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## ❖ 'Not Wrong for Long': the Role and Penetration of News Wire Agencies in the 24/7 News Landscape

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### Abstract

This paper examines the role of Australia's single news agency, Australian Associated Press (AAP), in the Australian news media landscape. Specifically, we examine the prevalence of AAP copy in the 'Breaking News' sections of two major news websites in an effort to create a preliminary understanding of the impact of AAP on Australian news content. The results suggest an overwhelming reliance on copy from not just AAP, but international news agencies, in major news websites. Increasingly, the need for large volumes of news copy, coupled with the need for that copy to be published online as soon as possible, would appear to be having a significant impact on the type and depth of news covered. The paper and its associated data-gathering techniques form part of a much broader examination of the role of AAP in Australian journalism, and particularly the evolving role of AAP and other wire services as a source or origin for news stories in an increasingly 24/7 news environment where the pressure to be first may be overriding the pressure to be right (Gawenda & Muller, 2009).

### Introduction

It was called an "elaborate hoax" by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Media Watch program: a fake press release which announced that former US president George Bush Snr. would attend an international conference at the Sydney Opera House on September 30, 2005. The bogus press release was followed up by wire service Australian Associated Press (AAP) who contacted the person listed at the bottom of the release and – supported by a web site about the conference – the story, complete with quotes from the bogus conference organiser Greg Stevenson, was distributed to the media.

Media Watch report that the release ran like this:

SYDNEY, Aug 25 AAP – Former United States president George Bush Snr. will join top international chief executives and politicians at a global business conference in Sydney. – AAP

Media Watch noted: "The AAP story was fed onto the websites of [major Australian news organisations] The Age, The Australian, Channel 9, Channel 7, the Courier Mail, the Daily Telegraph, The Sydney Morning Herald etc etc" (2005). Media Watch says it alerted AAP the next day to tell them it was a hoax but despite a retraction/correction by AAP, all of Australia's quality broadsheets – *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Weekend Australian* and *The Age* – still

ran with the story on 27/28 August. An interesting twist was *The Australian's* focus on the predicted protests by the group '30A' at the conference when '30A' had in fact been the group to distribute the bogus press release in the first place. Media Watch reported:

The people from 30A told us that the hoax was a piece of 'culture jamming' designed to highlight their concerns about the conference. It certainly exposes how shallow the media coverage is: somebody puts up a fake website and everybody believes it must be true.

What was never really in focus in Media Watch's analysis, and what appears to be absent from any critical analysis of media reportage of inaccuracies such as this, is whether the story was accepted simply because of its source: AAP. News from AAP brings with it an authority so absolute that the news media do not question its content or factual accuracy. The legitimacy offered by AAP's 'filtering' process is confirmed by one commercial television reporter/producer, who told Pearson & Brand's research team in 2001 that wire services were the most influential and trustworthy news medium, because:

They don't make mistakes and that's usually the first priority ... that's by far the most influential because if we've got a breaking story we'll pull up whatever is on wires, rip it off the printer and give it to the presenter, and they'll go straight to air and they won't even attribute it. (2001: 102)

Indeed, there are numerous other examples in recent years of news covered by AAP that is followed up, unquestioned, by major news sources (Media Watch, October 13, 2008; Australian Press Council, 2008: 32; APC Adjudications No 1428; No 1383). While questions of balance, spin, rigor, news gathering practices and news diversity are regularly aimed at other third parties – quite justifiably public relations professionals and political media advisors – news material from wire agencies appears largely immune from serious scrutiny. This issue is particularly pertinent in the contemporary news environment, which fills a great deal of its increasing news hole with wire copy (Australian Press Council, 2008: 7).

This paper aims to investigate the role of AAP in the Australian news landscape, focusing particularly on its role as a source of news for leading news outlets. At a time when diversity of news sources is under much scrutiny due to the impact of the Internet on news delivery, we argue that there is a need to go back one step prior to publication to consider the origin of news stories more closely.

### **The nature of news agencies**

News agencies exist to sell their journalism – news stories – to the media. Indeed it has been suggested that agencies view "news as property" (Correy, 2009). The two traditional types of news agencies are corporations that sell news, such as the New York-based Thomson Reuters, or cooperatives that share news with each other, like Associated Press (AP) or AAP.

Traditionally, news agencies were key to news gathering in conflict zones and international locations (Baird, 2009) where it was economically sound to draw news from a central, pooled source. As Paterson states, "in the realms they know best, like conflict zones and developing regions of the world, the news agencies frequently break stories other major media miss" (Paterson 2006, p. 5). Certainly, news agencies or wire services such as AAP and Associated Press, can lay claim to journalistic resources that most news organisations could not sustain (APC Adjudication 1383) and this is an increasing trend with regular cutbacks to editorial staff at more traditional media outlets (Collingwood 1999; Raward & Johnston 2009; Barker 2009; and see newspaper reports on the issue, Zimmerman 2009; Folkenflik 2005, among others).

