

UNITED STATES STUDIES CENTRE - WORLD PRESS INSTITUTE MEDIA FELLOWSHIP REPORT

December 9, 2012

By David King

The United States Studies Centre–World Press Institute fellowship is an intense program of study, discussion and observation that allows foreign journalists to take the pulse of the US media.

The fellowship offers an “immersion” into US politics, business and culture with briefings at media houses, universities, think-tanks and schools.

I was one of ten journalists from around the world selected to participate in the 2012 program. We visited 25 different news organisations in 11 states during the nine week program. The fellowship is based in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St Paul in Minnesota and then develops into a tour of news organisations across the continent. We travelled to Iowa, North Carolina, Washington DC, New York, Massachusetts, Florida, Atlanta, Texas, Illinois and California.



The fellowship coincided with the late stages of the 2012 presidential race and had a sharp focus on federal politics. We received briefings from a number of political academics and commentators and attended the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, where Barack Obama renominated for the presidency. It was an incredible opportunity to see how a political party developed a narrative for its candidate and refined its political messaging in the lead up to the poll.

Throughout the fellowship I was able to write stories for *The Australian* newspaper on a wide range of topics including US politics, the influence of Hispanic Americans in the federal election, the impact of the drought in the corn belt and education reform in charter schools.

We visited the newsrooms of some of the biggest media houses in the US and had briefings from senior editorial executives at those companies. Newspaper visits included *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Miami Herald* and *The Boston Globe*.

Television visits included CNN in Atlanta, the Spanish language network Univision in Miami, PBS Frontline in Boston and Hubbard Broadcasting in Minnesota.

Radio visits included National Public Radio in Washington DC, Minnesota Public Radio in St Paul, Minnesota, American Public Media's *Marketplace* in Los Angeles and Hubbard Radio's WTOP in Washington DC.

Visits to digital and online news operations included Google in California, *Politico* in Arlington Virginia, *The Texas Tribune* in Austin, Texas, and the investigative journalism centre *ProPublica* in New York. We also visited the New York headquarters of Bloomberg.

For this report I have chosen to focus on how digital and online technologies have dramatically changed the US media and how they continue to push innovation in the way people consume and share information. Almost all publishing operations are now multi-media, pushing out stories across many platforms. Social media and mobile internet technologies have made people both consumers and producers of content wherever they are.

Newspapers

The decline in American newspapers was driven by the internet, but it was not the drift of readers that hurt papers most, it was the drift of advertisers. Advertising went online to audiences who utilised the power of search and retailers became better able to directly connect with customers via the web. The newspaper business model was shaken, with advertising revenues dropping by half in some places. Most newspapers were forced to downsize, while others went out of business.

At the same time web technology reshaped the publishing industry. Print publishers became online publishers, then multi-platform publishers and most recently mobile device publishers. Each time they shifted to a new technology, the dollars they got per advertisement shrunk.

Pay walls

The industry realised it needed to develop other revenue streams and had to maximise the value of the advertisements they had. So they started charging more for their product. Most quality papers have put up the price of the newspaper (*The New York Times* on Sunday is six dollars) and they have also put pay walls around their digital content. What they once gave away for free online, they now charge for, just as they do with the printed product.

The key to success is to have a product people are willing to pay for, which, almost by definition, has to be product they can't get somewhere else for free. If you have readers spending more time on the website, you can charge more for advertising.

New York Times

Among the first to charge for web content was The New York Times — the third biggest selling newspaper in the US, with a daily circulation of about 1.5 million.

Dean Baquet, managing editor for news at The New York Times, says introducing the pay wall worked. “It’s been hugely successful, more successful than expected. It’s contributed to an increase in the print paper.” But he warns that there must be a quality product. “I don’t think most people can do a pay wall.”



All news is local

Producing unique quality content that people want is easier for the big national papers with well-resourced newsrooms. But it’s a harder task for the regional newspapers. So most have dropped their foreign-based reporting staff and national affairs coverage and have focussed on local news.

