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K. Bowd

University of South Australia

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Intersections of Community and Journalism in Australia and Singapore¹

Kathryn Bowd

University of South Australia, Adelaide

The notion of “community” is a contested one, but one which is widely used across a range of fields and applications. For example, understandings of community in a country such as Singapore differ significantly from interpretations of community in a country such as Australia. In Singapore, notions of community are strongly influenced by language and cultural background, while in Australia, geography and distance are often key factors. Journalists’ relationships with the communities for whom and about whom they write are complicated by this imprecision and by the range of contexts and environments to which the term can be applied. However, while social, cultural and political differences between countries and media systems make it difficult to generalise about media-audience relationships, there may be areas of intersection. For example, there is a strong focus on community-based news in both Singaporean newspapers and Australian regional newspapers, as well as on community advocacy, community-building and positive reinforcement of community values. This paper argues that this represents a strengthening of the notion of the “local” in the face of widespread globalisation. The reclaiming of the local has implications for the future direction of journalism and the structures within which journalism is practised.

Introduction

The notion of “community” is widely used across a range of fields and applications. From community health care to online communities to cultural communities, it makes an appearance in the literature and practice of many academic disciplines as well as in day-to-day usage. Politicians talk about the effects of a particular policy on “the community”; commentators discuss “community values”; and bloggers refer to the creation of “online communities”. However, defining community is problematic, even within individual disciplines, something exacerbated by the increasing breadth and complexity of its use in recent decades. In examining literature about community, one thing almost immediately apparent is the lack of agreement about what it is. Instead, it is this lack of agreement and resulting imprecision of the term that forms the basis for much discussion of the topic. Further complicating attempts at definition is the consideration that it is a term sometimes used descriptively, sometimes normatively, and sometimes combining both. Worsley et al (1992) argue that it is difficult to separate the descriptive and normative uses of the term, and that much of the confusion about community derives from a failure to distinguish between facts and values, while Bell and Newby (1974: 3) claim most definitions of community reflect not what it is, but perceptions of what it should be. Thus, defining community is more complex than drawing together a collection of ideas and usages to form a composite meaning, but must take into account the contexts and ways in which it can be used. As a result, any discussion of community requires some degree of generalisation.

The many contexts and settings in which community can be found further complicate this definitional imprecision. Notions of community may not be consistent across social, political, cultural and geographic settings. For example, understandings of community in a country such as Singapore differ markedly from those in a country such as Australia – in Singapore, community is strongly influenced by language and cultural background, while in Australia, geography and distance are key factors, with considerations such as cultural background and language often playing a secondary role. Nonetheless, this does not preclude geography as a factor influencing notions of community in Singapore, nor culture and language as influential factors in Australia.

Influences on Australian journalism

As understandings of community are influenced by social, political, cultural and geographic settings, so too are understandings of the role of the media and of journalism practice. Even where key influences are shared, the resulting media products may have little in common. Singapore and Australia share one important early influence – the press (and by extension the broadcast media) was a product of the British colonial system. This influence can still be seen in some elements of journalism practice – for example, the main “quality” English-language newspapers in both countries are broadsheet in size and serious in tone. However, more recent trends in media development in both countries suggest news media systems with little in common beyond this heritage.

Mainstream Australian media typically subscribe to the conventions associated with Western journalism. While a full discussion of theories of Western journalism and their application is beyond the scope of this paper, the conventions of objectivity,

balance and the “Fourth Estate” role of the media are widely considered as central to journalism practice.

The ... claim, that the press was entitled to its own independent standing in the political system, as the Fourth Estate has become an ideal which continues to influence the attitudes of those working in the ... news media. (Schultz 1998: 15)

The media positions itself as a “watchdog” on government and other institutions, and “conflict” is often seen as a central news value.

Government control is limited, with a widely held belief that government “must not interfere in the process of collecting and disseminating news” (Hachten 1981: 65). Self-regulation is seen as preferable and, for adherents to social responsibility theory, essential: “Freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position ... is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication.” (Siebert 1956: 74) While the flaws of self-regulation are acknowledged (see for example, Chadwick 1996, Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance 1997) – external regulation is widely considered more problematic.

