a Twilight countdown. On the top of *salon.com* there is mention in the '5 Things' box of the current Bond, Daniel Craig, becoming a dad. This was not uncommon to see on any number of days and highlights the combination of content available in online journalism.

Finally, the most common type of journalism that occurs in these web organisations is *convotelling*. *Convotelling*, as introduced in Chapter 6, is a hybrid form of conversational storytelling. It is the main goal of these online journalists I observed, trying to both capture the speed and public interest nature

of the web through conversational storytelling. Of prime concern in this concept of journalism is both engaging the user in the story, and often giving them a say in it. But also creating a strong narrative of public interest on whatever platform (traditional text-based story, blog, video etc...) seems to be the best way to convey it. This type of journalism cannot be classified as investigative journalism because of its conversational nature and constant interaction with the user, nor is it pure entertainment because it gives priority to both the story and the user. *Convotelling* often gives weight to topics it sees as important as with the Presidential election but *convotelling* is more concerned with engaging the user than being an authoritative watchdog. It can be argued that *convotelling* is merely a form of online entertainment journalism but it doesn't necessarily give priority to the tabloid only as seen on these two websites nor does it seek out these types of stories. The key to *convotelling* is a good story mixed with user input and conversation.

A key example of *convotelling* during the election was Sarah Palin. Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin entered into the Presidential election narrative when Republican candidate John McCain, in a surprise move, picked her as a running mate. Palin was not on the lips of any of the journalists I spoke with or observed prior to this announcement of her candidacy. I was in the newsroom of the *Los Angeles Times* the evening before McCain made his announcement. The main Top of the Ticket blogger was preparing some profiles in case McCain made an announcement the next day but Palin's name was not spoken.

Less than twenty four hours later, the name Sarah Palin turned into a sort of national obsession. She was everywhere and these two news organisations covered her candidacy quite vigorously. I analysed the homepages for both websites twenty eight times prior to when election returns began coming in November 4, 2008 and after she was announced as the Vice Presidential pick. Palin appeared in some story, blog, pictorial or other format thirty two times on the homepage of *latimes.com* during that time period. She made a much larger impact at *salon.com*, appearing fifty seven times of twenty eight captures I made. The story of Palin's rise to the national stage was of great interest to both the users and those producing the news. Blogs on both these sites frequently covered anything Palin said or did and pictures of her also appeared frequently on these sites. When Palin was famously interviewed by Katie Couric for CBS News, both sites used this content to create their own content both in blog and story form.⁵⁶

The conversation became quite loud as her candidacy continued and the response to anything about or surrounding Palin was large (as noted in Chapter 9). When an opinion piece was written by feminist Gloria Steinem on Palin for the *Los Angeles Times*, it was by far the most viewed and emailed story on the website (September 2008) that month. Additionally, five of the top ten 'most viewed' articles for September 2008 and two of the top ten photo galleries were about Palin. 'Letters' at *salon.com* were also quite high when any of the stories or blogs mentioned the Vice Presidential candidate.

⁵⁶ War Room Blog-Thur. Sept. 25 'Palin digs herself in deeper' ---Walter Shapiro story Oct. 2, 2008 'The big veep showdown'
TOTT- Sept. 26 'The upside for Sarah Palin from her widely panned sit-down with Katie Couric' ---James Rainey story Sept. 26. 'Palin talks to Couric—and if she's lucky, few are listening.'

10. 4 CHAOS IN ACTION

Chaos is our lot: the best we can do is identify the various forces at work shaping various possible futures (Shirky 2009).

The basic tenant of the chaos paradigm ‘approaches content only *in context*, viewing it as the outcome of contingent processes which, though they may be influenced by quite simple underlying rules, are fundamentally unpredictable’ (McNair 2006). Whereas the ‘control’ approach (Curran 2002) to media sees the economic or political forces in charge of what ultimately is output in the journalistic sphere and the liberal pluralist approach sees the journalist as autonomous (Schudson 2005) within the context of media organisations, chaos takes in all of those factors, although it admittedly gives more weight to the liberal pluralist argument of autonomy of journalists.

The competing interests that vied for coverage on each site ranged from a constant need for the ‘new’ to the important ‘brand’ pieces each of the sites do. Add into the mix, technological issues which constrained what could be done but also opened many doors to multi-platform content along with staff shortages on both sites and you have a recipe for a chaotic atmosphere. McNair (2006) outlines the basic tenets of the dominance paradigm versus the chaos paradigm that have reshaped journalism and to varying degrees these influences could be seen, however there is still much that is not fully encapsulated in cultural chaos theory.

