

## **TV sports media distribution as cultural exchange<sup>1</sup>**

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For a little over a year I have been involved with AT.com,<sup>2</sup> a web-based bulletin board system designed to facilitate discussion and distribution of media content chosen and recorded by members, for members. The original purpose of AT was very explicit: to provide rugby matches to Australian and New Zealand expatriates who had no other means of watching them, and tangentially to any others who might show an interest. However its overall role has become as a hub for cultural exchange via media. AT provides Australian and New Zealand members with the opportunity to satisfy their need to connect with their own culture, as well as the opportunity to connect with other cultures by way of foreign sports media. The reverse is equally true, with foreign (non-Australian or New Zealand) members able to experience foreign (to them) sports media. Integral to this distribution role is discussion about a wide variety of technical, cultural and casual issues surrounding media distribution and use, making AT a complex and interesting cultural ecology.

In July 2005, while living and working as an English teacher in the Republic of Korea, I was struck down by a mystery disease the doctors told me, casually, was either pneumonia or tuberculosis. One afternoon, quarantined in my apartment awaiting test results, I came across across highlights of an old Waikato v Wellington rugby union match on channel 63 dubbed in Cantonese, and I was hooked. While I had played rugby and football as a youngster, I had actively avoided TV sports while living in New Zealand, but after two and a half years in Korea it suddenly meant a great deal to me. Perhaps through a conjunction of boredom and impending mortality, I had become a Real New Zealander. But alas, there was no more rugby to be found on channel 63. So I turned to the internet, and on one site I made contact with an Australian calling himself 'Kanga',<sup>3</sup> who was trying to distribute rugby games he had recorded, but found the demand too great for his internet connection. I had a very fast, unlimited link, so we made a deal: Kanga would record matches and send them to me over the internet; I would distribute them to others who wanted them. Other users expressed support, willingness to help record and distribute matches,

and so AT was born.<sup>4</sup> The intended membership of sports-starved expatriates broadened, and currently AT has 21,784 members from more than 100 countries, concentrated most strongly in Australia, Western Europe, North America and Northeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

My rugby epiphany mirrors much of the theory around national or cultural identity. James Lull describes nations as 'imagined communities'; polysemic spaces within which individuals may participate in ways appropriate to them.<sup>6</sup> There is no question I was a New Zealander before developing an appreciation for New Zealand sports; the development simply allowed me to engage in a new way with New Zealandness. The idea behind offering expatriates or diaspora communities media in order to connect them with their home is to assist them to develop a 'metaworld'; a refuge from the foreign environment in which an expatriate exists. My wife Debora Stoddart, in the context of ethnographic research into culture shock in expatriate communities, describes how such a 'safe haven in the domain of the Other'<sup>7</sup> can be created by surrounding oneself with familiarity; food, décor, music, accents, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Chaney cites the transnational phenomenon of the 'Irish' pub as a canonical metaworld - in Moscow, Bangkok, Buenos Aires or New York, 'Irish' pubs are consistent and reliable, possibly bearing only a cosmetic resemblance to a real Irish pub, but always fulfilling the role.<sup>9</sup>

The creation of the metaworld is itself important, but what goes on inside is more relevant: its most important function is, by providing sanctuary, to facilitate discourse both about one's home culture and one's experiences in the culture of the Other.<sup>10</sup> Nancy Baym's analysis of the rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s) usenet group demonstrates how valuable opportunity for shared reflection based on media consumption can be,<sup>11</sup> but her study does not explicitly concern expatriates, and the presumption on r.a.t.s is that participants have more or less equal access to the topical media. This presumption is unrealistic in a typical diaspora context - indeed, unequal access to media was the founding purpose of AT - so in order for AT to function fully as a discussion forum it must *supply* the media which is topical to discussion. Only by doing so is it able to provide a metaworld for expatriate members. Steinfeld recognises two main 'dimensions' of computer-mediated interaction: 'task' and 'socio-emotional'.<sup>12</sup> Both are clearly

present on AT, with task-oriented communication facilitating distribution and generally keeping order, while socio-emotional communication makes up the bulk of the discourse which makes the site a *community* rather than simply a media library. If we take Chaney's pub analogy literally, we can see this role made explicit in one of the earliest discussion threads, entitled "Favourite Beer?".<sup>13</sup> AT is an Australian sports bar on the internet.

