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Moral compass: How a small-town newspaper used silence in a hyper-charged controversy

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Abstract
A recent controversy over plans to build a mosque in the provincial Australian city of Bendigo provides an interesting case to explore the news practices of one small-town newspaper faced with an issue that triggered an avalanche of hate speech, bigotry and extremist voices. Between 2014 and 2016, there was open conflict inside the city's municipal chamber, violent street protests, hate campaigns and disinformation on social media. This research considers the role of the *Bendigo Weekly* in facilitating and shaping debate among local news audiences. Our research reveals that the newspaper deployed silence as a deliberate strategy for countering hatred and to tourniquet debate to the local level. The newspaper argued this was in the interests of serving as a 'moral compass'. The importance of engaging a diversity of voices in deliberative democracy is widely celebrated in journalism studies. This essay, however, extends scholarship on silence as a form of agency for countering hate speech that is becoming an increasing feature of the digital era.

Keywords
Common good, community identity, local journalism, media and mosques, media power, moral disinterestedness, morality, silence

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Introduction

The small city of Bendigo's wide and opulent central streetscape dates back to the 1800s and is emblematic of one of the world's great gold rushes that brought together people from all corners of the globe. From 2014 to 2016, these streets took on a different symbolism when they filled with thousands of angry protesters in response to a local planning proposal to construct a mosque. The conflict became one of the most visible backlashes yet against an Islamic prayer centre in Australia (Stewart, 2015), making history and garnering international attention (US Department of State, 2017). During the controversy, municipal meetings were derailed and violent protests were staged in the city, supported by alt-right groups from within and beyond Australian shores. Objectors took the dispute to the High Court before the mosque was eventually approved. At one low point, vile imagery of female genital mutilation was circulated on social media by a local politician with anti-Islam views and there was also a mock beheading on the streets.

The Bendigo mosque planning issue became a very loud and vocal controversy, as we will soon demonstrate. While reporting conflict is certainly a key news value (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017), we are more interested in highlighting and interrogating an under-examined media practice that emerged during the controversy – the exercise of silence in the interests of democracy and community identity. By silence here, we mean the use of media power to deliberately halt media attention around an issue that involves hatred, racial vilification and religious bigotry that may be generating coverage elsewhere.

To extend local journalism's relationship to silence in such contexts, we first shift away from traditional approaches to democratic theory and the 'objective' journalist to situate moral disinterestedness front and centre in this discussion. Elsewhere, we have been interested in critiquing how certain local news plays – and is expected to play – a role in preserving or reinforcing a particular moral order and meaning making function in the geographic or 'geo-social' spaces they serve (Hess, 2016, 2017; Hess and Waller, 2017). We follow Pierre Bourdieu (1990) who contends:

> Instead of wondering about the existence of universal interests I will ask: who has an interest in the universal. Or what are the social conditions that have to be fulfilled for certain agents to have an interest in the universal. (p. 31)

In this article, we explore notions of 'deliberate' silence (Hansen, 2018; Jungkunz, 2013; Keating, 2013), which has been theorised as a positive intervention in public debate. We expand this to consider deliberate silence as a practice that can be adopted by those in positions of media power to reinforce a particular moral or worldview in the interests of social order. It is our contention that certain local news outlets continue to wield considerable symbolic power to shape reality, especially the way audiences perceive notions of what it means to be 'local' or part of a 'community' (Hess, 2017). There are times when democratic debate can become heated and unruly (think human rights and environmental protests), and where marginalised or under-represented people unite for collective action. But there are also times when voices claiming 'rights' are violent, destructive, and ignite hatred and intolerance. In such instances, silence is a powerful moral instrument in the hands of news media and deserves our attention. This should be

situated, nonetheless, against the desire of media outlets to reinforce their legitimacy and should always be considered against a backdrop of power.

In the sections that follow, we begin by highlighting the role of local media as civic custodians in the communities they serve, and the importance of considering their relationship to moral disinterestedness in increasingly unruly, noisy and uncivil mediated spaces. We will then unpack the dominant approaches to studying silence in media and journalism, from press censorship to how people are talked about, talked to, ignored or denied opportunities to speak and be heard. Through an examination of the *Bendigo Weekly*'s practices, we argue there are under-examined dimensions of silence within journalism studies that deserve attention. Ultimately, we position deliberative silence as a force available to those in positions of media power that should be studied through a critical, rather than celebratory lens.

