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Play it again, Sam: how journalists cashed in on YouTube's favourite koala

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Abstract
The world was captivated when footage of a badly burnt koala drinking water from a Victorian firefighter's bottle was uploaded to YouTube in February 2009. When the story of “Sam the Koala” was adopted by the mainstream media, recombinant themes were used to construct her story— from heroism and patriotism to villain vs victim and romance. While scholars have examined the changing role of the journalist in a converged world and the rise of “soft” news, this paper focuses on the way journalists create disjointed narratives around YouTube footage to extend a story's lifespan. We call these new narrative forms “fractured fairytale news” to describe this emerging phenomenon of convergence culture. Further, we suggest that news media exploit the YouTube community for their own commercial gain and conclude that the fractured fairytale style is a poor vehicle for the future of news.

Introduction
As Australians reeled from the horror of the deadly Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria on February 7, 2009, images and stories of death, destruction and horror dominated the Australian media and made headlines around the globe. But from the ashes a much more palatable story emerged, one of hope and survival in the shape of a furry, badly burned koala named “Sam”, who captured the hearts of media audiences. The story's production is the epitome of media convergence: a citizen journalist with a mobile phone first captured Sam drinking from a volunteer firefighter's water bottle during a backburning operation a week before the fires, the footage was circulated via email to friends and family and later published by the Herald Sun newspaper. It was then uploaded by a veterinary student on to YouTube, where it received more than two million hits. A marsupial megastar was born.

Sam's story is part of a long news tradition that has helped to make the koala not only a national but an international icon. It was the early 20th century Australian print media that gave the koala its mantle as ambassador for the bush. On August 11, 1904, artist and writer Norman Lindsay drew his first koala cartoon for The Bulletin, entitled “The boy from Manly”. According to natural historian Ann Moyal, Lindsay’s method “was to symbolise a situation or an idea in single form, [so] he chose the koala as his form and idiom of Australianness” (2008, p. 134).

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By 1908, this koala character had solidified into *The Bulletin*’s legendary hero Billy Bluegum, who came to “symbolise national habits, foibles and ideals” (Moyal, 2008, p. 135) and featured regularly in its pages for more than half a century. The last drawing of Billy appeared on December 12, 1956, most fittingly with him at Australia’s first modern global event, the Melbourne Olympic Games.

The *Herald Sun* cast Sam firmly in the Billy Bluegum mould in its initial coverage. Sam was the symbol of the Australian spirit in the nation’s darkest hour – a plucky little survivor, an image of hope for a grieving nation. Her “saviour in gold”, David Tree (*Herald Sun*, February 12, 2009), was a hero – the embodiment of mateship, literally extending a helping hand – an exemplar for how Australians should respond to fire victims. This “true blue” news angle was quickly exhausted by News Limited newspapers, but Sam attracted global interest after the footage was uploaded on to YouTube, making her an irresistible international media commodity. Transnational media companies were reported to be vying for book rights, film deals and network TV interviews (*The Daily Telegraph*, March 18, 2009, p. 3), and Australia’s News Limited newspapers developed a series of related plots involving Sam and David Tree so it could continue to profit from their popularity.

The media event of “Sam the Koala” provides us with an entry point into our analysis of the ways in which YouTube has become a source of news, pointing to the changing role of the journalist. Our paper shows how the news media now seek maximum leverage from stories that generate mass attention in the YouTube community. The footage is given a series of new exchange values, thereby exploiting the unpaid work of the image creator and the YouTube user who uploaded it. We argue that to create these new exchange values, journalists employ disjointed narratives and archetypes that are familiar to audiences, and describe the result as “fractured fairytale news”. The use of fairytale frames has long been a part of news production, but within convergence culture the journalist constructs an event as a succession of self-contained stories, each able to capture the public’s attention in a different way. Within “fractured fairytale news”, the characters are reassigned new motives and roles to fit variable and conflicting presentations. The stories are also fractured in the way they are told across news mediums, from YouTube to traditional media. We argue the story of Sam the Koala is the epitome of this emerging fragmentation of classical narratives in constructing news and conclude that if journalists want to remain relevant and authoritative voices in the public sphere they need to stay true to their role of not just reporting what has great public appeal but also providing context and credibility for all sources of news, including YouTube.