The “watchdog” role of Western media frequently conflicts with the commercialised nature and concentrated ownership of the media in Australia. Schultz argues that it is journalists and editors who are the most insistent advocates of Fourth Estate principles, and that their managers “would prefer a more compliant, more entertaining and less critical approach” (Schultz 1998: 6). This fundamental conflict creates tension within media organisations.

Against this background of the principles and conventions of Western journalism, the Australian media have also developed in unique ways. The style of journalism that emerged in Australia was imported from Europe but shaped by the social and cultural environment of the early colony (Lloyd 1999 in Forde, et al. 2003: 315). The nature of the Australian media was further developed in regional areas, many of which are hundreds of kilometres from major cities. Even in relatively populated areas, towns are often 50 or 100 kilometres away from each other. This has led to a high degree of independence among country towns, and an inward focus – the events and issues of that town tend to take on a higher degree of importance than those of a state or national capital hundreds, or even thousands, of kilometres distant. This has been a key factor in the development of the regional press in Australia, which

exhibits a myriad of differences from the daily press ... (it is) well-read, fulfils a different role in society from the much-studied metropolitan press, and has been, historically, instrumental in ... political, social and economic development ... (Pretty 1993: 78).

Regional news media in Australia have developed their own style of reporting news, focusing on matters of interest and relevance to their own geographical areas, which are usually bounded by the circulation area of the newspapers or the range of broadcast media, and largely ignoring news outside these areas. Even news stories of international importance are often presented in regional news media from a local perspective, reflecting the impact on the area or the involvement of people from the region in the wider event or issue.

Influences on Singaporean media

While Australian journalism is grounded in the values and conventions of Western journalism, Singapore's media have been partly contextualised by the debate over Asian values. The notion of Asian journalism as different from Western journalism was given impetus by the debate on the New World Information and Communication Order (Natarajan & Hao 2003: 300). The frustrations and anger of many "Third World" nations (Hachten 1981: 73) over issues such as the growing gap between rich industrialised democracies and poorer nations (Stevenson 1994: 308) and the Western dominance of global news flows (Stevenson 1994: 7) were some of the factors behind what became known as the NWICO debates of the 1970s and early 1980s, now seen as a reference point for national, regional and international communication development (Richstad 2000: 278). Western media were criticised as too monopolistic and powerful, as imposing alien viewpoints on nations trying to build their own identities and as weapons of domination (Hachten 1981: 74). These concerns sparked broader debate over the notions of "development journalism" and "Asian values" in journalism, and whether such values in journalism could, or should, co-exist with the notion of the media as watchdog.

The idea of Asian values is a contentious one, as it "presumes a shared value system for journalists in Asian countries, and also a difference from the shared values of countries of the West" (Quintos de Jesus 1996: 3). It has been claimed that it is not possible to have a universal set of Asian values as there is not a single Asia (Massey & Chang 2002: 990), and that there is no consensus among Asian countries on what constitutes Asian values (Natarajan & Hao 2003: 302). Others argue that there is no specifically Asian journalism because journalism arrived in Asia from the West; that globalisation of journalism has increased the similarities in the ways Asian and Western journalists work; that news values are the same everywhere; and that the practice of journalism worldwide is influenced by the global marketplace (Massey & Chang 2002: 991).

However, the notion of Asian values has remained influential. Gunaratne claims that Eastern thinking emphasises interdependence and mutual causality in place of the individualism and self-interest evident in Western concepts of liberal democracies (2005: 156), while Xu suggests "Asian values" include group orientation, filial piety, hard work, community/nation above individuals, emphasis on duty over rights, responsibility over freedom, education, social stability, harmony and respect for authority (2005: 2). While these values may be universally shared, they are given a higher priority in Asia than in Western countries (Xu 2005: 2, 3). An example of this is the "Asian value" of harmony:

The news work norm of harmony is the Eastern opposite of the Western journalistic practice of emphasizing, or some would say sensationalizing, conflict. (Massey & Chang 2002: 992)

