Inundated by the Audience: journalism, audience participation and the 2011 Brisbane flood

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Abstract

Following the Brisbane flood in 2011, Seven's breakfast television program Sunrise launched a partnership with the Queensland government called Operation Bounce Back. The initiative called on skilled tradespeople to volunteer for the rebuilding effort and extended Sunrise's representations of audience participation. In this article we examine Operation Bounce Back in relation to different accounts of audience participation. We examine the interaction between Sunrise and government in the management of Operation Bounce Back. We draw on both Sunrise's representations of the program and documents obtained under Right to Information provisions. The case provides the basis for considering the role of journalism in managing representations of public and audience participation.

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> There is another flood that's going on and that's the flood of love and support that is coming through to our Soapbox. We are getting absolutely inundated with incredible emails. (Larry Emdur, Sunrise, 11 January 2011)

Managing participation

While recent accounts argue that journalism has suffered an 'authoritative collapse' (Baym 2005) this has not necessarily diminished journalism's importance to the creation and facilitation of power relationships. While journalists may not be 'believed' as they once were, the new practices of journalism are central to a media and political process that depends on the continuous management and modulation of audience participation. The role of the journalist in this process isn't to merely observe and report but to identify with the audience, act on their behalf and facilitate their participation in events.

Journalists and politicians share a de-facto symbiotic relationship as they mediate between the substantive work of making policy and the activity of impression management (Louw 2010). A common narrative in recent years is that impression management, rather than policy, has become the key driver of the political process. In an interview on Lateline Jay Rosen called the Australian media-political process 'broken'. According to Rosen, 'there was a time when the political system decided what policy was, what their stance was going to be, and then of course consulted their advisors about how to present it. Today... it's almost the reverse of that. What's going to work in the media is presented first and then figuring out policies that you can announce that correspond to that comes after' (Rosen 2011). Rosen is not alone in making this argument. A selection of recent versions of this narrative in Australia include Annabel Crabb (2011), Bernard Keane (2010), George Megalogenis (2010), Laurie Oakes (2011), Guy Rundle (2010), and Lindsay Tanner (2011). In this article, we consider how impression management involves not only the creation and management of representations of events, but also the creation of audiences and the management of audience participation. By considering how central audience participation is to impression management we intend to connect the often dichotomised narratives about the public as, on the one hand, passive victims of media manipulation and 'dumbing down' and, on the other hand, as seizing new technologies to become active participants in the media-political process.

During the Brisbane flood in January 2011, Seven's breakfast television program Sunrise launched Operation Bounce Back. Sunrise described Operation Bounce Back as a joint initiative between Seven and the Queensland government to organise skilled tradespeople to help with flood recovery.[i] Operation Bounce Back followed other initiatives by Sunrise over the past decade, such as the Rain Train (2002) and Reject the Recession (2008). With each of these initiatives Sunrise produced a form of journalism organised around representing and facilitating the audience's direct participation in responding to a crisis. Where Auberon Waugh once described the 'chattering classes' as a formation of journalists, broadcasters and public figures who comment on events but have little or no influence over them, Sunrise manage journalistic frames and media rituals that

amplify audience 'chatter' or participation under the rubric of enabling direct intervention in events. In this article, Operation Bounce Back acts as a useful case for developing a deliberately speculative account about how the management of audience participation impacts on the media-political process. We consider whether new journalistic formats and practices challenge traditional narratives about the practices, meaning and purpose of journalism. And, if they do, what journalism's mediation and management of audience participation tells us about its role in the contemporary exercise of power. We use this case to propose questions and frameworks for further research on audience participation, journalism and politics.