10.4.1 INFORMATION SCARCITY V. INFORMATION SURPLUS

Where once you had to pick up the morning paper or turn on the television at six in the evening to get your information, now it is available to access online whenever and wherever you would like. The sheer amount of information on both of these websites on various technological platforms provides the user with more than they could have ever gotten from a local paper or half hour nightly news program (AP Report 2008). And these are just two journalistic websites out of thousands that exist online. The focus on the ‘new’ of both these websites also leads to an ever increasing amount of information, updated constantly that would never be the case in a confined print newspaper that is highly edited and constricted due to space and time.

10.4.2 SEALED (CLOSED) V. LEAKY

McNair refers to ‘power pools’ which change as the environmental conditions change. He states: ‘Communication is the medium through which power resources are disseminated, and leaky channels of communication therefore mean less secure power centres’ (2006:200). In the case of the Web generally, its leaky nature can be seen quite easily through websites like *huffingtonpost.com*, *politico.com*, and other blogs who were breaking stories throughout the campaign on both sides of the fence, politically speaking.

However, the reliance on official sources and the dominance of mainstream news websites in terms of traffic does not create complete leaky channels of

communication. This study shows that journalists do read the emails of viewers and that other news organisations are sources of information but there is still a reliance on official campaign news and the two dominant parties.

This leaky versus sealed view of communication can also be evaluated internally within each organisation. *Salon.com* did not have a centralized power structure but allowed their journalists and in particular their bloggers an extreme amount of autonomy which often created a leaky system rather than a centrally constructed editorial line. During the three Presidential debates and one Vice-Presidential debate, they created 'Live Blogs' with several of their key writers and bloggers debating back and forth what was being said by the speakers.

Latimes.com also had a very leaky system within their organisation as they had newspaper journalists traditionally constructing stories, next to bloggers giving more voice to their pieces of information. This was also seen through the *National Enquirer* story (described in detail in Chapter 8) about John Edwards' affair which was reported in a blog but which the newspaper editorial team decided not to cover.

However, the *latimes.com* centralised structure and focus on the newspaper masthead made the communication generally more closed and done through traditional channels such as telephone calls or meetings. There were many scheduled meetings in conference rooms in order to talk about and plan stories rather than direct autonomy given to journalists. The blog posts on the *latimes.com* website did provide a leaky channel that was not always possible for editors to control.

10.4.3 OPACITY V. TRANSPARENCY

One of the hardest things for politicians to keep, in the world of online journalism, is a secret. This is especially true when they are on the road day-after-day campaigning for votes and constantly exposed to traditionally understood reporters, bloggers who work for sites like *latimes.com* and *salon.com* and even user-generated bloggers who write for sites like *huffingtonpost.com*. These candidates are always on display and with websites using so many platforms to follow the story as well as the use of linking to create shared information, the journalism all of these websites put out is much more transparent.

This transparency created through online journalism has led some politicians, such as Obama and his campaign, to publish directly to the Web⁵⁷ and open their campaigns up so as not to appear opaque or secretive.

This does not mean, however, that all is open as there is much that is still hidden and secretive. As McNair makes clear, ‘Elites may seek to give appearance of openness by legislative or presentational means, and the apparatuses of spin and public relations are extensively employed to achieve these as well as other, less sinister objectives. But a public predisposition to transparency in the processes of power acquisition and management has become a given for serious political actors in a democracy’ (2006:201).

⁵⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/user/BarackObamadotcom>

10.4.4 EXCLUSIVITY V. ACCESSIBILITY

One of the biggest claims made by the dominance paradigm is that the media is controlled by an elite few and that access to news and information is for a few (Herman and Chomsky 1998). It is an exclusive club, per se, and the access that the general public and smaller news organisations are limited. This does not hold true online and specifically if we look at something like the party conventions and how both news organisations covered them and the access they were given and information they possessed.

If this exclusive access to information was true there would have been a marked difference between what a website like *latimes.com* (which is owned by one of the largest media corporations in the US) would have been able to possess and what a small net native website like *salon.com* had. However, this was not the case at all. In doing content analysis, they both pulled out different stories that gave users of each site a large quantity of information that showed no signs of elite media (or even the political parties) holding control of the narrative. The one defining feature of the narrative was that there was no single agenda or narrative but rather a lack of one voice or dominant story angle.

10.4.5 HOMOGENEITY V. HETEROGENEITY

One of the strongest features of the Web is its variety of sources and voices. Far from being a homogeneous network of journalists all saying the same thing, it is

noted for its variety of expressions from all over the globe. These sites also prove that heterogeneity exists within the sites themselves.

The complete autonomy of bloggers at *salon.com* who were trained journalists with a point of view and voice brought to the website diversity to the coverage that would not have existed otherwise. At *latimes.com*, the lack of vision from the top as well as the autonomy of bloggers and the sheer need for the new showed that within the website there was no homogeneous nature to the Presidential coverage whatsoever. On the contrary, as it was argued earlier, there was a distinct lack of cohesion that many users vented (via the website) a frustrating experience. However, although this may have been confusing for someone visiting the website, it showed that the nature of online news both within the news organisations themselves and on a larger Web-based scale.