Singapore's media are often associated with the Asian values debate. Massey and Chang's study of online newspapers found that Asian values were prominent in Singaporean media (Massey & Chang 2002: 999), while Bokhorst-Heng (2002: 561) argues that Singapore's media most closely fit the Japanese model, which emphasises the "Asian values" of "consensus as opposed to confrontation, co-operation rather than conflict, and responsibility to the community and nation rather than

individualism". The identification of Singapore with Asian values may be closely linked to the political context in which the nation's media operate:

... the political leadership promotes them as beneficial to national development, and journalists conceive of themselves as the government's nation-building partners. The press freedom limits ... may be coincidental to journalists' role conceptions, or the restrictions could represent the codification of a close press-state relationship that has arisen naturally from a mutual sense of patriotism. (Massey & Chang 2002: 999, 1000)

Singapore's political system is unique in that it fits neither models of authoritarianism nor models of liberal democracies (Sussman 2003: 36). It is claimed that Singapore functions "at least nominally, as a democracy and as a successful, relatively open market economy and yet imposes a panoptic level of state surveillance, intervention and repressive supervision over the lives of its citizens" (Sussman 2003: 36).

The nation's founding prime minister, now Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew, has long been an advocate of the idea of Asian values. Lee is widely acknowledged as supporting the premise that "the modern, economically strong Asian society is best built on a foundation of traditional Eastern beliefs, not transplanted Western values" (Massey & Chang 2002: 992), and that "a permissive liberal society would lead to chaos in a country like Singapore where potential strife among different races and religious groups can easily be agitated" (Tan, et al. 1998: 205). This approach flows through to the media, with former Singapore prime minister Goh Chok Tong saying in late 2005 that "a liberal press is not necessarily good for every country" (Agence France Presse 2005), and that "... a free press by Western standards does not always lead to a clean and efficient government or contribute to economic freedom and prosperity" (Agence France Presse 2005).

Of particular concern for Singapore's government has been the nation's disparate mix of cultural, religious and language groups: "The colonial legacy ... left countries such as ... Singapore with populations drawn from a variety of geographical origins, faiths, races and cultural traditions." (Bannerjee 2002: 524). One of the principal tasks of government in such post-colonial nations has been to formulate policies and strategies to bind the numerous ethnic, linguistic and cultural communities into a single nation (Bannerjee 2002: 524). In Singapore, racial harmony has always been high on the government's agenda (Tan, et al. 1998: 205), and the media have been seen as instrumental in this process, as a tool for maintaining and developing harmony and stability. Tan et al's study of public perceptions of the press as a mediator between government and public found that:

To Singaporeans, the economic success over the past three decades is owed to the work of the leadership of the PAP government, which considers the press an effective instrument for nation-building. The public has more or less accepted the government's argument that the news media must co-operate with the government in order for the government to effectively govern the country. (Tan, et al. 1998: 209)

As in Australia, media ownership in Singapore is highly concentrated. However, while the focus is to some extent on commercial operation, there is a greater element of government influence: "The contemporary mainstream media scene in

Singapore is largely duopolized by two government-controlled media heavyweights ... and closely managed by the PAP government under the ambit of the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts.” (Lee 2005: 16) Tan et al claim the Singapore media are unique, as media outlets operate as independent financial entities but are heavily influenced by government (1998: 205). It is through “legal control, political manoeuvring and structural arrangements” that the government exerts “considerable influence” over media operations (Tan, et al. 1998: 206).

Journalism and community

A strong link between journalism and notions of community is suggested in the literature (see, for example, Kennedy 1974, Lauterer 2000, Stamm 1985). Park and Janowitz claim newspapers are a mechanism by which an individual is integrated into a community (Stamm 1985: 3-5) and Austin (1997: 38) suggests a correlation between newspaper readership and a sense of connection with community. The media is also suggested as instrumental in the development and maintenance of social capital, described by Putnam as features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam 1996).