The changing role of the journalist

The relationship between news media and consumers traditionally operated as a hierarchy in which the journalist’s role was “telling people what they need to know” (Deuze, 2007, p. 256). However, media convergence has resulted in a reconfiguration of media power in which the roles of producer and consumer are constantly shifting. The relationship is now both top down and bottom up, and media aesthetics and economics have been transformed (Jenkins, 2004).

Editors of news publications are operating under intense economic pressures due to increased competition for audiences and advertising in a fragmented, deregulated global media market. They are increasingly expected to develop “citizen journalism” initiatives in order to reconnect with disappearing audiences, following advice from researchers such as those at the American Press Institute who have claimed that “to stay afloat, media companies must reimagine storytelling forms to vie for consumer attention […] and they must react to consumers’ creation of content with awe and respect” (American Press Institute, 2005, p. 3).

To meet the challenges, traditional news outlets such as newspapers have moved to more “lifestyle” journalism (which relies on less expensive sources) and are looking for “good news”
stories to sell to advertisers and audiences. By running more celebrity news that ties their product to other media, they hope to make it seem more relevant to audiences who are engaged with a wide range of media (Fulton, 2005, p. 222). This change has resulted in “the blurring of form and content between news and non-news” (Dunn, 2005, p. 140), as newsrooms increasingly move away from the inverted pyramid form of objective, fact-based news, expressed as “the public interest”, and further into the realm of soft news, which is oriented to popular and commercial values (McKnight, 2001, p. 55). Soft news is considered infotainment and does not have a high priority in the traditional news values scale. It encompasses such fields as entertainment, sport, lifestyle, human interest, celebrity and the arts (Bainbridge et al., 2008).

**YouTube as a source of news**

Journalists have long engaged with popular culture in shaping the news. In exploring the relationship between journalism and popular culture, Conboy (2002) argues that the popular press survives on its ability to maintain a dialogue with contemporary cultural trends (Conboy, 2002, p. 1). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that YouTube, a new form of popular culture, is given coverage in the mainstream media. With its catchcry “broadcast yourself”, YouTube has turned a generation of media consumers into producers since its launch in 2005. Its creators report that more people tune into YouTube than the SuperBowl and 70,000 new clips are uploaded each week. YouTube is owned by Google and is a commercial product, yet it is celebrated for its participatory, democratic nature because it gives the power to users and viewers to decide its content (van Dijck, 2009, p. 45). It is its non-commercial relations with consumers that make it an attractive news source for journalists. YouTube provides a free, transparent view of what is generating mass public attention and its content becomes an extremely valuable commodity for the mainstream media. The way journalists make meaning of YouTube footage for their own commercial gain deserves specific attention.

We consider YouTube not only as a form of popular culture but also as a cultural archive in which material is utilised for both altruistic and economic purposes. Gehl (2009) argues that the YouTube archive has two curatorial functions – the storage and classification of material in the archive and its exhibition and display. Gehl says YouTube users are the curators of storage and classification. “Each and every object in YouTube is titled, described and tagged ... Users supply all three.” (Gehl, 2009, p. 48) He suggests it is the curators of display who are most powerful, as they are able to create meaning and “facts” from the digital archive by contextualising, interpreting and displaying material. He says they also benefit from the unpaid labour of the curators of storage, who have paid significant capital costs in equipment and internet access to produce or gather, edit, upload and tag videos (2009, p. 49). They create new exchange values from the footage to gain maximum benefit from what is shown to have immense public appeal. Gehl limits his description of curators of display to bloggers, hybrid websites, search engine and web portals such as Yahoo!, large broadcast media, Google/YouTube itself and its advertisers. He gives the example of bloggers scouring the archive in search of the object that will fit the particular narrative they are constructing. We argue that journalists are powerful curators of display or “meaning makers” of the YouTube archive who ultimately exploit the free labour of those who upload content to the site. But where Gehl focuses on bloggers scouring the archive in search of footage to suit the narrative they are constructing, journalists create narratives around the objects of the archive to capitalise on their immense public appeal.