Local journalism, moral disinterestedness and the common good

In examining the role of silence in local news debates, it is important to expand on the context through which we consider local journalism. Local media's strong connection to 'community' often leads scholars to reach for democratic theory to understand its relationship to public issues. In deliberative democracy, for example, representing diversity and giving voice are part of journalism's normative role. Nielsen (2015) highlights, for example, that local journalists prefer to see themselves as independent and detached from the communities they cover – that their most important role is to hold power to account and keep people informed about public affairs. Local journalists are also seen to exemplify deliberative democracy models because of their willingness to connect audiences to conversations and to resolve matters of public concern. Public, advocacy and recent shifts towards solutions journalism – have all emerged from such traditions where journalists play an active facilitator role and provide a platform for a range of voices to be heard (Dzur, 2002; Merritt, 2009; Rosen, 1999). However, democratic theories (even James Carey's fondness of civic republicanism) tend to assume that local political decision-making can be arrived at equitably, or that individuals can and will put aside their own interests for the sake of the collective (see, for example, Hess, 2016). We have argued elsewhere that established local newspapers surviving the digital era can be understood as 'civic custodians' in that they play a powerful role in shaping community identity and connection at the intersection of political, cultural and social realms (Hess, 2016).[1] In viewing local journalism this way, we must also reposition its role as serving and negotiating a shared 'common good', rather than 'public good', because it provides a more robust, and broad-based foundation from which to understand its closeness to 'community' and associated moral and collective values (see Hess, 2017 for full discussion). Other scholars have also advocated for the need to consider local journalism's relationship to the common good (see especially Borden, 2010, 2014; Christians, 1999) but not through a lens of media power. Hess draws on Bourdieu (1990) to argue there are always certain institutions and individuals in society to whom we turn to help shape our understandings or reinforce certain values; and that it is in the interests of such institutions or individuals to perpetuate certain ideas for their own legitimacy. In other words, the common good[2] provides the fine-grained sensitivity to consider how ideas of 'right'

and 'just' behaviour are constantly being challenged and re-negotiated by journalists in specific social contexts. This meaning making function and contribution to social order can be especially important in times of crisis, enabling voices that reinforce a particular worldview to be favoured over others.

Voices and silences in journalism. Silence and voice are often set up in binary opposition in scholarship about journalism. Journalism is, after all, largely celebrated as a platform from which a range of voices can be heard or listened to. Here, news media are understood not only as a 'precondition for political voice in large-scale societies, but are also an important factor in distributing the possibilities for voice among different groups and sectors of the population' (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt, 2018). The Fourth Estate is therefore seen as counteracting coercive structures of silence by ideally giving 'voice to the voiceless' in the public sphere (Hansen, 2018). It follows that most contemporary journalism scholarship concerned with questions of public debate and civic engagement subscribes to what Gray (2015) calls a *vocal ideal of democratic citizenship*. It focuses, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, on the news media's Fourth Estate responsibility for empowering the voices of citizens in the democratic process, and equates silences with disengagement and *barriers to voice*. Scholars working in the critical-cultural tradition have argued that the news media have capacity to stifle debate and silence marginalised voices (e.g. Couldry, 2010; Dreher, 2009; McChesney, 2000). Noelle-Neumann's (1993) well known 'spiral of silence' theory of public opinion formation has been widely appreciated and critiqued, while external threats to silencing the Fourth Estate have been at the heart of discussions about freedom of speech, freedom of the press and censorship throughout history and today (Lidberg and Muller, 2018; Steel, 2012).

It is our contention that there are indeed times when media power and silence can be used in the interests of democratic debate rather than as a threat to its existence. There is increasing scholarship that calls for deeper engagement with a range of meanings and motivations for silence, some of which might, in fact, be positive, active and politically engaged. Most recently, Ejvind Hansen (2018) has identified an urgent task for the Fourth Estate which is 'to create spaces for more (or at least: alternative structures of) silence' (Hansen, 2018: 1078). Megan Le Masurier (2015) and Hansen (2018) are among those to consider the connections between journalism, deliberative democracy and silence in the context of the greatly increased bandwidth of media. For example, Hansen (2018: 1072) draws on Derrida (1973) and Deleuze (1995) to look beyond journalism's 'obvious assignment of counteracting problematic structures of silence' to argue it can be used by the Fourth Estate to maintain meaningful discussion in a public sphere that has become 'a 24/7 machine'. In Speech and Phenomena, Derrida (1973) observed that in order to understand how meaning emerges out of communication, it is important to break free of the immediacy of the voice. He looked beyond the idea that silence is something to avoid, to look at how it plays a role in structuring meaning. More recently, Deleuze (1995) has identified that one of the main challenges to the constitution of democratic public spheres today is that when there is little space for silence, we end up in a situation where what is said gradually becomes meaningless noise that we are constantly forced to address. Hansen (2018) draws on these ideas to propose three approaches that the Fourth