Chaney, continuing Lull's 'imagined communities' line of argument describes lifestyle as a pattern of choices from a 'virtual cultural supermarket'; picking and choosing the bits and pieces of which make sense to them on an individual basis, but informed by their 'home' culture.<sup>14</sup> More applicable in the context of AT, however, is González' idea of 'cultural fronts', describing areas of negotiation at the boundaries where cultures (or 'imagined communities') butt up against each other. By choosing to inhabit these notional spaces, people may by 'symbolic struggle' negotiate new cultural meanings, thereby shaping their world.<sup>15</sup> Participation on AT has for many members provided an opportunity to renegotiate the embedded prejudices and preferences of one's own sporting culture by discourse. Sporting codes embody much cultural value, and mean a very great deal to those nations to which they belong, but not very much to others,<sup>16</sup> who might at best not understand them or at worst actively take issue with them. Television sports coverage mediates this strength of feeling by providing a more neutral, more distant portrayal of the sporting event than that which is experienced live, at the event itself.<sup>17</sup> The volunteer community of AT is another moderating factor. The site exists due to goodwill, shared effort and consideration; in fact even at a mathematical level the BitTorrent protocol used to distribute AT's media provides incentives to be altruistic.<sup>18</sup> In combination these factors engender a benign venue for discourse; a conciliatory rather than a combative cultural front which greatly enhances the site's value as a metaworld by easing symbolic struggle.

AT essentially reflects the will of its members: what they want to record, distribute, consume and discuss.<sup>19</sup> However, it does not represent the will of *all* members; the fact that AT only caters to those members who actively participate in the forum again underlines the importance of discourse to the metaworld.<sup>20</sup> AT's immediate popularity was unexpected, growing from 472,241 page hits in

August 2005 to 1,599,582 page hits in September 2005, more than a threefold increase in its first and second full months of operation.<sup>21</sup> Demand rapidly increased for sports other than rugby; separate forums were initially created for rugby union, Aussie rules football, rugby league, American football (NFL/CFL), ice hockey, cricket and motorsports. Before the end of 2005 AT formed a partnership with an emergent ice hockey distribution site run by a senior AT member. In April 2006 NFL and CFL content was moved to a new site under different management. The justifications for this were threefold: that AT's focus should remain primarily on antipodean content; that certain types of media were legally more risky than others; and that the members who joined AT because of American sports were seen to be 'leechers' - people who by and large did not participate in the discourse, and in contravention of the BitTorrent principle of altruism, took more than they were prepared to give.<sup>22</sup>

The exclusion of North American sporting content represents the only major alteration to AT policy to date, but the rupture in membership and content did not have a profound impact on the overall role of AT, or indeed its usage. It precipitated a small decline in the total proportion of AT.com visits by USA and Canada-based members, but general popularity among North American members remains high and continues to grow.<sup>23</sup> The fact that an almost complete embargo on North American content caused only a small proportional reduction in North American visits is at least a preliminary indication that even foreign, non-expatriate AT members<sup>24</sup> value the opportunity to consume Australian and New Zealand sports and media. This also calls attention to another fact which cannot be ignored: that people in *Australia* make up the largest single group of AT visitors.<sup>25</sup> Partly this is a function of necessity, since the users who provide the bulk of the media content must necessarily be in a place where it is broadcast, but it is also clear from forum comments that Australians and New Zealanders at home use AT as a general recreational discussion forum and source for media *they can get in ordinary life*.<sup>26</sup> While in many places there is a genuine need, many countries where foreign members live offer some coverage of Aussie sports. The fact that the site remains the 'source for Aussie sports'<sup>27</sup> for these members is a vital indication of the value of AT's community role.

AT means many different things to a wide range of people, and the complexities

of interaction embedded in it reflect this. However, on a fundamental level it's all quite simple: members use the forum as a place to relax, discuss, learn about things they don't know and teach the things they do, and to participate in media and sports culture even though they might be thousands of miles from anywhere their sport is played, or indeed although they may never have seen or heard of such sports beforehand. Having established all this, the burning question is: if as Real argues, media sports are becoming globalised (mostly by Australian Rupert Murdoch and his media empire),<sup>28</sup> why is there such staggering demand for this content? Why are global sports fans forced into a deviant role,<sup>29</sup> resorting to anonymous messageboards and arguably-legal distribution to gain access to average-quality, delayed coverage, sometimes in a foreign language which in many cases is only watchable on a computer screen? The sense of community developed around the sharing of these media makes a virtue out of these difficulties, using them to foster cooperation, exchange and understanding.