Differing accounts of audience participation
Sunrise's rituals of audience participation have been celebrated and critiqued. Writing from the perspective of examining the role of journalism in facilitating the policy process, Ian Ward (2006) recounts the case of Sunrise's 2002 Rain Train that took food and toys by train to rural Australians suffering from the drought. The Rain Train was a media ritual (Couldry 2003) through which Sunrise represented 'ordinary' Australians and relied on their participation to intervene in, and mediate, events. Through these rituals the Sunrise audience donate money and goods, attend Sunrise branded events, interact with causes online, participate in interviews, and open up their lives, homes and communities to Sunrise producers. In the context of analysing how media coverage of the drought informs policy about drought management, Ward's (2006) criticism of Sunrise's Rain Train coverage is that manufacturing media events and rituals in place of explaining complex events over time is detrimental to good policy and government. The criticisms Ward makes of the Rain Train could also be levelled at Sunrise's Reject the Recession campaign in 2008 where, supported by retail and finance industry leaders, they told their audience that 'ordinary' Australians had 'worried' themselves into the recession. Sunrise's solution was to ask businesses to offer a discount to members of the Sunrise Family to get them to 'reject the recession' and start shopping again. This explanation of the causes of and solutions to the recession displaced discussion about the complex nature of the global financial crisis. Following Ward (2006) Sunrise capitalise on the fact that media are the 'most important source of information in a crisis' (Ward 2006: 86). The Rain Train and Reject the Recession double as actions that are commercially lucrative for Sunrise and its partners and make the program politically powerful in the formation and circulation of public opinion.

Where Ward (2006) follows an established critique of journalism as constructing dominant frames through which the public interpret and participate in events, Harrington (2009) offers an account of Sunrise's audience as active and empowered participants in the process of representation. Significantly, Harrington's (2009) narrative is informed by Sunrise producers' and hosts' own accounts of audience engagement on the program. Harrington (2009), together with Sunrise's producers and presenters, attributes the success of the program to Sunrise's rituals of audience participation, facilitated by the 'ordinary' personalities of hosts 'Mel' (Melissa Doyle) and 'Kochie' (David Koch). Harrington (2009: 183) explains, 'the sense the program wishes to convey is that it acts as a voice for its viewers, representing them in wider political contexts.' To host David Koch the audience set the political agenda, not the politicians. To Harrington (2009: 187) Sunrise listens to its audience very carefully and incorporates them into the program. Rather than provide

representations of events in the world for the audience to decode, Sunrise manages rituals where the audience participate in the mediation of events. The audience is encoded into the text as co-producer of the 'dominant' or 'preferred' reading.

Our aim is to mediate between these 'representation oriented' and 'audience oriented' accounts of new forms of journalism. Analysis of journalistic frames often proceed on the basis of discerning 'dominant representations' made and disseminated to the public (Entman 1993). Audience centred approaches to journalism mostly consider how audiences make meaning from representations after they are produced. We intend to consider how audience participation is incorporated into the production of representations and by extension how audience participation is represented in contemporary journalism. The audience sees itself creating representations and intervening in events. Critical attention ought to be paid to how the participatory, active and empowered audience is incorporated into journalism's rituals, representations and professional ideologies.

Across the history of media and communication research, attention ought to be paid in any given time to how ideas about audience participation are asserted, who asserts them, and in what professional, institutional, commercial and political arrangements (Livingstone 1998, Morley 1993, Pooley 2008). Formations of the active audience are constructed in theory and practice to meet the commercial and political objectives of media practitioners and researchers (Morley 1993). Sunrise might be an open text in the sense that it enables the audience to participate in the production of representations. As David Morley (1993: 16) argued in relation to celebratory accounts of his active audience theory however, we need to make careful distinctions between an audience that is 'active' and one that is 'powerful'. Sunrise, like the active audience celebrants Morley criticises, might take particular instances of audience activity and participation and generalise and celebrate them as the whole (Morley 1993: 16). The active audience is dependent on the journalist who incorporates them into their professional practices and narratives. Journalism's professional narratives develop over time through organisational culture and interaction with other institutions and professions (Deuze 2006, Tuchman 1979). The representation of the active audience on Sunrise, or in journalism in general, is part of a larger incorporation of these ideas into our political life, popular culture, education curriculums and the professional ideology of cultural producers (Turner 2011).[ii]