Estate can take to in attempts to realise meaningful public discussion: silencing certain dominant voices, making room for an increased lack of answers to complex social problems and creating an awareness of the insufficiencies of the public sphere. Le Masurier (2015: 148) has suggested slow journalism as one way to improve the quality and accuracy of public discourse by providing media formats that allow silences as time for reflection, critical evaluation and discussion.

Towards deliberate silences in news. In order to extend on this thinking, we also look to scholars in political science, gender and development disciplines who have begun to investigate some of the factors that differentiate enforced or coerced silences from the kinds of silence that can be considered expressions of agency. These offer some valuable insights that are relevant to this discussion. For example, feminist scholar Christine Keating (2013) identifies 'resistive silence' as the rejection of speech that would insert the speaker into existing oppressive power relations or practices. Fernandez (2018: 199) expands on Keating (2013) to argue that 'resistive silence' can be deployed as an 'explicit strategy of resistance to the distortions produced by the cacophony of political and media 'circuses':

> The noise of normative politics on hyper-charged issues such as terrorism . . . has become so deafening that silence becomes the preferred option that offers necessary room to breathe. Such withdrawal into silence could also allow the space to consider alternative political pathways. (Fernandez, 2018: 199)

In a similar vein, political theorist Vincent Jungkunz (2013) introduces the concept of 'deliberate silence' as an intervention in public debate that can work to transform social and political contexts. While using silence as a means to enhance voice seems counterintuitive, Jungkunz says in a garrulous world 'silences become powerful ways of shaking things up' (Jungkunz, 2013: 4). They are not intended to subvert the conversation, but may be intentional means of communicating a message, value, consent or a disagreement. 'Deliberate silences' combine intentionality, meaningfulness, thoughtful engagement and robust commitment to inclusion. This line of inquiry focuses on silences at a grassroots level, and as a way of empowering marginalised voices. However, little research provides the framework in which to examine deliberate silences that are enacted by news media in the interests of democracy and community identity as guided by moral disinterestedness.

A small-town battleground

The Bendigo mosque controversy can be understood as an indication of the mounting international challenge to Muslims constructing purpose-built places of worship in western countries. Debates throughout the world share many features, including a wide range of stakeholders engaging in public discussion at the local level that resonates nationally, and sometimes internationally through media. Liu (2012) identified at least 53 contested mosque-building projects in the United States. Other examples include a 2009 Swiss referendum that banned the construction of minarets, and the opening of Denmark's first

purpose-built mosque, which was mired by conflict (Hooper, 2014). A survey of other European mosque planning controversies highlighted cases from Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain (Abdelkadar, 2014). There have also been bitter planning wars over mosque projects in the United Kingdom (see, for example, Reeves et al., 2009). From 2014 to 2016, Bendigo attracted international attention because it was the site of multiple anti-mosque/anti-Islam and anti-racism protests that became a flashpoint for national debates about community values, terrorism, multiculturalism, Australian identity and polarised the local community. As in other countries, the protests extended beyond a contentious planning scenario because they aimed to prevent Muslim people from experiencing the same religious rights and freedoms as other citizens. At the height of the controversy on 29 August 2015, about 1000 protesters took to the streets. It was the largest state policing operation ever conducted outside the state capital Melbourne, with estimates that up to 30 per cent of protesters were not local (Rudner, 2017: 81).