10.4.6 HIERARCHY V. NETWORK

‘The network structure of the World Wide Web...produces an environment where information cascades become more unpredictable, more frequent and more difficult for elites to contain when they begin’ (McNair 2006: 202).

These two websites are producing so much content on so many different platforms and with such a large reliance on the new that a hierarchical top-down structure simply does not explain fully what is happening at these news organisations. Both the Web, which is network based (Castells 2000) and these organisations which rely an extreme amount on cohesive relationships within the

news hubs, with the sources, with the users and with their economic structures show that hierarchy does not work as a model when describing either journalism construction or dissemination. In simply looking at the layout of these newsrooms and news hubs one can see the networked nature of news work, and that is just the physical places these journalists are working in.

The World Wide Web, and even more particularly blogs, reward networking. As evidenced in Chapter 2, *glam.com*, has achieved much success on the basis of spreading itself throughout the web and using content from various places via linking. The link itself is a networking tool (Pavlik 2001) that makes transparent what once was hidden from those consuming the news.

10.4.7 PASSIVITY V. (INTER)ACTIVITY

The entirety of Chapter 8 could be summed up in these two words. What was once a mostly passive one-way communication, from one to many is now a multi-layered communication network that is even creating a new form of journalism—*convotelling*. One of the journalists at *salon.com* had recently published an article in one of the most popular US magazines, *Reader's Digest*. It took months and months for the article to be published. She then received no reaction and believed there had been one letter to the editor regarding the piece. According to the journalist: 'I mean one thing that's great about publishing online is that as soon as you publish you get this reaction and that is very

stimulating when they're actually talking about the ideas. It's like incredibly gratifying and satisfying' (June 12, 2008).

The two things that tempers this new found interactivity however, are the technological ability the news organisations have in allowing commenting and the extreme focus on getting 'hits'. Both the journalists at *latimes.com* and at *salon.com* were not in full symbiotic interaction with their users. The *latimes.com* does not generally allow comments on their articles thus limiting the instant feedback one can get on an article and allowing users to interact with one another. Additionally, the larger focus on hits by both websites rather than creating an ongoing dialogue with users created an environment that was less about interaction and more about getting people to read or watch what was produced.

10.4.8 DOMINANCE V. COMPETITION

...news organisations are merrily giving away their news. According to a Pew Research Center study, a tipping point occurred last year: more people in the U.S. got their news online for free than paid for it by buying newspapers and magazines. Who can blame them? Even an old print junkie like me has quit subscribing to the *New York Times*, because if it doesn't see fit to charge for its content, I'd feel like a fool paying for it. This is not a business model that makes sense (Isaacson 2009).

The competitive environment of online news is something that is constantly felt in both these news organisations I spent time in. Advertising is currently the main model for revenue online and with that come the importance of hits from users. Hits are rewarded through being the first with a story, investigative pieces

that are exclusive to your site, engaging the user in *convotelling* journalism and through links. It is non-stop and this competition breeds a chaotic environment in which dominant control is almost impossible to gain either by a politician or a news organisation.

When seeking to find (through in-depth interviews) particular stories that had done well for the both sites in the past, a few themes emerged but no ideological storyline seemed to prevail. In that, both websites found that although certain themes or topics were generally popular with their users, often their biggest stories in terms of hits were one-off random pieces that had been picked up by aggregators or bloggers.

The news agenda was hard for both of these websites to control and they did not look to a few dominant institutions for it. Instead, competition seemed to create a sense of 'let's try anything', whether it be live blogging, radio pieces or user interactive polls.

10.5 FURTHER RESEARCH CALLS

This study is a contrast of two sets of journalists who are seeking to create output for the Internet. By analysing them simultaneously, over a set period of time, a nice contrast emerges between a newspaper parentage website and a net native website. However, what this study does not provide is a contrast of a broadcast newsroom with its unique restraints and constrictions with a newspaper parentage or net native site. As this study shows, both of these news

organisations are highly influenced by print products so what would it look like if the influence was audio/visual offline components? How would that dictate narratives or newsmaking decisions?

The decision making process, which as these two case studies show, relies heavily on speed and voice provide some intriguing ethical dilemmas for journalists. In describing a journalist's ideology Mark Deuze (2005) notes that there are often conflicts between what journalists aspire to (accuracy versus speed being a predominant theme). This study would benefit from an in-depth analysis of the ethics of these seemingly contradictory aspirations and foundations of journalism. How does it affect journalism's authority? How does it affect the ability of journalists to tell stories?