Sunrise, audience participation and the Brisbane flood
The Brisbane flood peaked in the early morning of 13 January 2011. It was the most significant flood in the city since 1974. In a press conference later in the morning Premier Anna Bligh evoked a shared 'communicative frame' (Cottle and Rai 2006) for responding to and representing the event. A communicative frame is a dynamic process embedded in values and practices developed over time. Always under construction, it 'pre-exists the discursive constructedness of any particular issue or event' (Cottle and Rai 2006). The Premier commended the 'avalanche' of volunteers as testament to the 'will' of the Queensland people, declaring, 'I want us to remember who we are; we are Queenslanders, we're the people that they breed tough north of the border, we're the ones they knock down and we get up again.' Operation Bounce Back was a media ritual through which Sunrise could amplify and modulate this communicative frame. Both the Premier and Sunrise stood to gain

from a communicative frame that invoked a shared 'we' and a general 'spirit' to 'naturalise' the event's causes and effects.

Over several days leading up to the launch of Operation Bounce Back Sunrise enacted a media ritual where audience members offered assistance to others. On January 11, Kochie reported from a local street where Sunrise had coordinated with one viewer to help another via the Sunrise website. While the audience member didn't have much 'spare cash' to donate, they did have furniture and supplies for a young child that they could donate to another young family. In these rituals Sunrise became a platform through which the public could respond to the event. Sunrise reporters drew on the stories of their audiences to mediate the event, but also used these stories to position themselves as key actors in the response. Grant Denyer invoked a collective 'we' when he told a distressed woman trapped in Gympie unable to get to her sick husband in hospital in Brisbane that 'well hopefully we can get one of those roads open as soon as possible and try and get you on out of here and over to the husband who needs you.' Kochie made a similar appeal when he reported from a local tourism business and told the audience that 'we' could help by going to Queensland for a holiday.

Sunrise extends breakfast television's development of techniques for cultivating and managing audience participation (Weitten and Pantti 2005: 32) by incorporating the audience's everyday use of interactive media into the program. Through web and mobile platforms audience contributions are continuously incorporated into the program and the development of stories. Audience members upload video and photo content, offer their opinions and ideas, vote in polls, enter competitions and attend events. The viewer contributions help to build the frame through which events are constructed. Viewers are also encouraged to join the Sunrise Family, an online community and database. Each of these applications enable Sunrise to manage and modulate their audience by both incorporating them into the production of content but also by offering the program a constant feed of information about their audience. Throughout their representation of the flood Sunrise framed events drawing on contributions from the audience. For instance, using emails and images from viewers of their uninsured losses, Kochie promised to challenge both government and insurance companies. He presented Sunrise's efforts as a 'campaign' where Sunrise acted on the audience's behalf. The program also reported on and encouraged audience members' use of Facebook groups to organise community responses to the event.

As the flood crisis deepened the media and government became interdependent on each other in the mediation, representation and management of events. In Sunrise's move to launch Operation Bounce Back the program attempted to centre itself as a key site of not only representing, but also responding to the flood, on behalf of ordinary people (Couldry 2003, Durham 2008). This ritual wasn't constructed around a traditionally centred institutional interaction between government and media, but instead around journalism expanding its purview into the business of government and policy implementation. Furthermore, Sunrise presented this activity as conducted on behalf of 'ordinary' Australians, as if the program was a medium through which they could participate in the flood recovery.

Operation Bounce Back

With the launch of Operation Bounce Back on January 18 Sunrise sought to become a central actor in the flood recovery effort. Over the weekend of January 15 and 16 Brisbane had seen one of the largest volunteer efforts in its history as the Brisbane City Council bussed thousands of volunteers to flooded neighbourhoods to assist with the clean up. In an interview about the flood recovery on the morning of January 18 Kochie used the audience's offers of help as a rationale for Sunrise to facilitate a way for them to act. He asked the Premier what she 'needed' and recalled Sunrise's 'partnership' with the Queensland government to rebuild after Cyclone Larry.