Bendigo is a mid-sized regional town located 150 km (2 hours drive) north-west of Melbourne. Ethnic and religious difference has been present there since the gold rush of the 1850s, but according to the 2016 census only 2.5 per cent of the total population was born overseas from a non-European nation. In recent years, Karenni, Hazara and Sudanese people with refugee backgrounds have settled in the area, and in the period 2006–2011, the diverse Islamic population more than doubled to close to 400, which was the fastest rate of increase in regional Victoria, creating the need for a purpose-built facility for weekly prayers, festivals and social events such as birthdays and weddings (Markus, 2018). In January 2014, *Bendigo Weekly* revealed plans for a AUD 3 million mosque. As details of the plan became public, anti-mosque/anti-Islam objectors including Bendigo residents and national right-wing political groups entered the debate. They tried to control the planning process and influence decision-making. The conflict intensified when a local 'Stop the Mosque' group established a Facebook page on 20 June 2014 – 2 days after the City of Greater Bendigo Council gave notice of approval for the development. Local opponents mobilised through formal planning objections, social media, disruption at council meetings and street rallies. A substantial part of the anti-mosque/anti-Islam campaign was supported from outside the region through social media, training, attendance at public events and crowd source funding (Stewart, 2015). For example, analysis by the Online Hate Prevention Institute in 2014 showed only 3 per cent of people who engaged with the 'Stop the Mosque in Bendigo' Facebook page were from Bendigo, with 59 per cent from other Australian states and 13 per cent from overseas (Markus, 2018). External groups that supported planning appeals and local protests included Restore Australia (which emerged from the national Populist Party One Nation), Q Society (with ties to UK anti-Muslim groups), Reclaim Australia and United Patriots Front. In response, supporters of the mosque and multiculturalism also held rallies, public events and a range of other social and education activities. These aimed to demonstrate support for the Muslim community and correct misinformation. During this time, the 'Believe in Bendigo' campaign emerged to counteract the bad publicity the town was receiving and present an alternative future to the anti-mosque/anti-Islam narrative (Regional Australia Institute, 2016). Five thousand people joined the 'Believe in Bendigo' Facebook page in 1 week and it drew high-profile national media coverage (see Australian Story, 2015).

Research on community attitudes to the mosque (Markus, 2018; Rudner, 2017) has found that while sections of the news media and social media supported multicultural-ism, religious diversity and the right to worship, they also polarised and politicised the key stakeholders, and proposed development and the planning process:

> Misinformation and disinformation spread widely and quickly amongst those objecting to the mosque and Islam . . . Metropolitan news coverage was viewed as selective, misrepresenting the extent of violence at events and thus contributing to social division. Social media was singled out as a key factor contributing to the explosive nature of the mosque objections. (Rudner, 2017: 94)

The role of Facebook in the Bendigo mosque conflict has been widely acknowledged and discussed in research and public commentary (see Markus, 2018; Rudner, 2017), but relatively little attention has been paid to how the issue played out across social media more broadly and especially to how local news organisations engage with these spaces during hyper-charged debates.

Research approach

This research article adopts a geo-social methodological framework which enables schol-ars to situate news within a specific locale and emphasises its connections to the wider social, cultural and political contexts in which media platforms play a role (Hess and Waller, 2017). It provides a permeable shell in which to unpack understandings of 'space', 'place', 'community' and the 'local', drawing on tenets of human geography and critical cultural sociology, especially Pierre Bourdieu's construction of social space (Bourdieu, 1984) and Doreen Massey's power geometry (see Massey, 1994; Rodgers, 2018). While there are certainly early social geography studies that have focused on integration within geographic space (such as Park, 1922), the geo-social approach provides a more contem-porary lens through which to consider the interplay of local news media and the physical and digital worlds it hovers between, constructing meanings of places and contributing to social order. For this study, it involved pinpointing the physical geographic space that a local newspaper serves, unpacking constructions of the 'local' and 'community' and trac-ing the wider social and digital flows and movements in which it is a part. Therefore, our examination was first anchored in the geographic region of Bendigo in Victoria (population 112,853[3]) with particular emphasis on the role of the small-town, locally owned newspa-per, *Bendigo Weekly*. The newspaper has served the Bendigo district since 1997 and is the region's only independently owned newspaper. It has a print circulation of 36,000 and offers free digitised PDF copies online via the publishing platform Issuu.com. Its media activities came to light as part of a broader study that provided a comprehensive analysis of Twitter activity related to the mosque controversy (Waller et al., 2016). That research found those in positions of power, such as mainstream news media, politicians, celebrities as well as bots tended to be most active on Twitter. It also mapped spikes in Twitter activity during the debate that coincided with three key media and staged events. During data analysis, we were alerted to the *Weekly's* sudden inactivity in 2015, despite the newspaper being identi-fied as a top tweeter in the early stages of the controversy (Waller et al., 2016).