The world's oldest, and one of the largest news agencies, Associated Press, was formed in 1846 by representatives of six New York newspapers (Associated Press, 2007). It currently services

1,700 newspapers and 5,000 radio and television outlets in the United States alone, reaching "half the world's population" on any given day (Associated Press, 2010). Likewise, its Australian counterpart AAP, was formed as a collective. However unlike AP and Reuters, there is scant literature on AAP. It is self-described in the following terms:

Australian Associated Press was founded in 1935 as a cooperative news gathering organisation for the mutual benefit of its 14 newspaper members ... In its first financial year AAP transmitted 1.1 million words as it covered major events like the Berlin Olympics, the Spanish Civil War and the Davis Cup tennis final between Britain and Australia ... Today, AAP ... sends 4500 stories, pictures, video and data files to its customers every day. (AAP, 2009)

AAP is owned by four Australian news organisations: News Ltd and Fairfax both own 45 percent, West Australian Newspapers and Rural Press Limited own 8 percent, and Rural Press, 2 percent (AAP 2009). It sources some material from other key news agencies in what it calls a 'cherry picking' approach.

AAP provides world news and images to our customers through commercial partnerships with major international agencies like Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, Agencia EFE, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, The Press Association, Kyodo, Knight-Ridder and New Zealand Press Association. This pool of news information is not simply passed straight onto AAP subscribers. The services are filtered, selecting the best news each agency has to offer. And many story angles are sharpened for the Australian market. (AAP, 2009)

Pearson and Brand suggest that the ownership of AAP might imply the major media groups in Australia – primarily News Ltd and Fairfax who have a majority ownership of the agency – have a "stranglehold on the news agenda" (2001: 9). They further clarify (2001: 9):

However, others may argue the wire service is more independent because it has these two owners, neither of which exercises editorial control. This deserves further inquiry.

The limited literature on news agencies includes few major studies about the impact of news agencies on the diversity of news content. This may be why the work of Chris Paterson currently appears to be the primary authority on the news agency content, based most recently on his UK study between 2001 and 2006 (Paterson, 2006; see also Paterson 1998; 1999; 2001). Paterson found that online news worldwide was based on the "de facto duopoly" of Associated Press and Reuters. "The political economy of online news is not one of diversity but one of concentration, and the democratic potential of the medium remains mostly that – potential" (Paterson, 2006:19). He argues that the notion of diversity "is a pretence that cannot last" and that the internet presents "the dangerous illusion of multiple perspectives which actually emanate from very few sources" (Paterson, 2006: 20). Frijters and Velamuri similarly note that due to economic cutbacks most major newspapers now rely on "recycled news" from wire services, or a decreasing number of mobile journalists (2009: 8).

Supporting this anecdotally, the Australian Press Council has noted a recent increase in the use of news agency material in online print publications in Australia. AAP Editor-in-Chief Tony Gillies reported in the 2008 APC State of the News Media report that newspapers, already heavy users of AAP content, "may use three or four times that amount of content on their websites" (APC 2008: 34). The APC report explains the increase:

Content sources such as press agencies like AAP have long provided many stories for Australia's newspapers. The needs of a twenty-four hour newsroom have led to a greater reliance on such sources. Increasingly in a globalised world, newspapers develop relationships with overseas publications with which they share articles on a reciprocal basis. In contrast to the maintenance of overseas bureaux, such stories can lack the context that an Australian

journalist working in a foreign country can provide. The current claim is that the greater reliance on outside sources has led to a diminution in quality. (APC 2008)

Alan Knight's study in 2007 on the use of sources by Australian foreign correspondents, while incorporating insights into the use of news services on the internet, also predicted the demise of news services. The latter observation is inconsistent with both Paterson's findings and suggestions from the Australian Press Council report which indeed suggest an increasing role for news agencies in the 24/7 newsroom environment. Knight's analysis seems to emanate from his categorising of news agencies as separate from the internet. In his study however, Tony Vermeer, the then-Editor in Chief of AAP, refuted any such distinction.