Star Tribune

The Star Tribune in Minneapolis is the 17th biggest newspaper in the US, with a daily circulation of just under 300,000. It was hit hard by the newspaper downturn. It went through bankruptcy and came out with a smaller staff and is now behind a pay wall. But more people are buying the paper than a few years ago and to achieve this, they went local. Their coverage is now aimed at where their readers live. Previously the news editors would have focussed on the city of Minneapolis itself and what happened there, but now the journalists are writing about what’s going on in the suburbs, in the schools and counties where their readers live. It’s their unique content.

Niche

The trend is undeniably towards niche publishing. Generalist newspapers offering a bit of everything will struggle for readers. Niche publishing gives readers something that can’t be replicated elsewhere or offered in the same level of detail. This is a challenge for established media players because a newcomer can start competing on your turf.

A great example of this is *Politico*, the political news publisher. It competes directly with *The Washington Post* and the national newspapers on their core product of federal

politics. When the Democratic National Convention was held in Charlotte, North Carolina, the local paper, *The Charlotte Observer*, struck a partnership with Politico and used its stories; not those of an established wire service or newspaper.

Politico

Jim VandeHei, the 36-year-old co-founder of Politico, calls them “people with a screw loose”. Those people, just like him, who can’t get enough politics. Politico was made for them, its motto is “all political news, all the time.” The website (and free newspaper in Washington DC) covers the White House, Congress, lobbying, elections and campaigns and plays to people’s obsessions. The business model is advertising driven and assumes that the group of people that are obsessed with politics have some similar characteristics which are attractive to advertisers.



The ‘Post’ Newspaper Publishers

As the money flowed out of newspapers and some closed their doors, people became worried that there were gaps in the media coverage. Public policy debates were being overlooked in stretched newsrooms, state politics wasn’t getting written about much and issues like juvenile justice, energy and environmental policy were being missed.

Enter the post newspaper publishers — not for profit news organisations designed to pick up where newspapers left off.

Funded by foundation money and donations, they have dedicated themselves to bringing quality journalism online. They were mostly led by highly skilled journalists who left newspapers.

Texas Tribune

“If you cared about politics and policy, you didn’t find much in the newspaper for you”, says *Texas Tribune* editor-in-chief Evan Smith. The Tribune writes about public education, energy, the environment, health and justice.

It's funded through donation and foundation money. It's heavy on data journalism and one of its most popular products is a salary app which allows readers to see how much public officials earn.



Social Media

"You've got take it to where the readers want to be," Stephanie Curtis, online editor, The Daily Circuit, Minnesota Public Radio.

Nobody could miss how important social media has become in the distribution of news. Facebook and Twitter are generating enormous amounts of traffic for traditional news websites. One digital guru told us people don't really type in web addresses any more, they just log on to social media and link to news websites from there. People want to spend time on social media and they want to have articles recommended to them by their friends.

Every media organisation we visited had teams of people dedicated to generating traffic and reader/audience engagement through social media. News publishers pushed their stories on Twitter and Facebook. Radio stations host Facebook discussions about what's been on their shows and saw which issues people weighed in on. In Miami, the Spanish language TV network Univision live broadcast its interviews with the presidential candidates on their Facebook page because they could not move a soap opera scheduled for that time.

The trend has massive implications for web publishers because readers are not accessing news sites from the home page much anymore. In order to get readers, publishers have to be active in the social media space.

Harris Media

"There's nothing more valuable than a friend's opinion" says online political campaigner Amy Brown. At just 25, she's the senior vice president of Harris Media, a Republican-leaning political campaign strategy firm. She runs the digital campaigns for GOP candidates in Texas and knows that Facebook is where it's at for getting your message out digitally. On Facebook people can "like" content and share it with their friends. And that's her core business, getting people to spread the political messages of her clients on social media. She explains that Facebook's algorithm knows who or what you are looking at the most and will show you more of it. "It's my job to get you to interact with our content, otherwise I will have to pay more money to Facebook to promote it."

Mobile And The Fractured Web

“Most digital consumption of content will be mobile in five years,” Raju Narisetti, managing editor, Wall Street Journal digital network.