For this special issue, we decided to investigate the *Weekly*'s media practices (and lack of) around the mosque in more detail. Our specific interest was to explore how a local newspaper attempted to overlay – metaphorically – a cultural dome over a geographic space, drawing on the practice of silence to reinforce universal ideas and values and filter information in the interests of quality debate for local audiences. We traced its Twitter and Facebook use between January 2014 and July 2016 and obtained copies of its print editions during this period, with particular focus on editions in June and July 2014 and August-October in 2015 that coincided with three key events in the controversy: the council's decision to approve the mosque in June 2014, and two large protests in August and October 2015.[4] All *Bendigo Weekly*'s posts containing the word 'mosque' were obtained from the newspaper's Facebook page. Facebook was added to the data set because it was highlighted by the editor, news media coverage and other researchers (see, for example, Markus, 2018) as a key platform for debate during the controversy. Thematic and chronological analyses of this social media activity (posts uploaded by the newspaper and community responses and reactions) and printed newspaper coverage was undertaken to highlight key themes. As part of our theory-building approach, we were also sensitive to what was not explicit or evident in the coverage that might give insight into the use of 'silence'. Our first aim was to explain why the *Weekly* had suddenly gone silent on Twitter part way through the controversy, and so interviews were conducted with the managing editor in 2017 and 2018 in order to tease out key themes identified from the data. The newspaper is a small operation and the editor interviewed for this study has been responsible for managing the article since its inception and so his views are particularly insightful and relevant. In the section that follows, we will show how the data reveal a process of journalistic transformation (Robinson et al., 2019) as the mosque debate unfolds, especially in social media spaces. It is not our intention to provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire data set here; rather we highlight key aspects to extend our theoretical argument around deliberate silences in local journalism.

Retreat from Twitter

Previous research highlights the increasing role that social media played in amplifying conflict and controversy about the Bendigo mosque across digital and mainstream news networks (Markus, 2018; Rudner, 2017; Waller et al., 2016). Our analysis revealed the *Weekly* was (and continues to be) a frequent user of Facebook and Twitter to promote stories and generate hyperlinks to the newspaper's website. Over the study period the *Weekly* tweeted about the mosque on 34 occasions and uploaded 55 posts to Facebook. It is not the volume of social media activity that is of interest here, rather *the transformation* in practices that evolved as the saga escalated. For example, the newspaper's entire Facebook activity around the mosque was contained to the first 6 months after the story broke, between January and August 2014. There has been no use of the word 'mosque' on the *Weekly*'s Facebook page since 19 August 2014. The newspaper's Facebook behaviour was mirrored on Twitter. It was active during the first 6 months of 2014 (a total of 33 tweets), with only two further tweets posted about the issue in 2015. As highlighted earlier, it was this sudden drop in Twitter activity that directed our attention to the *Weekly*'s transforming journalism practices. For example, our previous study

found it had recorded the second most re-tweeted items of any Twitter user in June 2014 when the council first approved the mosque (Waller et al., 2016). The *Weekly* was also a top three contributor to Twitter at this time alongside a celebrity commentator and local politician.

There was a dramatic change in practices on social media on two levels. In early 2014, almost all of *Bendigo Weekly*'s tweets and Facebook communication adopted a neutral tone, demonstrating journalistic impartiality (see Zelizer and Allan, 2010 for definitional work). However, they tended to highlight events that displayed the news values of 'conflict' and 'controversy' – especially hostile council meetings, organised protests, and controversial tribunal and court hearings. The newspaper's tweets in this period reflected standard journalistic routines, such as covering council meetings. For example, many related to discussion inside the municipal chamber, with the *Weekly* emphasising a right-wing populist local councillor Elise Chapman's resistance to the mosque:

RT @bendigoweekly: Cr @Elise_Chapman does not want a mosque in Bendigo. She says Perth did not allow a mosque and shows Bendigo can fight . . .

RT @bendigoweekly: Mosque is passed! All but Cr Leach and Cr @Elise_Chapman supported the decision. #bgocouncil

RT @bendigoweekly: Cr @Elise_Chapman calls for a new application to be submitted. Said this report has misrepresented the actual mosque plans . . .

It was a similar approach on the *Weekly*'s Facebook page in early 2014 with posts such as these on 10 January 2014:

'Revealed: photos and plans for Bendigo's first mosque' with a link to the newspaper story. And

'Discussions aplenty about plans revealed on front page for a mosque. What do you think? Have your say'.