People have often seen the web as an alternative news source, but in fact it is an alternative market for agency copy. The most trusted news sites on the web are usually those associated with established media. Established media have always used agencies to produce their product. Agency copy is littered throughout the web. When people call up breaking news, more often than not [it] is agency news they are reading. The reason for that is that agencies are specialists in accurate, real time reporting ... Those sorts of skills and abilities are e (sic) just as highly prized in the world of the Internet. That fact that the Internet is there, showcasing these skills, is more an opportunity than a threat. (Vermeer in Knight 2007, p. 20)

This idea is reflected in Paterson's findings, which identified upward trends in internet uptake of news agency material. His study, which looked at the amount of measurable verbatim news agency coverage by a range of major online news services, including CNN, BBC, (US) ABC, Sky and Guardian, found in every case usage had grown substantially, on average from 68 per cent in 2001 to 85 per cent in 2006. He noted that:

The major US sites, CNN, MCNBC, and ABC, are doing substantially less original international journalism than they were five years ago [from 2001 to 2006]. The New York Times seems to be doing more. BBC Online continues to exhibit little verbatim use of news agencies, and stories generally appear to draw from a wider range of sources than the American services...Sky appears to draw just from news agencies, but their text has been extensively reworded in Sky's concise house style. (Paterson, 2006, p. 18)

There are several points raised here by Paterson which warrant close attention. These include the use of verbatim news and the use of remodeled news generated by news agencies and used in other media. One pilot Australian study of FM radio news, which found that 61 per cent of analysed news bulletins came from AAP, also found that journalists rewrote copy from this service in accordance with house style:

... although AAP was the staple of the newsroom, its stories were never used in their original form. During the observation period, every story was rewritten in the "relaxed" and more informal FM style and stories were considerably shortened. (Raward & Johnston, 2009: 70)

The study found that despite the emergence of new information sources, notably the internet, AAP was still regarded as the most reliable and often the fastest supplier of breaking and developing news (Raward & Johnston, 2009). However while it is relatively straight forward ascertaining what number of stories in a news bulletin came directly from AAP, it is far harder to locate stories which might have come indirectly through other sources such as the internet and Sky news; or indeed to determine when stories might be changed slightly by journalists, enabling them to put their own byline on what is primarily wire copy (Online journalist [interviewee did not wish to be identified], 2009). Similarly, when news sources are merged or combined, the presence of news agency stories is far more difficult to identify and this model is clearly a trend in online news services. The Australian national broadcaster ABC, for instance, lists the following on its on-line news stories: "This service may include material from Agence

France-Presse (AFP), APTN, Reuters, AAP, CNN and the BBC World Service" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009). Likewise, the BBC is reported to mix news agency copy with its own, especially in the online environment (Paterson, 2006, p. 14). Since Paterson's study was originally intended to track verbatim copy, reworked and composite news stories not surprisingly raised complications and provided some limitations to his study. He further identified issues associated with this noting that the second most-common type of revision to agency copy involved newspapers adding their own ideology and "emotionally manipulative" words that agency journalists would exclude (Kutz & Herring, 2005: 6). Taylor noted that the neutral style had resulted, for example, in Reuters not using the word 'terrorist' on the grounds that "one man's terrorist is [another] man's freedom fighter" (in Knight 2007). The choice of wording between terrorist and freedom fighter is a clear ideological choice.

At the very least, Paterson argued that news agency copy will be changed to disguise its source.

Predictions are dangerous, but it is not unreasonable to suppose in the near term that the online news industry will try still harder to disguise its dependence on limited sources through cosmetic changes, the addition of minor editorial adjustments to agency stories (by machine and human), and the addition of further bells and whistles at news sites. They seek to distract readers from the essential problem. (2006, p. 21)

While the recycling of news has received much attention over the past decade (Turner 1996, Cunningham and Romano 2000, Tickle and Keshvani 2000, Pearson & Brand 2001) the more specific focus on international news agency news is quite recent. Nick Davies' Flat Earth News (2008) considers the main suppliers of information to the news media in the United Kingdom and the United States. Davies said news was largely based on "two primary conveyor belts: the Press Association and public relations" (2008: 74).

Davies described the passive processing of news material as "churnalism" (2008: 59) which is a term also used by the Australian Press Council in the State of the Print News Media report (Mann, in APC 2008; also Barker, 2009). Davies argued that a key issue associated with news agency copy was that mistakes made at this level may be perpetuated as a story continues to be re-reported in unchecked form (Davies, 2008). Once again, the Australian Press Council report expressed concerns over a similar issue, noting that the accelerated trend towards the increased reliance on AAP copy, and the as-yet-unanswered question of how much news is AAP generated and how much is original, "is of particular relevance to the Council when it has to deal with allegations of inaccuracy in agency-sourced material" (2008, p. 32). Jack Herman, Secretary of the Australian Press Council, more recently confirmed that the issue of inaccuracy stemming from original AAP reports was an issue the Council needed to consider; but that newspapers themselves were ultimately responsible for everything they published regardless of its origin (Herman, 2009).