Just as the internet changed newspapers, mobile technology changed the internet. All major publishers know that desktop consumption of news is on the decline. People are reading, watching and listening on hand held or portable devices. Mobile internet is the area of the greatest growth both in terms of technology and consumption.

The Boston Globe has adopted responsive design publishing across its subscription digital platforms. That means it doesn't matter which screen you're reading on, the content will be pushed out to you in the best possible format, resizing and reshaping to your screen. It allows readers to get the best product no matter how they read the paper.

TV And Radio

“20 year olds are not going out and buying new radios, they're listening on the web,” David Kansas, public radio executive.

Radio is well placed to make an easy transition to web-based use. Live streaming over the web is similar to listening on a radio. In financial terms, advertisements can still be broadcast in the same way.

Television will have to adapt to a more fractured audience that wants to watch via the internet and is becoming less accustomed to fixed-time broadcasting.

Young people in particular are less conditioned to watching a particular show or bulletin at a particular time. They don't expect to “miss” the news or a show because they were not in front of a screen at 7pm. They would go to a news site and get the latest information streamed to them on a mobile device. That presents a challenge for advertisers who are used to reaching certain audience demographics at certain times.

Journalism In The Digital Age

“This is an incredibly exciting time, all the technological changes have made it possible to tell stories quicker and better than ever before,” Milton Coleman, deputy managing editor The Washington Post, President of the Inter American Press Association.

Newsrooms are adapting their journalism to the digital age — but there's division on how. Some newsrooms have journalists filing a daily news report, writing a blog and tweeting updates throughout the day. Others had given each reporter an iPhone with the expectation they would produce daily video as well as their news report.

Chris Worthington, managing editor of news at Minnesota Public Radio, warned of the dangers of what he called “backpack journalism,” where a journalist has to write stories, shoot a video and record some audio. He says it can lead to a situation where nothing is done particularly well and an organisation risks “diluting the competency of your platform”.

Data journalism is expanding rapidly and many larger newsrooms have several specialist journalists who use large data sets to produce stories about health, crime and public spending. Modern data reporters are able to crunch data and then represent it visually through graphics so readers can interact with it. This is still in a nascent stage in Australian newsrooms and will be a boom area.

USSC-WPI Experience

The United States Studies Centre - World Press Institute fellowship is more than just a tour of American newsrooms. It is a two-month immersion in US society. We visited elementary schools in the poorest neighbourhoods, anti gang-violence projects in Chicago and farmers in Iowa struggling with drought. We met the Lieutenant Governor of Texas and congressmen in Washington. It was all set against the backdrop of an election campaign that allowed me to observe and understand US politics like never before.

A huge strength of the fellowship is the presence of the nine other international journalists. They were from Africa, South America, eastern and western Europe and India and all were accomplished in their fields. It was the perfect forum to discuss ideas and compare notes on what we had seen.

Throughout the program I filed stories for *The Australian* newspaper, for the WPI blog and the US Studies Centre blog. Having to write about the fellowship brought a deeper understanding of events.

Thank You

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to have participated in the USSC-WPI fellowship. It was a once in a lifetime experience.

I would like to thank the United States Studies Centre and its staff for giving an Australian journalist the chance to travel to America and to learn so much. Special thanks to Nina Fudala and her team for their support and encouragement.

I would like to thank the WPI executive director David McDonald and the other WPI staff, board members and hosts for their kindness and generosity and for running such a challenging and rewarding program.

And I would like to thank my editors and colleagues at The Australian newspaper for supporting me in this venture.