In Australia, some of the strongest media-community relationships can be seen in regional areas where communities are defined largely by geography and distance. From the early days of European settlement, the press played a crucial part in building a nation where the “tyranny of distance” was one of the greatest challenges (Pretty 1993: 77). The influence of geography on community in Australia is reflected in the words of journalists employed by regional non-daily newspapers, interviewed as part of a larger research project on journalism and community:

I guess it's ... geographical. ... Part of the idea of a community is things that bring people together, so whether it's geography, whether it's the same sporting interests, whether it's the same people being upset about a road being in bad condition ... I think the geography is the main thing for me. (SC)

It's the people who live and breathe the (geographical region). All the little towns, and all the bigger towns ... that's community, where everyone comes together and lives and breathes their own little patch. (SD)

However, there is also a sense of community as something that unites people, and of the local newspaper as instrumental in building community:

It's people who live in an area, but also it's the things that bring the people together as part of that community, the things they do together, the school, there might be a hospital, church groups maybe, all the activities that aren't part of work but are part of ... people's lives. (KD)

People being involved with each other ... it's about people communicating to each other, you're all involved in the same sort of clubs, in sporting activities, in the library, if they're running activities it's all about that sort of sense of involvement. (NT)

The paper sort of reflects what makes them tick and what they're interested in, and it's relevant to them and is able to help them if they need it. (MN)

The relationship between newspaper and community can be seen in the advocacy role of many local media outlets. From the early days of newspapers in Australia, "a town without a newspaper was a community without a voice to make itself heard in the wider world, a community unable to tell its collective story" (Kirkpatrick 1996: 159). The community advocacy role of Australian regional non-daily newspapers generally includes the favouring of local perspectives over wider viewpoints, but may also extend to support for or advocacy of a particular stance or course of action if it is perceived as potentially beneficial to the community (Bowd 2003). One journalist in the interviews mentioned above described a local newspaper as "a powerful voice for the community to voice an issue that people were really passionate about", while another said it was important for the local newspaper to campaign on issues of grave concern to people in the region.

The community-newspaper relationship can also be seen in the approach to news. Most regional non-daily newspapers in Australia cover only local news; even those that include state, national and international news focus primarily on local coverage, or on local angles on wider stories.

The annual events that shape the community's traditions are newsworthy and readers expect to find them mentioned in the newspaper ... they want to know who is getting married this week, who has died, and, yes, they want to read obituaries on the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. (Kirkpatrick 2001: 20)

This is echoed by journalists working for such publications:

We don't cover ... state and national news unless it impacts on us. (GT)

If there's a big issue you always have to localise it in some way, or it usually doesn't go in [the paper]. (QS)

Another common theme is "closeness" between newspapers and communities (see, for example, Kirkpatrick 2001, Kirkpatrick 1995, Pretty 1993), although Ewart and Massey (2005) argue that the relationship between newspapers and communities is more complex than is generally acknowledged. Respondents to one survey of local journalists indicated that they felt they knew their readers' wants, likes, dislikes and interests (Pretty 1993: 108), while it has also been claimed that (Alysen, et al. 2003: 10) closeness to the audience can give local reporters a better appreciation of what a community is thinking than is possible in a larger newsroom. This closeness is instrumental in country newspapers' reinforcement of community values. Pretty's survey of Australian country journalists in the early 1990s found that country newspapers were considered to be different to their city counterparts because they were oriented towards their communities and were a cohesive force (Pretty 1993: 113).

In Singapore, relationships between journalism and community focus more on communities of culture, language and religion, and on the media as a means of reinforcing and maintaining stability and harmony. Harmony at a national level, and the promotion of the key cultural, religious and language groups, is a cornerstone of government policy. "The Singapore Government pursues a policy of multiracialism,

where the maintenance of racial and ethnic cultures is actively promoted.” (Aquila 2003: 208) This focus can also be seen in the government campaigns run in Singapore since the late 1950s. For example, the “Speak Mandarin” campaign was introduced in 1979 to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to speak Mandarin rather than any other Chinese dialect, out of a “desire to promote Mandarin as a kind of social glue to unite the Chinese community” (Teo 2005: 123). Bokkhorst-Heng claims the centrality of the national agenda to the role of the press in Singapore is spelt out in many of the speeches government leaders have given on the topic (2002), and that the Western model is rejected in favour of a “responsible” media that works with the government in the interests of the “national good” (2002).