Paterson is damning of the cannibalising of news services by other media channels. He argued that the reuse of news from news agencies by the primary news aggregators and portals is sharply at odds with the democratising potential of new media. His study showed that "despite the deluge of privileged tellers of most of the stories circulating the world, (t)hose providers are demonstrably wedded to journalism as tied to established power and promotional culture as it can be" (Paterson 2006, p. 20). While conceding that it was the role of news agencies to provide words for news services which cannot first-hand cover an event or issue "this dependence was surprising in view of the pretensions of these news outlets to be international news services in their own right" (2006: 15).

Importantly, Paterson's findings suggest there are broader issues at stake which need to be understood – not just in terms of the news media's apparent reliance on agency copy, which

our findings discuss further – but more broadly on the news sourcing decisions being made by major news organisations. Political economy theories provide a strong grounding for understanding the necessarily commercially-driven, rather than democracy-driven, decisions that news institutions make every day.

Trends over the past 50 years have seen news organisations shed journalists; conduct less original investigative journalism; and look to syndicated news, public relations firms and news agencies such as AAP for an increasing amount of news content (see, for example, McChesney, 2003; Davies, 2008; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2003-2008; Edwards & Newbury, 2007; Mackinnon, 2006; Reeds & Colbourne, 2000: 25; Schiller, 1989: 21). Political economy suggests that this increasing reliance on news agency copy – among many other forms of 'syndicated' news – is the rational decision for commercial news organisations to make regardless of the impact that may have on news diversity. Certainly, online news journalist and advocate for the march towards smaller newsrooms Roy Greenslade recognizes online newsrooms require far smaller staffs and that news managers are justified in shedding journalists to improve bottom-line performance (Greenslade, Nov 27 2009). It has serious implications, however, for news diversity and public engagement (McChesney, 2003; McChesney, 2008; Lee, 2009). Political economy focuses primarily on the ways in which mainstream news practices fail democracy – an over-reliance on official 'experts' and sources; lack of context in most news reporting; and the prominence of the commercial motivations of media organisations which mould the news that consumers receive (see also Hamilton, 2004; Carey, 1989; and King, 1997). McChesney concludes:

A political economic analysis stresses that the reasons for lousy journalism stem not from morally bankrupt or untalented journalists, but from a structure that makes such journalism the rational result of its operations. (2003: 324)

Political economy causes us to ask in this study – what level of AAP content is being taken up by news organisations increasingly operating in a 'content-hungry' 24-hour newsroom? And what is the impact of this on news diversity?

### **The Australian context**

While there has been no focused study of AAP to date, it has nevertheless warranted some attention by Australian media commentators. Some point to the importance of AAP in the shrinking media landscape. Take for example the words of veteran political journalist Laurie Oakes as he laments the loss of news diversity in conjunction with the growing reliance on AAP and the ABC:

When I first came to Canberra, all the major newspaper chains, and there were more then, all had their own team of gallery reporters who reported everything that happened in parliament. Parliamentary debates were reported in detail; the newspapers ran large slabs of copy out of the parliament ... In the end we end up with just the ABC and AAP sitting up there in the gallery. (Oakes in Media Report, September 2006)

Pearson and Brand's 2001 study, completed for the then-Australian Broadcasting Authority, contains at least some Australian data that we can draw upon to frame this work. Their survey of 100 news producers/journalists – while small – found most journalists believed news agencies or wire services such as AAP were, along with metropolitan newspapers and public radio, significantly more influential on the news products of other media. That is, AAP, leading quality newspapers and public radio such as ABC and SBS had a stronger agenda-setting role than other outlets such as free-to-air television, commercial radio, magazines, the Internet and Pay TV (Pearson & Brand, 2001: 8). Importantly, AAP was also cited as the most frequently used source by journalists and news producers – with 32 percent citing it as "the most used

source of news and current affairs across all media and sources"; and out of all the wire services, AAP was the most prevalently used (2001: 47 and 337). Pearson and Brand found 78 percent of journalists and news producers used AAP as a news source most days – and that it was a credible source, comparable to metropolitan newspapers and ABC Radio's AM program as an influence on daily news agendas (2001: 47).

Journalists felt AAP had taken on a new role in the new media environment and had become a "media player in its own right, providing both a news service to traditional media and also a direct feed to audiences as the news provider for most portals and online news services" (2001: 9) and confirm Paterson's findings about the penetration of wire copy into internet news services. An online editor explained the widespread use of AAP copy on online news sites was a budgetary issue – "No-one can afford to have to pay for such a huge source so we're just attaching ourselves to them" (2001: 103).