Hartley describes the bardic function where traditional media have organised and scaled human storytelling into an industrial or expert-system model of production in which professionals manufacture stories, experiences and identities for the rest of us to consume (Hartley, 2009, p. 131). He outlines how this process is being challenged in the new media context. This is clear in the YouTube environment, where the story begins online with curators of storage and viewers before it progresses into the hands of experienced narrators or curators of display such as jour-
nalists. But the journalist’s role in reporting popular YouTube footage highlights how traditional media continue to rely on the expert-system model in a converged world. They create new exchange value from content which begins online, using their authoritative storytelling techniques and forms to do so. An analysis of the way YouTube has been reported in the mainstream media (Burgess & Green, 2009) indicates that it tends to be framed as either a lawless repository for a flood of amateur content or a big player in the new economy. In press coverage, YouTube is often used to express familiar anxieties about young people and the digital media, especially in relation to the risks, uses and misuses of the internet and mobile phone technologies (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 17). It could be argued that journalists create new exchange values from YouTube by creating moral panic around it as a “trouble as fun, fun as trouble” convergence (Herring, 2008), but this is more the product of the traditional conflict model of reporting than anything else. The way the news media use classical narrative and archetypes to create new exchange values from YouTube deserves specific attention, particularly if we consider narratives in the media as simply a way of selling something (Fulton, 2005, p. 3).

The use of classical narratives and archetypes in journalism is not new. Traditional themes are often used in news stories which share similar characteristics to oral literature, myth, traditional tales, ballads, literature, family histories and other forms of cultural narrative (Andersen et al., 1994, p. 58). Propp (1975) is well known in media studies for identifying recurrent patterns, set characters and plot actions in fairytales. The main characters include the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero. Booker (2004), in a more contemporary approach to story development, outlines seven basic plots that are structural transformations of ancient tales – overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, rebirth, comedy and tragedy. Carroll (2001) identifies and explores key stories or archetypes which are at the source of Western culture – the virtuous whore, the troubled hero, salvation by a god, soul-mate love, the mother, the value of work, fate, the origin of evil, and self-sacrifice.

Sometimes several plots and archetypes can be adopted simultaneously in news production. Andersen and Gray (2008) have coined the term “militainment” to describe the type of story that adopts a hybrid format, and where the media and military aim to control imagery and the meanings of war through fictional formatting. An example of militainment is the coverage of George W. Bush’s “Mission accomplished” speech on board USS Abraham Lincoln, in which he declared decisive victory over both Iraq and a “great evil” (Andersen & Gray, 2008, p. 376). While militainment recognises disjointed narratives in war reporting, we argue a new style of narrative is emerging in the reporting of news stories which first attract mass public attention in new media, most notably YouTube. We call this type of story “fractured fairytale news”, where disjointed narratives and archetypes are developed to create maximum exchange value from material which lacks hard news qualities but has clear public appeal. The story is also fractured in the way it is told across mediums. Here the story begins in one media platform, such as YouTube, and bears intertextual references to fictional characters and/or themes. This provides the initial angle from which the journalist reports. The journalist then assumes the role of authoritative narrator and applies a combination of plots and archetypes to ensure the longevity of the story and maintain public appeal. The story ends when traditional media no longer find value in the story and/or the audience is no longer entertained. Reporting on popular YouTube footage is hardly the type of journalism that topples governments or wins Walkley awards or Pulitzer prizes. The fairytale framing of news has long been a part of news narrative construction. But militainment and fractured fairytale news both recognise the use of hybrid narrative forms to expand on a traditional set of story conventions to appeal to audiences.

The image of Sam the Koala drinking from volunteer firefighter David Tree’s water bottle is arguably the defining media image of Victoria’s 2009 Black Saturday bushfires with both Australian and global audiences. However, the image was not created by professional media workers. One of Tree’s colleagues captured the moment using a mobile phone, and it was eventually
picked up by the *Herald Sun* newspaper, which made the image its own, imprinting its logo on the footage which was used on its website and subsequently uploaded to YouTube, promoting the image through its photo sales section to raise money for the fire service and, most notably, constructing news narratives around the image to capitalise on readers’ affection for the injured animal and her rescuer.