Xu claims that Singapore exemplifies the promotion of Asian values or local cultural values by the press, with ethnic language newspapers contributing to language maintenance and preservation and reinforcement of cultural boundaries through their reporting on respective cultural traditions (Xu 2005: 3). There is also a strong focus on harmony, as conflict-oriented reporting risks cultivating social and political disharmony: “Disharmony is instability, and instability risks undermining efforts to cultivate support for the state and its nation-building policies.” (Massey & Chang 2002: 992)

The links between the media and community in Singapore are explicitly outlined in the mission statements of some media outlets. However, these explicit links are primarily the province of non-English-language media, as in Singapore, English is the language of business and education, and a language which many – particularly younger – Singaporeans have in common. Most Singaporeans are educated mainly in English, with secondary emphasis on their “mother tongue” (one of Singapore’s other three official languages – Mandarin, Tamil or Malay). It is the “mother tongue” that is the focus of many of the government’s community-building campaigns.

For example, the daily newspaper for Singapore’s Tamil speakers, *Tamil Murasu*, is described as the “main information source for the Indian community”. The paper’s website claims that it “has established itself as a voice for the Tamil-speaking community in Singapore” (<http://www.sph.com.sg/newspapers/tamilmurasu.html>). Similarly, the Malay daily newspaper, *Berita Harian*, is described as “a newspaper for the local Malay community”, providing a “platform for the Malay community to voice their views on issues which concern them. It is a paper that speaks with authority and understands the needs of the Malay community” (<http://www.sph.com.sg/newspapers/beritaharian.html>). Meanwhile, the Malay-focused Suria television channel aims to be “the heartbeat of the Malay community” (<http://www.suria.sg/About%20Suria/index.html>).

The non-English media are portrayed as advocates for their communities, and positively reinforce the values of these communities. To some extent this flows through to English-language media, which often run news stories focusing on specific cultural groups or on cultural groups as distinct entities working co-operatively. For example, “Praise for S’pore’s multi-faith society” from *The Straits Times* of 26 May 2006, reports on a visit to Singapore by an Egyptian Muslim cleric in which he “encouraged Muslims to continue working with Singaporeans of other races and religions for the good of the nation”. “Colour-blind buddies” in *The Straits Times* of 21 July 2006, focuses on cross-cultural friendships, emphasising that while the nation’s cultural groups exhibit distinct differences, friendship can

bridge these gaps. The emphasis is on cross-cultural links rather than assimilation of cultural groups. Singaporean media support community-building and reinforcement of community values through a specific focus in non-English-language media on the communities of language and culture, and through providing clearly identifiable sources of news and information – in both print and broadcast media – targeted at those communities.

While interpretations of community – and the foundations of communities – may differ between Singapore and Australia, sectors of the media in both countries exhibit a strong focus on community, and on strengthening, developing and reinforcing community values.

The influence of globalisation

In recent decades, globalisation has become a topic debated from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of contexts – “social, political, economic, technological, corporate, demographic, cultural” (Jacobsen & Lawson 1999). Dasgupta argues that the currency acquired by the concept “reflects the agenda that the world today is unprecedentedly interconnected and interdependent” (Dasgupta 2004). Like community, globalisation is a term “at the confluence of many different disciplines and discourses” (Boyd-Barrett 1997: 13) which eludes straightforward definition. Weber describes it as “an increase in interconnectedness” (2003: 274), while Tomlinson argues that it “refers to the rapidly developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals world-wide” (1997: 170). Barker echoes a similar viewpoint in stating that: “While the values and meanings attached to place remain significant, people are increasingly involved in networks which extend well beyond their physical locations.” (1999: 36) Drawing on Giddens and Thompson, Preston and Kerr summarise globalisation as “the sense of a growing interconnectedness between different parts of the world and the increasingly complexity of new forms of supra-national interaction and interdependency” (2001: 113). More succinctly, it has been described as “a collection of processes in which economic, political, cultural and other ties are made between different countries”, an interdependence that has helped to form a new pattern for people’s daily lives (Dasgupta 2004: 18).