Interestingly, others have commented that AAP is crucial to minority groups because it can reach vast audiences that would otherwise be inaccessible. Kirstie Parker editor of the Koori Mail noted the following, also on the ABC's The Media Report:

We also do rely on ... the AAP media wire, which is a non-Indigenous media wire that reports on things around the country, but we try to ensure that we don't take things that are only reported on from that sense. We try to make sure that Indigenous people's voices are actually heard in that AAP coverage as well, and then we will often supplement it with our own reporting on additional issues. (Parker, January 2008)

So while the Koori Mail does use some AAP material, it does not appear to use the material verbatim, but remodels it to at least a moderate extent. As an Indigenous publication, it is essential they use AAP stories as a starting or supplementary point for their own take on the news – a practise which we might have expected is occurring in much larger and better-resourced news organisations but which, the literature suggests, is not.

One industry which continues to receive its share of attention as a primary source of news, has been the public relations industry. Pearson and Patching's recent literature review of media relations provides a lengthy account of the impact of public/media relations on setting the news agenda (Pearson & Patching 2008). The Australian Press Council has similarly expressed major concerns about the impact of public relations on news content and journalistic practices (APC 2008). Brisbane public relations firm Brumfield Bird and Sandford's 2008 'Media Survey' report, designed to assess the level of influence of the public relations industry on the news agenda reports:

The survey revealed the bond between PR practitioners and journalists was continuing to tighten, with PR professionals playing a more influential role in identifying stories, and ultimately in shaping tomorrow's agenda ... In addition, only one in five reporters (20%) surveyed in 2006 admitted they relied on press releases to generate the majority of their stories. Today 55% of journalists use press releases to create news. (Edwards & Newbery, 2007: 3)

However, the impact of PR on the news media via news agencies is not a topic that has ever been canvassed in any depth. Put simply, if a press release is distributed as news agency copy it becomes 'news'. For example, Media Watch October 13, 2008 highlighted the case of a news story distributed by AAP which was essentially a rewrite of a press release about a survey on sexual activity conducted by a Gold Coast brothel – and which was reported unchanged by a number of mainstream news organisations (Media Watch, ABC Television, October 13, 2008).

It seems, therefore, that there is a case to be made for a concerted study of AAP and its role in

the Australian news media landscape to be undertaken. Our attempts to begin this work consisted of an original examination of the 'Breaking News' section of two major news websites; and interviews with key sources to give a preliminary understanding of the extent of AAP's influence on news media agendas and content.

### **Method**

The methodology used basic content analysis methods to assess the origin of 'Breaking News' stories in two online newspapers, and coupled this data with two qualitative interviews with selected key figures – a former online news journalist working from 2008-2009; and Jack Herman, the Secretary of Australia's peak monitoring body for newspapers, the Australian Press Council. These two qualitative interviews worked simply to provide further context and explanation of the trends identified in the story analysis and to trial semi-structured qualitative interviews as a methodology that might complement our strictly quantitative content analysis.

The story analysis sampled the Breaking News sections of two online daily newspapers, Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph* and Melbourne's *The Age*. The Breaking News section was chosen because it was assumed this was where stories began their life in the online newsroom; and possibly where many stories appearing in the hard copy of the newspaper also began. The newspapers chosen represented two major Australian capital cities, Sydney and Melbourne respectively, and the two major newspaper publishers, News Ltd and Fairfax respectively.

The study period took place from October 9-22 2009, with one week of each paper analysed. A larger number of stories from the *Daily Telegraph* were counted because the newspaper archives all its breaking news stories for two days. Hence, every story in the week from October 9-15 in the *Daily Telegraph's* online Breaking News section was able to be counted. In contrast, *The Age* only archives stories from their Breaking News section for three-four hours per day, which limited our ability to gather data for an entire 24-hour period. Stories 'drop out' as new stories are posted. For that reason, only three hours a day was sampled during the afternoon time between 1-6pm for *The Age*, although, as the results indicate, this disparity in time frames did not seem to have any impact on the result outcomes particularly as the findings focus on the percentage of stories in the Breaking News section that originated with AAP or another wire service. The timing was aimed at a busy time of the day in most newsrooms, the afternoon. It also coincided roughly with the two daytime AAP daily news bulletins at 11.30am and 4.30pm (a third bulletin is at 4.30am) (AAP, 2009).