> Kochie: Yep, this is what we found after Cyclone Larry didn't we? That once the clean-up's done you've got to rebuild, there's a shortage of tradies. We're getting so many emails from viewers asking how they can help. Is this the area? Can we, you know, we did an operation for Cyclone Larry to put together teams of tradies to help. Can we do it again for you?
>
> Anna Bligh: Absolutely. Look, I know there are people from all over Queensland and Australia who want to help and some people can help by you know digging deep and giving $20 to $50. Other people, they've got labour and skills. There are people who are out on our streets sweeping with brooms. But if people have the time to donate some of those skills that would certainly ease the burden and you know I know there's people from other parts of Queensland who'd love to come down here and be part of the helping hand as well.

In her response Premier Bligh didn't comment on Kochie's direct offer of Sunrise's assistance, she instead framed the exchange around encouraging the general assistance of the public in the recovery effort. Kochie, however, took the Premier's encouragement of community involvement as an invitation for Sunrise to act as a platform for managing the response.

> Kochie: Okay, alright, Premier Bligh, we'll get onto it and set up a website...
>
> Anna Bligh: It'd be terrific.
>
> Kochie: Give us, you know, give us half an hour to get it up, our web geeks can start on something and keep refining it and building it throughout the day. But a registration process for tradies to come in, give us your details, when you're available. Maybe we start the first weekend in February, the end of the month, give us a couple of weeks to match the tradies up with your department to make sure that everyone's organised properly and we'll get it working.
>
> Anna Bligh: I was going to say you really need to work in with our recovery taskforce people because...
>
> Kochie: Absolutely.
>
> Anna Bligh: ...you know there's a very big task here. And if you want people's volunteer labour to be put to the best use it'll need a bit of organisation, but you know if people were prepared to do that it would mean an awful lot to people who right now, their homes are clean, but they're sitting in them and realising a terrible reality that they've got nothing there.

Kochie and Premier Bligh shared a communicative frame that invoked the community spirit. While Kochie elaborated his offer to use Sunrise as a platform for coordinating the volunteer effort Premier Bligh didn't explicitly endorse the program. Instead, she stuck to encouraging the broader volunteer effort and the government's organisation of the recovery. As the interview continued Kochie spoke as if the Premier had invited Sunrise to coordinate the volunteer effort. After concluding the interview with the Premier he named the initiative Operation Bounce Back.[iii]

> Kochie: Okay that's our challenge. We will deliver. We'll keep you updated. And absolutely work in concert with your department. Anna Bligh, thanks for joining us.
> Anna Bligh: Thank you.
> Kochie: Okay give us half an hour as I say, go to the Sunrise website. Look, if you're anything to do with a house, if you're a roofer, if you're a carpenter, if you're an electrician, if you're a concreter, if you install blinds, alarms, whatever, go to the Sunrise website. We'll call it Operation Bounce Back and register there with all your details, your credentials, what you can bring, because we want Queensland to bounce back as quickly as possible and let's see if we can get something done. So give us thirty minutes or so, go to the website and let's follow this through.

Later in the morning, Sunrise led the hourly news bulletin with, 'In the past hour Premier Anna Bligh has announced a government plan to help the people of Queensland get back on their feet. Operation Bounce Back is a joint initiative with Sunrise and will call on skilled tradespeople to help with the recovery effort'. They then cut to a grab of Premier Bligh speaking in general about the need for skilled tradespeople, but not specifically about Operation Bounce Back. The newsreader then concluded the story with, 'now if you want to register you can head to the Sunrise website, it is live now'. The interview with Premier Bligh was also packaged as an advertisement played on the program, Sunrise YouTube channel and website. On the advertisement Kochie states, 'Sunrise has teamed up with the Queensland government to help the flood victims bounce back, with Operation Bounce Back '. And, the interview with Premier Bligh from earlier in the program is cut to this exchange:

> Kochie: We did an operation for Cyclone Larry to put together teams of tradies to help.
> Can we do it for you again?
> Anna Bligh: Absolutely.