As a small nation with almost no natural resources, Singapore from its early years as a nation embarked on a process of globalisation to make it relevant to the rest of the world (Kluver & Weber 2003: 371). It was an early adopter of a number of globalisation strategies, such as making English the language of business, politics and education; working with multinational companies to build the economy; importing popular culture from around the world; and importing education and foreign talent (Kluver & Weber 2003: 372). These strategies have led to it becoming one of the most globalised nations in the world (Kluver & Weber 2003: 372).

This experience of globalisation differs from that of Australian rural and regional areas. From the early years of European settlement, Australia’s economy was heavily dependent on agriculture, built on the ideal of “a class of landed workers ennobled by their vocation and their commitment to family, community and nation” (Gray & Lawrence 2001: 5, 6). Australian primary producers have been hit hard by more recent economic changes wrought by globalisation, such as the taking over of land

and farms by transnational corporations and the need to diversify to survive (Cheers 1999). Economic power has flowed from rural and regional communities to major cities, a shift that is “leaving much of rural Australia in crisis” (Alston 2002: 94) and which has exacerbated rural population falls, the downgrading of infrastructure and government services and the withdrawal of investment and commercial services such as banks (Cheers 1999). This has had wide-ranging effects: “In many places, government-employed service workers are being dismissed or being relocated, leaving those towns without an appropriate level of services, and without a secure middle-class base from which to draw leadership and direction.” (Gray & Lawrence 2001: 3) The rationalisation of services has not been confined to rural and regional areas – bank branches and government offices in many parts of Australia have been closed – but the effect has been more pronounced in these areas. While the effects of global market changes have not been all negative (Cheers 1999), they have, nonetheless, had profound effects on rural and regional communities.

Globalisation and the media

The media have been affected by globalisation no less than any other field. Changes in global information flows have dramatically shifted patterns of media distribution and consumption, and international concentration of media ownership has the potential to severely limit diversity of opinions and perspectives. This aspect of globalisation has created concerns about cultural imperialism, and in particular the dominance of US cultural products, primarily in Asian countries, but also in other Western nations: “Enthusiasts said that electronic mass media did away with distance and isolation. ... Those of a more critical turn of mind said that mass media did away with difference and autonomy as well as distance” (Vervoorn 1998: 230). Seneviratne points out that “it does not matter if one resides in the East or the West. The radar screens of the local media, as far as news priorities and agendas are concerned, are often set by a handful of global media companies, predominantly based in the West.” (Seneviratne 2005: 56). There are, for example, few major cities around the globe in which CNN and the BBC are not part of standard business hotel-room viewing.

While cultural imperialism is a contentious notion, in recent years concerns about the possible cultural implications of media globalisation have re-emerged as a central issue, particularly for Asian media (Bannerjee 2002: 517). Bannerjee argues that there are great imbalances in global cultural flows and the world trade in cultural commodities (2002: 517), and that “the one-way flow of media products and services from the advanced industrial countries to Third World nations undermine[s] their cultures, morals and values” (Bannerjee 2002: 519). For many Asian countries, “colonialism and the struggle for self-determination and nationhood are potent and recent images” (Massey & Chang 2002: 988), and Massey and Chang argue that concerns about this figure prominently in general concerns about the effects of globalisation on independence and cultural sovereignty (2002: 988).

In Australian regional communities, concerns about increasing concentration of media are focused primarily on the dominance of major media groups, and the effects of this on the availability of local news and information.

Media localisation

However, many theorists argue that globalisation does not exist in isolation, that it is instead naturally complemented by the “interrelated process” (Lie 2001: 19) of localisation. Some see localisation as a reaction against globalisation, while others suggest it is an essential part of the process. The literature on globalisation and localisation encompasses a broad range of disciplines – including human rights, arts and entertainment, “new media”, transport, economic development and public relations (see, for example, Cabus 2001, Ho 2003, Jacobsen & Lawson 1999, Maynard & Tian 2004, Nijkamp, et al. 2000, Preston & Kerr 2001)