The simple content analysis required an identification of the author of the story which indicated its origin – either a staff journalist; a wire agency; another newspaper from the same media organisation (eg, *The Daily Telegraph* running a story from The Courier-Mail); or a combination of staff journalist and wire agency copy. The sample of stories was simply counted and placed into the following categories:

- AAP
- Agence France Presse (AFP)
- Reuters
- Associated Press (AP)
- New Zealand Press Agency (NZPA)
- Other News Ltd papers or News.com
- Other Fairfax newspapers
- Staff journalists
- Combined staff journalist and wire copy

Interestingly, AAP identifies a similar use of their copy on their website which suggests:

Our customers use AAP text in the following ways:

- As is: Stories used word for word. Sometimes it carries AAP attribution or our journalists'

- bylines; often it doesn't;
- As a tip-off ... or for story leads only;
- For the quotes we've procured;
- As the trunk of a story which is then localised by the customer with their own sourced quotes and comments (AAP, 2009)

The categories, above, were not pre-determined, but emerged as stories were counted. Merrigan and Huston (2009) claim content analysis aims to describe, explain and predict, however this sample served to do only the latter: by analysing 731 Breaking News stories over a week, without generalising across all story categories, we hoped to be able to predict the primary sources of stories in the Breaking News category of the two online papers. The study may also be able to explain, to some extent, the reason for the homogeneity in much of the news appearing on the news agenda, particularly on online news websites. At the very least, we anticipated the findings would provide sufficient information for a more comprehensive study.

## Findings

A total of 527 stories were analysed for *The Daily Telegraph*, representing every story that appeared in the Breaking News section of the *The Daily Telegraph* during the sample week. We counted 214 stories from *The Age* online, and reiterate that the number of stories counted in *The Age* online was considerably less than those appearing in *The Daily Telegraph* due to the disparity in the way their Breaking News section is archived. Nonetheless, the figures provide some interesting data for further investigation.

The first realisation to come out of the figures is that the Breaking News section is essentially the wire feed to the news website. This is consistent with Vermeer's observation of the lack of any distinction between the two (in Knight, 2007). All stories appearing in *The Age* online throughout the period were wire copy; and about 80-90 percent of stories (possibly more – see below) appearing in *The Daily Telegraph's* Breaking News were wire service stories. This section – the name of which would imply it contains news being 'broken' by a combination of staff writers, wire services and others – should more accurately be re-named 'News Feeds from the Wires', or perhaps 'Breaking News from the Wires' so readers are aware that most, and often all, of the copy contained within is news agency material.

Notably, the largest proportion of news for both newspapers came from AAP – in *The Daily Telegraph* 57 percent of total copy appearing was directly, and unchanged, from AAP while an even larger percentage, 65 percent, of copy in *The Age* online was directly from AAP. If we combine the figures from AAP and Agence France Presse in *The Age* online, then across that one week in October, 96 percent of the stories appearing in *The Age's* Breaking News were from just two wire agencies with no staff input. It would appear that *The Daily Telegraph* was more likely to run stories which combined provided wire copy with some input from staff writers, however it is our assessment that this is more a case of the way the different websites credit wire copy rather than a genuine attempt by *The Daily Telegraph* to follow-up wire stories and remodel them. The category 'combined wire copy/staff writers' comprises just over 21 percent of all *Daily Telegraph* stories, while none from *The Age* fell into this category. These figures need some qualification. A number of stories on *The Daily Telegraph* website ran with a byline – either Colin Brinsden, or Katherine Field, or Ed Logue. These were initially counted as 'staff writers + AAP' as the stories also ran with an AAP tag on them which differentiated them from stories which ran solely with a straight 'from AAP' byline. But on closer investigation, most if not all of the named writers appear to be AAP journalists. Some stories on other News Ltd newspaper websites were sourced as coming from the *Herald Sun* or the *Adelaide Advertiser*, when in fact the byline on the story was an AAP journalist's name that we had become familiar with. Colin Brinsden, as an example, works out of AAP's Canberra bureau. In our sample,

Brinsden's work was bylined to him and AAP.