The image was published and discussed in News Limited tabloid newspapers throughout Australia from February 10 to the end of May 2009, and featured on commercial television news at the height of the fire crisis, but rated few mentions on the ABC, in Fairfax newspapers or even in *The Australian*, which carried only one report on the media melee surrounding Sam (March 21, 2009).

In our analysis of the tabloid media’s use of the image, it became clear that journalists created a succession of fragmented narratives about Sam the Koala and David Tree by developing new plots and assigning the characters different roles to keep the audience interested. Timeless archetypes of victim, villain, hero and damsel in distress were used and the backdrops changed several times, from the bush story of Australian mateship to a koala love story. In keeping with the notion of “fractured fairytale news”, we have identified a range of disjointed narrative plots and archetypes which fit the models outlined by Propp, Booker and Australian literary tradition, including:

**Australian mateship**

The ethos of Australian mateship features strongly in the Sam the Koala stories. It provided the initial news angle for journalists, but was exhausted within two days of the story first being published in News Limited papers. The *Herald Sun* coverage began on February 10 with the photo splashed across the front page with the heading, “Here you go, mate”, and the caption, “Fire does not discriminate ... and neither does the Country Fire Authority. This extraordinary photo of CFA volunteer David Tree giving water to a distressed koala was taken amid the burnt-out remains of a forest near Mirboo North in Gippsland.” (*Herald Sun*, February 10, 2009, p. 1). The caption did not acknowledge when the photo was taken or by whom. Two days later, the *Herald Sun* reported on the media event that saw Sam and David Tree reunited at the wildlife shelter where she was being nursed. The front page headline: “Mate, you are a lifesaver” (February 12, 2009). The *Geelong Advertiser* reported the same event under the heading, “Koala meets friend again” (February 12, 2009).

**Overcoming the monster**

News Limited depicted the Black Saturday bushfires as a monster that razed communities and destroyed everything in its path. The footage of Sam the Koala and David Tree became the symbol of hope in the aftermath of this terrible event, even though the image was taken before the fires occurred. “Overcoming the monster” is recognised as one of Booker’s seven basic plots, in which the monster is invariably shown as posing a deadly threat to an entire community of people and as a mortal enemy to the human race (Booker, 2004, p. 219). For example, *The Daily Telegraph* placed its initial coverage of Sam the Koala under the strap, “Hell’s fury: the survivors” (February 13, 2009), and *The Gold Coast Bulletin* reported on the, “Rescue from a wildlife wipe out” (February 14, 2009).

**Rags to riches**

There is a dominant rags to riches plot in which Sam is the central character. This storyline follows Sam’s rise to global celebrity and her money-making power (in the form of photo sales for the Country Fire Authority cause and the lucrative book, film and advertising deals said to be
being negotiated on her behalf). The most basic example of rags to riches is that of Cinderella, the story of a humble, disregarded little hero or heroine who is lifted out of the shadows to a glorious destiny (Booker, 2004, p. 53). A collection of News Limited headlines reinforce this plot:

- “Get your people to talk to my people: Sam the koala signs up a manager” (The Sunday Telegraph, March 8, 2009);
- “Sam’s a money spinner” (Herald Sun, February 18, 2009);
- “Big bucks flood in for cover girl koala” (The Mercury, May 18, 2009);
- “Sam the koala is a superstar” (The Daily Telegraph, March 18, 2009);
- “Coming soon, Sam the movie” (Herald Sun, March 18, 2009).