- 1 This is an edited version of a paper submitted as part of the requirements for a Graduate Diploma in Arts at Victoria University of Wellington.
- 2 I have omitted the name of the forum at the request of the forum's administrator.
- 3 All correspondence regarding AT is undertaken through nicknames, which I have not changed.
- 4 To be clear: Kanga is the founder of AT; my role was simply to provide bandwidth and disk space, and eventually I was given responsibilities as a forum moderator. Since leaving Korea in early 2006, my involvement with AT has been minimal, though that may change in future as time and resources permit. It is also important to note that the concept behind AT is not original; media distribution systems of the sort have been around effectively since the internet began, including those which specifically cater to expatriates.
- 5 As at 2006/10/16 21:00 NZDT.
- 6 Anderson, and Chaney, cited by Lull (2001:153).
- 7 Suvantola, cited by Stoddart (2005).
- 8 Stoddart (2005).
- 9 Chaney (2001:77) does not explicitly refer to 'metaworld', but this is precisely what he describes.
- 10 Stoddart (2005).
- 11 Baym (2000).
- 12 Steinfeld, cited by Jones and Kucker (2001:216).
- 13 <http://AT.com/vb/showthread.php?t=52>. As at 2006/10/16 at 21:00 NZDT, there are 9106 threads.
- 14 Chaney (2001:82-3).
- 15 González (2001:112+).
- 16 See for instance Geertz (1973); Bergin (2002); Kaufman and Patterson (2005); Simons (1996); and Ismond (2000). Interestingly, much of the scholarship on this matter appears to feature the game of cricket.
- 17 Jhally cited by Washington and Karen (2005:200-1).
- 18 Cohen (2003) designed the BitTorrent protocol explicitly with this in mind as a means to facilitate more efficient distribution. See in particular 3.1 Pareto Efficiency (p4).
- 19 My analysis focusses on sports media content, as that is my basis for involvement with AT and its initial purpose. However, at least as important is the role AT now plays in the distribution of non-sport media, demand for which is driven by Australians (both Home and Away), for the creation of metaworlds in much the same way as sport. If anything, the TV side of AT has grown larger and is more popular than the sports section. While I don't intend to analyse it here, it cannot go unmentioned.
- 20 Of the 21,000+ members, fewer than 1,000 have posted more than 10 messages to the forum. It is these members, not the silent majority, to whose needs the forum explicitly caters.
- 21 <http://AT.com/vb/showpost.php?p=3280>
- 22 Most of the discussion around this occurred in private between moderators, but see for instance <http://AT.com/vb/showthread.php?t=4890>, <http://AT.com/vb/showthread.php?p=47886> and <http://AT.com/vb/showthread.php?t=7121>.
- 23 <http://AT.com/vb/showthread.php?p=83945>.
- 24 AT users have the opportunity to select two national identifiers: "Where I Live" and "My Country"; however these are optional and for a number of reasons do not yield useful information. For example, Kanga (born and bred in Australia) lists "Where I Live" as Australia and "My Country" as the USA. Therefore, in the absence of hard data I presume that a fairly high proportion of visitors to AT are not in fact expatriate Australians and New Zealanders, but are foreigners living in their own countries.
- 25 <http://AT.com/vb/showthread.php?p=83945>.
- 26 The 'Game Discussion' and 'Chill out' forums represent the best examples of this. Since returning to New Zealand, my usage has matched this pattern.
- 27 <http://AT.com/vb/showpost.php?p=1813>
- 28 Real (2001:174-5).
- 29 As per Jenson (1992).

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The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is a department of the United Kingdom government, with responsibility for culture and sport in England, the building of a digital economy, and some aspects of the media throughout the UK, such as broadcasting and Internet. It also has responsibility for the tourism, leisure and creative industries (some joint with Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy). The department was also responsible for the delivery of the 2012 Olympic Keywords: mediatization, media logic, social interaction, modernity, virtualization. Introduction. This article presents a theory of the influence media exert on society and culture. It attempts to answer the question: What are the consequences of the gradual and increasing adaptation of central societal institutions, and the culture in which we live to the presence of intervening media? They devote some attention to social institutions like sports and religion, but their prime focus, quantitatively and qualitatively, rests on the format media give political communication. Like Asp (1986, 1990), Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) apply the concept of medi-ization to media's influence on politics. Digital-media startup Wave.tv has raised \$32 million to fund its expansion plans despite the blow the coronavirus pandemic dealt to its chief subject area—sports. The Series A round, which consists of new equity and debt, values the company, incorporated as Bullpen Sports Network Inc., at between \$50 million and \$100 million, according to Ishaan Sutaria, the president of Wave.tv. Newsletter Sign-up. CMO Today. CMO Today delivers the most important news of the day for media and marketing professionals. PREVIEW. SUBSCRIBE. The funding round was led by new backers CoVenture and GPS Investment Par Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2018-2022. Global and Russian markets: Key trends and outlooks. Expert opinions. The distinctions between segments are blurring, such as the distinctions between print and digital; video games and sports; terrestrial, cable and online TV; and social and traditional media. In the evolution of entertainment and media, traditional business models are being reinvented so that companies can tap into new revenue streams and create market relevance at scale.