The news bulletin and promotional video suggests that Premier Bligh specifically endorses Operation Bounce Back as the government's program for managing the volunteer effort. The full interview transcript doesn't demonstrate this explicit endorsement. This is curious considering the repeated claims made on air about the nature of the partnership. Kochie claimed that, 'we have thought this through with the Queensland government; we're working in very close co-operation with the Premier's department so everything is going to be organised well.' As they screened an image of web technicians 'managing' the Operation Bounce Back website featuring the Sunrise and Queensland government logos Mel confirmed Kochie's claims, 'as we say, fully managed by the

Queensland government to make sure that everyone is done properly'. Mel explained that Sunrise were able to 'spread the word' and 'coordinate' the audience's participation on the government's behalf. In another segment Kochie and Mel are 'on the couch' as Kochie reads from a sheet that lists the advice the government has provided Sunrise on the skills and resources they need. Simon, a Sunrise Reporter in Brisbane, reaffirmed the partnership by telling viewers that Operation Bounce Back was 'being co-ordinated by the Public Works Department here in Queensland, so it's all being done completely legally'.

The Department of Premier and Cabinet's only publicly acknowledged interaction with Operation Bounce Back was in interviews between Kochie and Premier Bligh on January 18 and 20. The interview on January 20 began with Mel praising the 'unbelievable' response of tradies to Operation Bounce Back and asked the Premier where she had chosen as the 'first place for Operation Bounce Back to target'. The Premier responded by emphasising the importance of rebuilding 'community' spaces and announced Hutchinson Builders would oversee the rebuilding of the Goodna Rugby League Club. Mel thanked the Premier and announced that this would be the first of many Operation Bounce Back initiatives they would announce.

An initial Right to Information request to the Premier's department revealed no written correspondence or other documents detailing a partnership between the Premier and Sunrise. A Right to Information request to the Department of Public Works suggested however that Sunrise proposed the idea to the Premier's office. The Premier's office delegated the Minister of Public Works to action the request. An email on the morning of January 17 from the Director General at the Department of Public Works to the Premier's department says that 'my Minister has apparently been tasked by the Premier to discuss a Channel 7 request to run another 'Sunrise tradesman program''. An email later that afternoon from Sunrise producer Andy Kay contains a 'brief' for Operation Bounce Back that describes it as a 'Queensland Government initiative which has invited Sunrise as its media partner to assist'. Internal memos and briefing notes indicate that the Queensland government took 'ownership' of the initiative and purposively selected community clubs to be rebuilt at Ipswich, Goodna and Theodore. A submission to the Minister by the Director General of Public Works on 11 March 2011 explains that Operation Bounce Back was 'extremely resource intensive' and refers to several implementation problems relating to volunteers, site selection and material resources. With a lack of volunteers and materials, the government implemented Operation Bounce Back by leveraging partnerships with major building companies Brookfield Multiplex and Hutchinson and used the government owned building service Q-Build to manage and resource the projects. This involved significant investment of resources from government public servants in running the program and material and labour resources to undertake the projects.

Bouncing back together
The case of Operation Bounce Back provides a fulcrum for raising questions about the impact cultivating and managing audience participation has on journalism and politics. While Sunrise created representations of Operation Bounce Back that presented themselves and their volunteers as central to the rebuilding effort, government correspondence indicates the program required

resource intensive management from public servants and political advisors. Sunrise and the Queensland government appear to both depend on, and compete, with each other in their attempts to benefit from audience participation. Sunrise depend on the government to legitimise Operation Bounce Back. For Premier Bligh, Sunrise is a medium through which she can manage the public's impressions of the crisis and their participation in the recovery effort. Premier Bligh and Kochie have an interest in sharing a common communicative frame. They each seek to identify with the audience, act on their behalf, and facilitate their participation in events. Impression management, we contend, involves not only the creation and dissemination of particular messages, but also the management of audience participation in the circulation of those messages.