**Heroes and villains**

Hybrid archetypes – most notably heroes and villains – are applied to the story of Sam the Koala. These characters are identified by Propp (1975) as central to the classic fairytale. David Tree was branded a hero by the media with headlines such as, “Mate you are a lifesaver” (Herald Sun, February 12, 2009), and descriptions of him as her “saviour in gold” (Herald Sun, February 12, 2009). But as the media continued to seek new exchange value from the footage, he was transformed into a villain with a hidden agenda. Booker says the consistent feature of monsters, villains and tragic heroes is that they have a blind spot; they are obsessive; and they live in a fantasy world of wishful thinking which is linked to egocentricity (Booker, 2004, p. 254). Stories evolve around Tree cashing in on his fame and the tragedy of Black Saturday with, “I won’t rip off Sam: firey denies he’s trying to cash in on injured koala” (Herald Sun, March 10, 2009), and, “PR blaze strains fire friendship” (The Sunday Tasmanian, March 8, 2009). Adelaide’s Advertiser applies both hero and villain in the story “I only want to help Sam”, with the lead paragraph: “Sam the Koala’s saviour has rejected claims he is cashing in on his new-found fame.” (March 10, 2009) Tree is left bewildered by his treatment in the media: “I’ve never chased the media. The media’s chased me.” (Herald Sun, March 10, 2009) When the media reported Sam’s death from chlamydia, Tree was transformed into a broken hero: “I’m sobbing like a baby and I am a grown man. It’s like it’s not worth it now – that she managed to survive the fires but to die from a disease that they should be able to vaccinate against.”

Ironically, the media itself is cast as villain at times where journalists offer reflective comment pieces or turn the focus on the narrative techniques used to construct the Sam phenomenon. For example, The Weekend Australian ran a story on the media hounding Sam’s wildlife shelter under the headline, “Hungry media intruding on Sam’s safe haven” (March 21, 2009), and the Herald Sun ran a satirical piece, “How much koala can you bear” (March 20, 2009), in which journalist Ross Brundrett sets up a mock interview with Sam the Koala. In one mock interview exchange, the journalist asks Sam about her latest movie deal:

**Journalist:** “So, what can you tell us about the movie?”

**Sam:** “Well, it’s my life story and it builds up to that amazing scene where I drink a bottle of water, only we’ve changed it to a bottle of Coke because we thought that gave it a little more edge, and besides, the product placement was worth big bucks, ha, ha, ha. Anyway it stays pretty true to life from then on, with the addition of a couple of brilliant car chase sequences and a slow-mo of me wrestling with the baddies.”

**Romance**

News Limited did not miss an opportunity to get further mileage out of Sam’s popularity by tying her to the general news cycle and Carroll’s (2001) notion of soul-mate love. In the spirit

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of the season, it announced on February 13 that it was “Valentine’s Day for Sam”, with the subheading, “Love story” (*Herald Sun*). Readers were told she had a new beau – Bob, another injured koala being cared for at the shelter. The story went national with, “Koala love goes global” (*The Advertiser*, February 16, 2009); “Rescued Koala falls in love” (*Northern Territory News*, February 13, 2009); and “Koala Sam now lucky in love” (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 13, 2009).

**Tragedy**

News of Sam’s death from chlamydia on August 6, 2009, shocked the nation, and the *Herald Sun* responded by devoting the front page, a double-page spread and editorial to the tragedy. Our analysis found News Limited gave Sam’s story more news coverage than any individual human victim or survivor of the fire. Booker outlines several ways in which a tragedy unfolds and highlights a tragic death as violent, premature, unnatural, or one that shows something has gone hideously or, as we say, tragically, wrong (Booker, 2004, p. 153). This is the treatment often adopted by the news media in their depiction of a tragic end. The story came full circle with its reference to the initial true-blue news angle with the headline, “She was such a little battler” (*Herald Sun*, August 7, 2009). The newspaper quoted condolence messages from Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Victorian Premier John Brumby and Federal Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull. Mr Rudd was quoted as saying:

> I think that [Sam] gave people of the world a great sense that this country Australia can come through those fires – as we have. Sam the Koala was part of the symbolism of that and it’s tragic she is no longer with us.

Including comments from authoritative sources made Sam’s death a “hard news story”. The *Herald Sun* also ran a pointer: “Leave your tributes to Sam … PLUS watch the video that started it all”, along with a fact file on chlamydia. In Greek-tragedy style, the audience became the chorus with a list of condolence emails printed in the newspaper with comments such as, “Cross over the rainbow bridge, darling Sam” and, “What a sad ending this beautiful fairytale had”.