The news media's role in emphasising conflict and generating debate instead of resolving it is well documented (Bennett, 1996; McManus, 1994; Price and Tewksbury, 1997). Journalists draw on a series of acknowledged norms and conventions in shaping and disseminating news. In particular, they rely on a series of widely accepted news values, of which conflict is especially important in the news selection process (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). The *Weekly*'s early social media activity suggests that promoting stories about conflict and tension on Twitter might unintentionally create a distorted view of the overall context in which an issue is discussed and debated in public forums. For example, our analysis of print coverage of the same stories that appeared in the *Weekly* indicates that the newspaper was in fact beginning to adopt an advocacy role in support of the mosque, even though this was not apparent on social media. Four print stories appeared in the month the council first approved the planning permit, including a Page 1 story 'New Dawn' (20 June 2014) and two editorials 'Beating Intolerance' (20 June 2014). Here, the editor comments:

All the passion, shouting and at times, bigotry cannot win an argument, especially a planning one. The council made a brave decision. Among the spite, the death threats (including some here), the intimidation and the hatred, council acted reasonably, calmly and with the future of the city foremost in their minds. They should be congratulated. (20 June, p. 10)

In one of the interviews with the editor, he said the newspaper had 'broken' the mosque planning story in 2014. In this early period, the *Weekly* sought public opinion and highlighted the views of protesters on social media. Its position changed over time to one that leaned towards being guided by 'a more moral compass' rather than journalistic notions of balance and impartiality. He states:

What this whole thing has really crystallised for us is to always think about the consequences of what we write about. There needs to be a holistic view, it's not just about the headline or clickbait . . . what we put up in quick grabs on social media can be deceiving. Sometimes it's better to stay off it. (Personal interview with author, 16 November 2018)

The editor said the newspaper's sudden silence on social media was a deliberate strategy to temper debate and rebuild quality conversations for local audiences, and he considered the newspaper's print edition and website as the most appropriate platforms to achieve this, rather than social media. This was particularly so as many people outside Bendigo had begun to use the issue to play out their political agendas both on the streets and across social and mainstream media.

Silence speaks volumes

The newspaper's approach accords with Le Masurier (2015) and Hansen's (2018) observations that silence can be used by journalists to create an awareness of the insufficiencies of the public sphere, especially when issues of injustice and intolerance are involved. The newspaper's final Facebook post, on 19 August 2014, coincided with a story about an anti-mosque protest group having its Facebook presence shut down:

Stop the mosque Facebook site shutdown amid public outcry. (Facebook post, *Bendigo Weekly*)

Self-imposed silence on the part of the newspaper speaks volumes about its stance on the issue, given that mainstream news media are expected to have a social media presence at all times. Yet often there is little reflexivity undertaken by news media as to who, where, how or why social media improves quality debate and reporting (Gutsche and Hess, 2019). The editor states:

I've never been a big believer in social media for issues-based reporting as it gets out of hand all too easy. I'd rather stick to news pages. I think we probably got tired of the issue so we did stop tweeting . . . it added nothing to the debate and essentially every time we wrote something about the mosque proposal it was met with a barrage of criticism and vitriol from opponents.

He continues:

Facebook was certainly far more influential in the debate than Twitter. It fanned the flames beyond the Bendigo region because news seems to spread more quickly on Facebook. It's the graphic images that are most effective, like we had a local councillor putting up pictures of female circumcision – totally unrelated to the mosque – but she linked it to Islam and generated attention. Twitter is more like Facebook for grown-ups, but it can have a negative impact when you have outsiders all having their say. It was absolutely a conscious decision not to engage on social media very often about the issue. I know we jumped back on Twitter to announce there was a protest, later in 2015, I don't know why . . . would we do that again? probably not.

The editor's comments might be understood as a form of boundary work on two levels: a shift from impartial reporting to advocate through the use of silence, and second, an attempt to keep 'outsiders' – those who do not live in Bendigo – from overpowering debate for 'insiders' at the local level. Boundary work is widely acknowledged to explore how journalists separate their professional standing from others who claim to be a journalist (see Carlson and Lewis, 2015), but there is scope to consider how news media generate or reinforce boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the wider geo-social spaces they serve in the interests of pursuing quality, democratic debate. Here, the editor shifts from aligning with normative conventions of 'objective', impartial reporting that is increasingly highlighted as a point of distinction for journalism from competing social media sites, to introduce silence as a form of journalistic agency on social media. It is a careful and deliberate silence, designed to slow things down and combat silencing of local dialogue by loud, outside voices (Jungkunz, 2013).