Servaes argues that the intercultural dynamics set in motion by globalisation lead to the emergence, consolidation or reformulation of specific cultural and ethical values common to the various cultural areas (2000: 54-55). While globalisation encourages uniformity and homogenisation, localisation encourages identification with cultural, religious or national groupings (Maynard & Tian, 2004, p. 287). “While globalization is progressing at an unprecedented pace and intensity, the pervasiveness and depth of local identities have resurfaced.” (Dasgupta 2004: 19) Lie describes localisation as “an inward process of articulation and reinforcement of local identities and local community characteristics” (2001: 14), which can be seen as “a process of articulating locally grounded cultural practices and reinforcing cultural identities at local community levels by contrasting it with other cultural localities” (Lie 2001: 19). The concept of social capital may be intrinsically linked to localisation, as social capital can be seen as a “way of empowering local communities in the face of globalisation” (Alston 2002: 101, 102).

Localisation goes some way to addressing concerns that globalisation “has made most people marginalized, politically, economically and even culturally” (Wang 2000: 228). Wang cites the example of Japan, which has a strong Western influence but in many ways retains its own national and cultural identity; “the localist tendency is manifested as giving full play to Japanese national and cultural spirit, and creating its cultural image” (2000: 230). It could be argued that “geography still matters”, as local and national geographical factors continue to shape production and consumption processes in many ways (Preston & Kerr 2001: 15).

Australian regional newspapers can be seen to demonstrate the principles of localisation in the ways that they articulate and reinforce local identities, local values and local community characteristics. By demonstrating a preference for local news, and by being advocates for their communities on a range of issues, they encourage identification with the communities they serve, at the same time providing a point of contrast between their communities and those outside their circulation area. For example, the portrayal of government and big business as having negative impacts on regional communities (see, for example, 2005, 2005, Clayton 2005, Marston 2004) serves to reinforce community values while emphasising points of distinction between the geographical community and those outside it. This distinction may also be a factor in the development of social capital in these communities.

Singapore media, too, focus on perspectives relevant to communities, in this case communities defined primarily by language and culture. By highlighting the factors that differentiate each community in specific language-targeted publications and broadcasts, they provide points of contrast between communities, reinforcing

community identity and values. The existence of language-specific media outlets further supports this role by providing a focus point for each community on issues, ideas and events, and through this, the opportunity for community empowerment. The message is extended to the rest of the nation through broader approach of the English-language media.

Localisation is becoming increasingly apparent as a force in the media. For example:

In Asia, it is becoming increasingly evident that local, national and regional broadcast markets are emerging, and that the impact and penetration of Western-based programmes and channels are neither the most popular nor able to compete with local counterparts. On the contrary, more and more producers and broadcasters are localizing their content and trying to cater to local tastes, languages and cultures. (Bannerjee 2002: 518)

Implications for practice

While Australia and Singapore have, despite their shared colonial heritage, very different media systems, both share elements of a focus on community. This focus has come about in different ways – in Australia, community is often defined primarily geographically, while in Singapore, it is much more dependent on culture and language. Understandings of community are also influenced by historical development and political systems. In Singapore, for example, the reinforcement of communities of language, culture and religion occurs within a broader framework of nation-building, supported and encouraged by government.

In both nations, communities have their own media which reflect their interests, reinforce community values and help strengthen a sense of community. This localisation of media occurs within and alongside the bigger picture of globalisation. In recent years, much of the focus on the media has been on its global spread and the growth of news and information provided by multinational media giants. In most of the world, for example, cable or satellite television services include channels such as CNN and BBC World rather than more localised news services. What the “local”, community oriented nature of regional Australian and language-specific Singaporean media suggests is that space still needs to exist for news that focuses on communities, no matter how and why those communities are defined. The emphasis on community that exists within these forms of media may be a valuable counterpoint to the global influence of the news media giants.

Endnote

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented in the unrefereed strand of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre conference in Penang, Malaysia, in July 2006.

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KATHRYN BOWD is secretary of the Journalism Education Association, Australia and program director of the BA (Journalism) in the School of Communication at the University of South Australia. She worked as a journalist in Australia and the UK for 17 years before moving into journalism education. She is working toward a PhD, focusing on the relationships between communities and non-metropolitan newspapers. Email: kathryn.bowd@unisa.edu.au