Finally, one of the most interesting findings of the study was that despite official sources' ability to be omnipresent, journalists still rely on them, especially in political situations. It would be valuable to explore this journalistic mindset through in-depth interviews and analysis with journalists across online news organisations. The relationships between journalists and their sources is something that Gaye Tuchman (1978) in particular focused on. She claimed, 'Rules requiring unimpeachable sources and identifying those sources are embedded in socially structured understandings of the everyday world and institutions' (1978:85). Further exploration in this new online environment would most definitely benefit the field of research.

10.6 LARGER IMPLICATIONS

This chaotic nature of journalism that exists online is still at a starting point in some respects. As one journalist at *salon.com* explained when trying to understand if online journalism is different:

I don't know. Like I think it's still, I think that's still just an answer to be continued.... I am really curious to see what the NY Times does.... And as it goes online, I mean that's a traditional voice of media that's online too and is that different? Is that different from Salon? Are they our competition? I don't know. People are taking their news at their desk and on their Blackberrys. So I know it's a good place for us to be (August 12, 2008).

Indeed it is a good place to be for journalists as people continually go online for news. Despite this, the larger economic problems facing journalism revenue are putting a sour note on an ever-increasing appetite for the product.

The constant news about large media organisations folding (Isaacson 2009), the current global economic crisis and the lack of an online business news model (Westphal 2008) are causing many to be negative about the prospects of journalism's future (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). However, I would argue we are merely in the midst of a redefining moment in journalism. Much of what we traditionally understand about what journalism was, how it was constructed and disseminated are shifting as this research shows and many scholars argue. According to Dan Berkowitz, '...journalism's social role has often changed as new media forms have emerged...it is time for those who study

journalism to move beyond the age-old lens of conventional journalism perspectives and consider what journalism means, as defined by the journalists who produce it and the audiences that consume it' (2009:292).

All of the factors described in this and previous chapters are shaping what online journalism is. As the technology increases and changes and more people have access to the World Wide Web this reshaping will only continue. What is significant about this change is that it is not occurring in a vacuum. Virtually all of the big online news organisations (*latimes.com* included) are not only parentage in nature but also part of larger media companies. These companies use digital technology on many different platforms including newspapers, magazines, television, radio etc... These changes that have occurred on the Web to journalism are increasingly bleeding onto other types of journalism done across technological mediums.

The newspapers are increasingly reprinting blogs in their newspapers (as was the case with Top of the Ticket during the election cycle in the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper). Television news increasingly uses the Web and its websites to interact with the audience in a way they never could before⁵⁸. The speed of the news cycle is creeping into all of these mediums so that the immediate is even more immediate, if that is possible. One journalist at *Time* magazine says we are now in the '24-minute news cycle'. According to James Poniewozik:

⁵⁸ CNN regularly checks in with 'News on the Web' during its daily broadcasts and Jack Cafferty, a famous CNN contributor, also spends time on various newscasts talking about what is going on, on his blog.

With cable and now online outlets that can make anything news at any time, the media formerly known as mainstream are dealing with news that can go through several rounds of attack and counter-attack between the morning paper and evening news. The 24-hour news cycle that media critics used to bemoan seems as quaint and leisurely as a taffy pull. We're now living in a 24-minute news cycle (2008).

But one of the biggest features of online journalism that is seeping into the offline is its distinctive voice and brand that is no longer objective and set back from the story. According to the multimedia editor at *salon.com*, 'I mean I think that journalism in general is going toward this heavily kind of personality infused place' (August 12, 2008). Journalist Michael Miner noted this in a September 2008 article, entitled 'Fact and Opinion'. 'I simply wish to observe, without suggesting a correlation, that Internet values are seeping into print journalism, and Internet values reward instant punditry, the more flamboyant the better. Simple, solid reporting is OK, but flamboyance is what attracts page hits, and page hits attract advertisers—enough of them, in a theoretical tomorrow to keep journalism afloat.'

If the definition of what journalism is the one put forth by McNair (2006) then what is occurring online is merely an evolving form of journalism. What these news organisations are doing is merely a new hybrid-form of journalism that incorporates all of the elements above. It does provide a watchdog role in some form but also entertains and primarily seeks to engage the user in *convotelling*. In this new online journalism the rules are written by those consuming it, the constant need for speed and the voices all competing for someone to listen. Gone are the days of the gatekeeper, the news being pre-defined by format, and the

journalist as the ultimate objective truth-teller. These two news organisations show that while there is no long-term agenda for how this will play out, there are different ways to go about producing journalistic output. To be sure, these methods are chaotic and often times executed on a case by case basis but what is occurring is fundamentally reshaping our idea of journalism. Online journalism is making up its own rules and the impact of this is being reverberated throughout the larger industry on all platforms.

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