Closing down the sideshow

The newspaper engaged with a second form of deliberate silence by shutting out racist, racially bigoted and unconstructive voices, as well as those who 'fanned' negativity about Bendigo's reputation and 'sense of community' (Hansen, 2018). This action was taken by the newspaper before the second protest was due to be staged in October 2015. The editor said this was to 'take back control' drawing parallels with studies that reference local news as 'civic custodians' (Hess, 2016) in the interests of not only social justice and democracy but also community identity and reputation management:

> There were anti-mosque protesters but there was a group called 'Believe in Bendigo' who were quite vocal in painting the city in a bad way saying that we have to stop racism. But that causes damage in itself to a community's reputation . . . Most of the protesters were from outside. I did not want to legitimise the claims of reputation damage. We're a city of 105,000 people and there were never more than maybe 1,200 people at the rallies. So, by 2015 after the first protest we just decided we didn't want to give either side a voice anymore. We had to decide if we wanted to be the ones to keep fanning the flames . . . absolutely not.

Analysis of 30 print editions of the *Weekly* between October 2015 and June 2016 confirms the editor's approach to silencing damaging voices was consistent across media platforms. There is no reference to 'Believe in Bendigo' or 'Stop the Mosque' proponents in any news coverage, despite reference in earlier editions. Rather the newspaper returned

to factual reporting about the mosque as a planning matter; it also published stories on the mounting council costs for security to keep 'outsiders' from causing harm:

> This is all it ever was and should have been, it was a planning matter but it ended up with a huge sideshow attached.

The editor also highlighted how the newspaper's decision to silence anti-Mosque/anti-Islam and other damaging voices in its coverage was supported by other civic institutions. These included the council and local police who worked together to develop strategies for calming tensions and containing public debate to residents of Bendigo, especially after the matter had been referred to the High Court. Le Masurier (2015) has advocated for these kinds of silences in journalism on the basis they allow time for critical evaluation and dialogue. In this way, silence can also be understood as a measure of healthy political or public discussion because it makes space for reflection and empathy.

Ultimately, the newspaper decided to take a moral stand through silence and solidarity in the interests of community, human rights and democracy, highlighting the instrumental potential of silence at the intersection of politics and culture:

> I think editors also have a social responsibility, particularly when it comes to community newspapers, and in this case, opting out/scaling back our coverage both on Twitter and in the newspaper reflected this. In the end, we realised giving the protesters news coverage played into their hands. As an editor, I get to choose what I think my readers want to read, and what I believe is good for our community. I believe in free speech but that's not to become a platform for racism, intolerance or even hatred. And it's on that basis we made the decisions that we did.

The editor said while he did not have direct evidence, the newspaper's silent stand had enhanced its reputation in the community, with social media continuing to provide a barometer of community satisfaction or dissent. The newspaper maintains a stable profit margin, although this of course cannot be attributed to its editorial position on the mosque issue:

> What I can say now is that for every action there is a consequence . . . once upon a time you would print and be dammed . . . but now people have a far greater say in what we do – they keep us accountable because of online. There was no wide backlash over our position on this. We had the spokespeople of each group unhappy they weren't getting coverage, but I also had people congratulate us for what we did. I think if there's no backlash then people are pretty happy.

The *Bendigo Weekly*'s deliberate silence on the mosque evolved in response to the way the issue unfolded in metropolitan, national and social media, and how that drew partisan outsiders to engage in protests that attracted national and international attention to the town due to racism, hatred, bigotry and violence. Attempting to re-direct focus on the importance of the 'local', 'community' and a shared common good might well have led to alternative and 'outside' voices seeking other platforms to air their views and is worthy of future investigation, but beyond the scope of this article. As Jungkunz (2013) has observed about such intentional silences, it was imbued with democratic affect:

intentional, meaningful and demonstrating a robust commitment to social inclusion in Bendigo.