David King,
National Chief of Staff
The Australian newspaper
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Media visits

Minnesota Public Radio, St Paul, MN
The Star Tribune, Minneapolis, MN
MinnPost, Minneapolis, MN
Atlantic Magazine, Washington, DC
Politico, Arlington, Virginia
The Washington Post, Washington, DC
National Public Radio, Washington, DC
WTOP radio, Washington, DC
Bloomberg News, New York
The New York Times, New York
ProPublica, New York
Wall Street Journal, New York
Boston Globe, Boston Massachusetts
Christian Science Monitor, Boston MA
The World, radio, Boston, MA
Frontline, Boston, MA
Univision, Miami, Florida
The Miami Herald, Florida
CNN Headquarters, Atlanta, Georgia
The Texas Tribune, Austin Texas
Marketplace, radio, Los Angeles, CA
Centre for Investigative reporting, CA
Google, Mountain View, CA
Dolan Media, Minneapolis, MN
Hubbard Broadcasting, St Paul, MN

Published articles

Published in *The Australian* newspaper

[Hispanics relish growing electoral clout | The Australian](#)

JORGE Ramos has a simple explanation for the intense political spotlight being shone on the US Hispanic community. "They need us," he says ...

www.theaustralian.com.au/.../hispanics-relish-growing-electoral-clout/story-e6frg6so-1226484857970

[Obama delivers his commandments to resurrect God and Jerusalem ...](#)

7 Sep 2012 ... The Democrats abruptly changed yesterday to reinstate language from the 2008 version after omitting the word "Jerusalem" in the document ...

www.theaustralian.com.au/.../obama-delivers-his-commandments-to-resurrect-god-and-jerusalem/story-fn95xh4y-1226466748177

[Lone Star mayor Julian Castro is the face of the coming generation ...](#)

6 Sep 2012 ... JULIAN Castro is quick to play down comparisons between himself and Barack Obama, but the personal and political similarities between the ...

www.theaustralian.com.au/.../lone-star-mayor...face-of-the-coming-generation/story-fn95xh4y-1226465901498

[Farmers suffer in extreme drought | The Australian](#)

3 Sep 2012 ... KEITH Martz is the fourth generation of his family to toil in the fields of Bluegrass, Iowa, and the drought that's gripping the corn belt has not ..

www.theaustralian.com.au/.../farmers-suffer-in-extreme-drought/story-e6frg6so-1226463436573

[Lesson for all as US schools think again | The Australian](#)

1 Sep 2012 ... THERE'S a crisp intensity inside the kindergarten class at Mastery, a new charter school in Minneapolis that's turning stereotypes about ...

www.theaustralian.com.au/.../lesson-for-all-as-us-schools-think-again/story-e6frg6so-1226462700516

Published on *The Australian* online

[Obama faithful brave the squall for democratic convention climax ...](#)

7 Sep 2012 ... Obama faithful brave the squall for democratic convention climax. by: David King in Charlotte, North Carolina; From: The Australian; September ...

www.theaustralian.com.au/in.../us.../story-fn95xh4y-1226467020275

[An oasis for Democrats that's a break with convention | The Australian](#)

6 Sep 2012 ... Charlotte is a hot town. ... David King, The Australian's national chief of staff, is the recipient of the 2012 US Studies Centre World Press Institute ...

www.theaustralian.com.au/in.../us.../story-fn95xh4y-1226466358252

Published on the US Studies Centre blog

In Boston, looking for the real Romney

21 September 2012 - Martin Baron has been the top editor of The Boston Globe for 11 years and during that time has become a close observer of Mitt Romney.

The hunt returns to wolf country

24 August 2012- Gerald Tyler lives up at Ely, northern Minnesota, a town of about 3,500 people just shy of the Canadian border. It's wilderness country, canoe country, and, most controversially, wolf country.

Published on the WPI blog

04 October 2012- Consumer protection - how to avoid sandwich anxiety, coffee confusion and a coke overdose

<http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/david-king/2012/10/04/consumer-protection-how-avoid-sandwich-anxiety-coffee-confusion-and-coke>

24 September 2012 - "They need Us"

<http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/david-king/2012/09/24/they-need-us>

22 September 2012- The antidote to Miami's vice.

<http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/david-king/2012/09/22/antidote-miamis-vice>

26 August 2012 - Mississippi reflections

<http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/david-king/2012/08/26/mississippi-reflections>

23 August 2012 - The lost wallet

<http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/david-king/2012/08/23/lost-wallet>