In politics organised around managing the creation and circulation of impressions the substance of what is said matters less than the ability to manage the process to extract tactical gains. In Kochie's pledge to 'deliver' we see Sunrise use the process of impression management and audience participation to generate audience ratings and a valuable and politically powerful journalistic identity. Kochie positions himself as a central figure in managing the recovery. In the Premier's implicit participation we observe politicians engaging with the media process as part of the continuous management of public opinion. The Premier appears reluctant to acknowledge the partnership in the 'close' terms that Sunrise presented it on screen. Correspondence taking place at the time between Sunrise and various public servants and political advisors suggests that the government wants Operation Bounce Back to be presented as their initiative. The tone of the interviews suggests that while Sunrise and the Premier each have their own strategic interests, they are also mutually dependent on each other to legitimise their roles in making representations and managing participation. Sunrise and the Premier share a relationship of mutual dependence and competition. There are strategic opportunities for each, but also risks that they might erode their own power and legitimacy, or lose control of the communicative frame through which events are represented.

Audience participation has been met over a long period of time with celebratory and critical accounts of its empowering and democratic affordances. Rather than continue this binary about whether audience participation is or isn't empowering, we propose that fields of journalism, media and politics should pay critical scholarly attention to the problems that rituals that amplify audience participation pose for the authority of journalists and politicians and the functioning of the media-political process. While audience participation is frequently coupled with claims about enabling engagement with the substantive business of politics, we contend that attention be given to the inverse possibility: that audience participation amplifies the need for increasingly sophisticated forms of impression management. Using the flood coverage as an example, we suggest that while journalists and politicians collaborate in creating a celebratory rhetoric around audience participation, that audience participation is carefully managed for political and commercial gains. Journalists' and politicians' shared communicative frames become less focussed on the 'quality' of how events are represented and more targeted at managing audiences' perceptions of participation and involvement. Consequently, journalism becomes peripheral to substantive debate about policy, but central to the manufacture of audiences and the management of their opinion and participation.

Throughout the twentieth century journalists cultivated a professional narrative that put themselves at the centre of good liberal democratic government. They have gradually incorporated more 'active' forms of audience and public participation into this professional identity (Bowman and Willis 2003, Harcup 2004, Singer et al. 2011). This process has possibly had the unintended consequence of unravelling their authority. Rather than reporting on events and scrutinising power relationships journalists become managers of rituals of participation. And therefore, journalism also becomes a central player in the machinery of impression management. In doing so, journalists gradually relinquish the role they had, or aspired to, in animating substantive debate or understanding of policy and government. By becoming a manager of audience participation journalism obscures the power relationships it once might have exposed or scrutinised.

Celebrations of audience participation organised within platforms of political impression management and commercial media avoid a thorough account of the qualities of participation and good government. In these accounts, participation becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. This scuppers the possibility of careful deliberation about the quality of participation (Couldry 2010), the difference between speaking and being heard (Hindman 2009), and critique of a system that relies on participation in general but pays no attention to particular ideas and expressions (Dean 2010). The problem remains distinguishing between 'active' and 'empowered' and deliberating over what kinds of participation are desirable (Andrejevic 2007).

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[i] The Brisbane floods were mediated in a centred and consensual ritual. Media and government worked together to manage representations of the event. As an example, The Queensland Reconstruction Authority wrote to media organisations, including Seven, thanking them for their support in the representation of events. These letters thanked the media for their 'balanced reporting and keeping stories in context'. Publicly too, the government thanked media organisations for the way they reported events. Anna Bligh thanked Sunrise on behalf of the people of Queensland for making those affected by the floods feel that the wider community knew what was happening to them and cared about it. In both cases, the government effectively thanked the media for managing public opinion appropriately.

[ii] See also the special issue of Cultural Studies on Convergence/Culture (2011, 25(4-5).

[iii] Records show that the Operation Bounce Back website domain was registered the previous evening. Documents released under Right to Information suggest Sunrise first made the request to the Premier's office sometime around the weekend of the 15th and 16th of January.