Discussion/conclusion

One of the strengths of repositioning local journalism and its relationship to a 'common good' and moral disinterestedness is in the way it directs out attention to the cultural meaning-making function of news and its relationship to social order. Through our analysis of social media data, print editions of the *Weekly* and the spoken word of the editor, a detailed picture of journalistic transformation (Robinson et al., 2019) has emerged. Journalism is facing unprecedented challenges to maintain its hold on the spaces where quality debate can take place on matters of public interest. As the mosque crisis intensified, debate polarised and disinformation proliferated, normative approaches to journalism were found to be inadequate to the task of managing and damaging fast-moving public conversations across global and local media platforms. *Bendigo Weekly* was guided by a 'moral compass' for appropriate and inappropriate discursive behaviour, rather than normative ideas about the role of journalism. This is not so radical. As Hansen (2018) has argued, the suggestion that it should be an important assignment of the Fourth Estate to facilitate structures of silence is not path breaking. In a classical sense, from the beginning journalists have selected information to be publicised, thus giving weight to certain kinds of voices and certain notions of expertise (Hansen, 2013), and devaluing, or in effect silencing, other voices and other perspectives, in the mainstream. This did at least bring about a minimum of clarity in the conversations in the public sphere. In this case, impartial reporting was gradually supplanted by distinctive advocacy practices tightly focused at the local level to counter hatred, racism and intolerance and re-frame the mosque as a planning matter. This highlights the value of foundational concepts such as the common good through which to understand local journalism's relationship to the communities it serves in the digital age – a focus on civility helps us reposition the role of the journalist in monitoring, if not serving as the umpire of civil practices in social spaces (Hess, 2016, 2017)

The instrumental potential of silence was harnessed to transform the conversation, from one that swirled around 'outsiders', social division and sensationalism, into a focus on 'insiders', social inclusion, redefining the issue as a matter for council, and meeting the information needs of citizens. We have attempted to show that deliberate silences were used as a form of media power in several contexts: the *Weekly*'s withdrawal from the cacophony of Twitter and Facebook discussion about the mosque can be understood as 'slowing things down' and refusing to engage with, or be drowned out by loud, uncivil voices (Jungkunz, 2013). The editorial decision that followed – to stop covering the protests, or source comment from activists – accords with Le Masurier's (2015) concept of journalistic silence that provides space for critical evaluation, dialogue, reflection and empathy. Perhaps more radically, the *Weekly*'s deliberate silence can be interpreted as an explicit strategy of resistance to the distorted view of Bendigo and the mosque issue produced by social media, metropolitan and national news (Fernandez, 2018). For the most part, silences have been uncomfortable in media and journalism studies (Hansen, 2018). Routinely viewed as undemocratic, in binary opposition to voice, and as a barrier

for minorities (and also sometimes for journalists themselves), silence remains under-examined and under-theorised in the garrulous excesses of the digital age. It is our contention that as politics polarises, debates become increasingly uncivil and misinformation and disinformation flourish, silence as a form of agency available to journalists to counter racism, hatred, bigotry and damaging falsehoods deserves further consideration. There are times when news media can take a moral stand in the perceived interests of 'all' within a given social space, and it may be for their own legitimacy that they continue to do so, in certain contexts. The power of silence is, nonetheless, one that comes with great responsibility and there is always potential for inequalities and abuse of power. Our intention has been to reveal two sides of the same coin through extending scholarship on the practice of silence for journalism studies.

Authors' note

Lisa Waller is now affiliated with RMIT University, Australia.

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Notes

1. Hess (2016) argues that established local newspapers that are surviving the digital era play a particular powerful role as keepers and conferrers of civic and community identity and moral values in the towns they serve, a symbolic power developed overtime. She contends: 'the keeper is synonymous with custodian, warden, protector, minder but always implies a degree of power or control . . . those who are seen to be custodians of places stand to gain symbolically and economically'.
2. Media scholars who consider the common good in broader discussions about morality and ethics tend to provide an overview of the meta-ethical and normative positions that frame discussions, surveying deontology, forms of utilitarianism and virtue ethics (see, for example, Borden, 2010; Couldry et al., 2013; Ward, 2010). While we certainly aim to complement this work, our intention here is to focus on how moral disinterestedness is reinforced and perpetuated in society, and local news media's relationship to this.
3. www.bendigo.vic.gov.au.
4. The newspaper's Twitter feed was obtained using the cross-institutional project Tracking Infrastructure for Social Media Analytics (TrISMA) as part of our broader project on twitter activity (see, for example, author Waller et al., 2016). TrISMA is funded by an Australian Research Council's Linkage Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities grant, and it 'establishes a powerful new framework for tracking, storing, and processing the public social media communication activities of Australian users at very large scale and in "close to real time"'.

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