In an online newspaper like *Adelaide Now* however, the online version of the *Adelaide Advertiser*, much of Brinsden's copy was credited to the *Herald Sun*, or the *Adelaide Advertiser*, with no mention of AAP anywhere. While *Adelaide Now* was not a part of this study, we searched News Ltd papers generally in order to better understand the way online news sites were generally crediting their AAP copy. So, in the example of Brinsden's copy then, once his story went through the original newspaper's filter and was published under his byline in the hard copy of the newspaper, it could then appear on a news site as 'from the *Herald Sun*', or 'from the *Adelaide Advertiser*', not AAP. It is our sense, then, that a large proportion of the copy that we have labelled here 'Combined wire/staff' is in fact primarily wire copy – very occasionally altered by a genuine staff writer with a legitimate combined byline with AAP, but often reproduced verbatim with simply the byline of the AAP journalist which seems to give the impression that it is produced by a staff writer and simply complemented with AAP copy. It is also the case that some of the stories we have attributed to 'other' News Ltd publications also originated as wire copy, but in going through the filter of the other news website are now appearing as copy from the *Herald Sun*, or the *Adelaide Advertiser*. While *The Daily Telegraph* was certainly more likely than *The Age* to be using genuine copy from other newspapers and staff writers in their stable, some of those stories originated as wire copy but were no longer identified as such because they had been through the news.com.au filters. This requires more detailed investigation and data gathering.

Results from *The Daily Telegraph* indicate Sunday showed the least reliance on AAP and the highest percentage of stories from other News Ltd sources at 12.1 percent. It also showed a far higher reliance on AFP copy at nearly 50 percent, compared to only 30 percent of AAP copy. This was the only day that any other source was higher than AAP. With the exception of the Sunday, AAP represented between 50-75 percent of total news, averaging at 63 percent for the week. In contrast, in every day for *The Age* the highest percentage of stories came from AAP. AFP was notably higher on Saturday at 43 percent, compared to AAP at 50 percent. AFP on all other days was consistently high, usually comprising around one-third of total stories. While acknowledging the limitations of the small sample from both papers, there does seem to be evidence that online newspapers rely heavily on wire services to fill their news hole. Wider samples, which incorporate other sections of the paper, will undoubtedly show a greater use of staff reporters than the Breaking News section. However, Breaking News is where many stories begin for follow-up, so this does appear to be a logical place to begin an analysis of news sources. These stories in many cases set the daily news agenda within these online publications.

Certainly, there appears to be enough evidence to warrant a wider investigation of the use of wire services across leading daily news services such as these newspapers, in both online and hard copy.

### **Discussion**

There are a few points to make arising from these figures. Firstly, it is quite clear that online news websites rely overwhelmingly on wire services for ongoing, 'breaking' copy. This is to be expected – it is not possible for a modern newsroom to generate the volume of news now required by the 24/7 news environment. However, we might have expected more copy from other News Ltd or Fairfax newspapers to be used; and for the Breaking News section to contain more wire service stories that had been remodeled or followed up by staff journalists. This is not usually the case, however, with the greatest majority of stories being wire copy simply republished verbatim as 'Breaking News'. What is not clear is the impact that this increasing reliance on wire services as a source of news is having on news agendas generally. For

example, does the fact that the overwhelming proportion of news identified as 'Breaking News' by leading newspapers mean those are the stories that are automatically followed up by the newspaper's paid journalists for the following day? If so – and this would appear to be the case – what is the impact of this on news diversity?

A former online journalist from *The Age* online indicated his job was essentially what Nick Davies has termed 'churnalism' – and as a working journalist he was well familiar with the term.

An AAP story comes in, you might follow it up with an extra interview, [there's] a lot of that. Or you might just add another little bit of fact that you can put your name on ... there wasn't really a general rule, as long as I had contributed something, I got the byline. If I genuinely followed up something, and called someone and contributed something new to that story then I got the byline...but the Breaking News section is primarily wire copy because it's coming through all the time, you just turn it around and put it up. You know the term 'churnalism'? Well that's what 'churnalism' is, getting the AAP story and just turning it around. (Online journalist, 2009)

Jack Herman, Secretary of the Australian Press Council which commissions the annual State of the News Print Media study in Australia, said a reliance on AAP copy in such a 24-hour news environment was to be expected (Herman, 2009). This not only has implications for news diversity, but also for issues of inaccuracy where the same error – originating with AAP as our earlier examples showed – may be repeated time and again as more publications pick up the wire copy. However, if an online publication gets it wrong overnight, it is usually cleared up the following day (Herman, 2009). The former online journalist for *The Age* clarified:

The basics of AAP is their brand, their credibility is in their brand and so you don't necessarily question their copy. They have the resources to be out there getting the story, *The Age* doesn't have those resources so, you don't question them on it. But if they come up wrong ... I mean the new catch cry in journalism is, 'you're not wrong for long'. So, if you're wrong, you change it.

Indeed, on the issue of resourcing the online journalist indicated that when he was retrenched, along with a number of other editorial staff from *The Age* in early 2009, there were representatives from AAP standing outside *The Age* office, offering the redundant staff jobs as they left. There seems to be recognition in the industry that, with the increasing pressures to produce news 24/7 coupled with the increasing bottom line pressures to maintain and improve profits, news organisations themselves no longer have the resources to produce original copy. AAP, and other wire services, are increasingly seen as an economical way to provide 'independent' and credible news copy without spending large amounts of money on employing journalists.