**Conclusion**

McNair (2009) has described the current news media climate as the Age of Dissolutions. Journalism is in a state of crisis – a crisis of confidence, of identity and of an existential nature as journalists’ authority and status is challenged by the massive changes to news businesses, technologies and cultural practices that are largely due to the rise of new media. McNair argues that the journalist’s role now is that of an “information architect” who is needed to fulfil the role of providing context and credibility to news. Professional practices and standards are more crucial than ever in a world where people are inundated with information and journalists can play the role of facilitator of the public sphere.

New media such as YouTube will continue to be a story in themselves as well as a generator of news, but if journalists want to be the authoritative voice on these phenomena they will need to do more than generate fractured fairytale news in their attempts to connect with audiences. After all, the audience has shown it doesn’t need journalists to replay these types of stories because they can do it themselves. Rather than exploit the unpaid labour of the YouTube community for its content and as a free opinion poll to what is generating mass public attention, journalists need to refocus on their core business. The MEAA Code of Ethics reminds us that journalists are “professionals who search, disclose, record, question, entertain, comment and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy. They scrutinise power, but also exercise it, and should be responsible and accountable” (MEAA, 1999).
The amazing image of David Tree and Sam could have been presented from a range of other perspectives if journalists had carried out their professional mandate. But from the first publication of the photograph with the headline, “Here you go, mate” on p. 1, the Herald Sun made a direct appeal to populism and the patriotism that had already proved a winner with the new media audience.

As Fulton (2005) says, soft news reporting does not just write characters into stories. It links events with individuals rather than social institutions and, by presenting the story in this way, is able to elide the political, social or economic factors that would enable audiences to contextualise events and analyse issues separately from the people involved. In the case of Sam the Koala, providing a broader context could have meant audiences learned about the history of the koala and what it is about this animal that has made it Australia’s best-loved national symbol; Sam and Dave’s story could have been used to raise awareness of the challenges endangered koalas face and the disease which, according to the Australian Koala Foundation, is carried by at least half of the nation’s koala population (Australia Koala Foundation, n.d.). Journalists could have provided an understanding of Sam’s behaviour through the lens of scientific or Indigenous understandings of the koala.

Koalas are very difficult to see in their environment – they were not detected in the new colony until 1803, 15 years after first European settlement (Moyal, 2008, p. 6). David Tree told The Australian: “You normally don’t get close to a wild koala; they bolt off.” (March 21, 2009) And koalas rarely drink water, but instead hydrate through eating the most tender tips of eucalyptus leaves, so for a koala to consume three bottles of water in quick succession, as David Tree reported to the media, is highly unusual behaviour.

Moyal (2008), in her iconography of the koala, says that in one NSW tribal language “koala” means “no water”, and the link between the koala and water informs many Indigenous myths, as does the animal’s role in many stories as a wise adviser in times of danger and trouble, and a clever operator when oppressed.

An Indigenous perspective may have served journalists well in their attempts to contextualise the YouTube phenomenon in an even older, but much fresher, Australian storytelling tradition, but instead they remained firmly in a well-worn Western narrative cycle and generated fractured fairytale news by constructing conflicts over global media deals, turning the “mate”, once a “saviour in gold” into the villain and giving Sam a timely love interest in an attempt to spark up the story once the true-blue angle had been exhausted. When the protracted media event of “Sam the Koala” is read as an overall narrative, these variable and conflicting presentations of the “news” she embodies contest the coherence of the story, but read discretely, the media is involved in constructing the event in a succession of self-contained stories, each able to capture the attention of the public in a different way.

It is easy to see how this style of journalism can lose its sense of purpose, beyond selling ads and boosting circulation. McKnight observes that at its worst, soft news and its neo-liberal, market-oriented rationale has the potential to tip over into “exaggeration, sensation and ultimately, fiction” (McKnight, 2001, p. 49), which begs the question for journalists: do koalas really fall in love?

Sam the Koala’s story illustrates the use of fractured fairytale news, where disjointed narratives and archetypes are developed to create maximum exchange value out of material which lacks hard news qualities but has clear public appeal. It shows how some journalists are becoming Rumpelstiltskins of the Information Age. After all, turning a picture of a koala’s rescue into a six-month news extravaganza is almost as fanciful and profitable as spinning straw into gold.
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