Furthermore, there is a perception among newspaper journalists that the online version of their publication is the 'second-rate' journalism, primarily wire copy that is churned out and for that reason they often will not provide original copy for it. When online journalists ask their hard-copy newspaper colleagues for five-six parts of a story they are already covering:

... some of the journos just tell you to get f\_\_ed straight out. They won't provide original copy for online. Some of them will and we tried to foster good relationships with the journalists working on the paper, but a lot still saw it as second-rate and they wouldn't write anything [original] for us. (Online journalist, 2009)

What this means for journalism in Australia – and Paterson's study would indicate the trend is international – is significant. The perception of an increasing news hole created by the 24-hour newsroom is just that – more of a perception than a reality. The news is coming, increasingly,

from wire services who may be sourcing their news from press releases, government media units, lobby groups, and so on, but who produce the same copy which is simply repeated across a range of news outlets. These outlets then, variously, 'turn around' the copy verbatim with an 'AAP', or other wire service credit; alter the story slightly and give joint credit to their own staff writer and the wire service; or alter it to varying extents and just byline their own journalist regardless of the amount of wire service copy contained in the story. In addition, some news websites appear to be publishing news stories with a byline which, on first glance, would appear to be a journalist writing for their newspaper or another paper in their stable but who is, in fact, an AAP journalist. Only reading a wide variety of news websites, however, would reveal the fact that the same journalist's byline (an AAP journalist) is appearing over and over again.

This prevalence of agency copy appears to be in stark contrast to findings of a study of online and newspaper coverage of a Denver election in 1997, which found that the online versions of two US newspapers, the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*, contained far more staff-written stories in their online newspapers than agency copy (Singer, 1997). Indeed, the hard copy of the newspaper ran more agency copy than the online version – these current findings indicate that in the 10-12 years that have passed since Singer's study online news websites have become considerably more reliant on agency copy to fill a much larger online news hole than has previously existed online.

### **Conclusions**

The Australian Press Council report poses what it calls the "unanswered" questions of how much news agency material is being used by the Australian print media. It further points to the fact that, in terms of allegations of diminution of quality, "no particular data trend could be established. In this connection there are a number of trends but no real conclusion as to where they will lead in the long-term" (2008: 7). The preliminary data presented here confirms, in the Australian context, Paterson's international findings about the high penetration of wire copy into internet news websites, and also confirms both Pearson and Brand's Australian findings and the 'hunches' of the Australian Press Council's State of the Print Media report, that news organisations are increasingly using wire service copy, particularly that from AAP, for their news content. While in the past AAP copy may have been used in addition to original news gathered by the journalist, or as a story lead, its copy is now being used immediately, directly and very often, verbatim. Veteran Australian journalist and finance editor Geoffrey Barker recently reflected on the state of the Australian newsroom when he left his near-50-year career in national and international reporting:

... journalists are regarded, as one former Fairfax chief executive famously put it, as 'content providers for advertising platforms'. They are pressed to write more and to write it more quickly, to supply not only the newspaper but also its website. Journalists are valued according to the number of times their name appears over articles, meaning that the most automaton-like information processors – purveyors of what Nick Davies calls 'churnalism' – are the most valued staff. Journalists who want to take time to observe and reflect, to put events in context and put some effort into their writing, are regarded less favourably. (2009, n.p.)

Indeed, much of what Barker suggests is borne-out by this study, albeit preliminary and just a 'taste' of the more in-depth data that must be gathered and analysed. For this reason, more than ever then AAP warrants a study in its own right which can sit alongside existing international studies of news agencies to determine the extent of its reach, the use of its material, and how it is perceived by other news media.

Importantly, the use of verbatim news from AAP as well as the use of remodelled news warrants closer investigation which can be revealed through content analysis, and interviews

with industry journalists. These findings – while based on the Breaking News section only – suggest that many stories in Australian newspapers, and the news media generally, are primarily originating from a source that is so entrenched within Australian media that it is rarely, if ever, questioned. This is not to say that AAP is not a credible source. Indeed, Mr Herman noted that given the large amount of news AAP “pumps out” it is usually reliable (2009). The result, however, is that AAP’s ‘truth’ often becomes the vast majority of the Australian media’s ‘truth’, even when, in the above case and others, it might contain inaccuracies and even when it might lead to increasing homogeneity in the news environment. The reach and impact of AAP content on the Australian news environment is the focus of a more detailed study for the authors in 2010.

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