Experiential Knowledge as Discourse: Authority and Parrhesia in News Media Risk Communication

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Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge and belief, understand that it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services, Charles Sturt University or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of thesis, subject to confidentiality provisions as approved by the University.

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Ethics Approval

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this thesis, has obtained ethics approval from the University of Western Sydney (now Western Sydney University) Human Research Ethics Committee for the research contained in this work.

The approval number is - HEC 03/099
Editorial Assistance

This thesis was edited by Elite Editing, and editorial intervention was restricted to Standards D and E of the *Australian Standards for Editing Practice*. 
Abstract

This thesis offers a new examination of risk communication which syntheses the risk society and governmentality approaches. While there are established traditions of research which integrate elements of risk society and governmentality theories of risk communication in the media, few have focussed on both active audiences and authority. This thesis uses a model of ‘parrhesia’, a consideration of rhetorical speech where judgements of truth are related to the position of the speaker, as used by Michel Foucault, to examine experiential forms of information in the news.

By using case studies of television news stories, this thesis develops an examination of both content and narrative structure to put forward a theoretical position which demonstrates the authority of experiential knowledge in risk communication. Once the case studies were complete, a questionnaire was used to examine the viewing preferences of general audience members. The data collected was then triangulated with semi-structured interviews that examined the respondents’ understanding of risk communication via these media sources.

This research finds that news stories present risk information through narrative and experiences of non-experts. The interviews reveal that this is a preference shared by the audience. Therefore, television news audiences express a preference for narrative-based, experiential risk information over risk information presented as expert knowledge.

Contemporary media such as online news sources and social media represent a new mode of news delivery that allows for risk communication to occur in a highly curated and personalised news environment. Rather than viewing online news use as indicative of a new type of news consumption, I argue that it is an extension of the type of risk communication found in pre-digital, television news audiences.

I conclude that audiences invest authority in risk information communicated through those they see as experiential proxies, including the “everyday” demands of reflexive modernity. This is explained through a synthesis of “risk society” and governmentality as a form of governmentality where, through the theoretical lens of parrhesia, experiential knowledge becomes discourse. Reflexive discourse is in demand by reflexive, self-disciplining risk information consumers who are distrusting of experts and navigating contested knowledge.
Dedication

For Nina and Sebastian, who missed too many trips to the park, too many bedtime stories, and too many “Frozen” sing-alongs.
Chapter 1: Introduction

my girlfriend’s mum watches it and she’s one of those people that, I think, that are influenced by Today Tonight, and um, like for example the saving money and that, I remember once [my girlfriend] said that she [her mother] apparently threw out her frying pans because she saw a segment on Today Tonight that frying pans … were um … bad.

This thesis is a study of mediated truth, authority and risk. Today, we can find constant reminders of the need to live a risk-conscious and risk-avoiding life. Avoidance strategies can be mapped in regards to risks both local and global, individual and social. For example, we see the management of large-scale risks such as terrorism shaping policy on an international level, while more locally we are asked to do our part to keep ourselves and our communities safe from crime and other threats to person or property. In the political arena, large-scale risks such as terrorism or climate change are driving policy decisions focussed on the management of risks, attempting to avoid presumed worst-case scenarios. In the drama of current world politics, for example, policy decisions made by the recently elected Trump administration in the United States show there is an ongoing contest of ideas about how to manage large-scale risks. More importantly, there has long been a trend to treat all policy decisions as exercises in risk management. Further, as part of a democratising of risk information and risk management, even large-scale risks are communicated in such a way as to entreat support from individuals and constructs them as “everyday” risks. Refusing entry to refugees is presented as an appeal to keep us safe from crime, closing national borders becomes a policy purporting to keep criminals out of communities and give “good citizens” their jobs back; dealing with crime becomes dealing with problematic sections of cities so law-abiding citizens can walk the street safely again, and so on. The political rhetoric and the issues may not be completely new, however, the basis for policy on these issues purposely moves away from “facts” to what are sometimes called, glibly, “alternative facts”. The supposed naturalness of being risk-averse at almost any cost that drives risk communication in this context is striking.
1.1 Risk and News

My interest in this research began with an initial observation that experts were rarely used to convey information about “everyday” risks in television news programs. News programs that present more in-depth coverage and “current affairs” often do not include experts, or information delivered by experts. This observation led me to consider how we might be able to choose from competing knowledges about risk. Drawing its empirical data from an examination of media texts, surveys and narrative interviews with viewers of these texts, this thesis explores how individuals invest trust in particular types of information about risk. Over the past two or three decades, it has been widely argued that risk is becoming increasingly central to the management of our lives. In particular this period, which Beck (1992) has called “late modernity”, is a time where ‘one is no longer concerned with attaining something good but rather preventing the worst’ (Beck, 1992, p. 49). Indeed it is argued that the need to avoid negative outcomes has become a central and necessary mode of late modern living (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1990).

The study of the contours of risk and everyday life is central to this thesis in a number of ways. Firstly, the risk society theory of Beck (1992, 2006, 2009a) suggests the management of everyday risks is a central part of what he called reflexive modernity. While this term will be discussed later in the thesis, it is important to note at this stage of reflexive modernity we are inherently risk averse. From this “reflexive” standpoint everything is a possible risk. Even the need to avoid risk in itself becomes a risk demanding to be managed. We manage these risks in an environment where the information guiding the management of everyday life is removed from traditional social structures (Beck, 1992; Beck, Bonss, & Lau, 2003; Beck et al., 1994). The everyday risks to be managed are concerned with living a prudent, risk-averse life—what sort of job should I get, who should I marry, what sort of washing machine powder will make my clothes the brightest, who do I vote for to keep me safe from terrorism? According to the risk society position, late modernity leaves us to navigate these risks with little certainty and without recourse to expert knowledge, which we find increasingly untrustworthy (Beck, 1992).
The examination of risk and everyday life by theorists drawing on governmentality theory provides a further conceptual framework in this thesis. These theorists draw on the theoretical legacy of Foucault (see Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1988; Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991; O’Malley, 2009, 2012). Unlike the risk society view of risk, governmentality theorists view expert knowledge as part of a discourse system which affords a continuing source of certainty and still relevant for managing risk (O’Malley, 2009, 2012). Proponents of the governmentality position argue that the self-disciplining and—due to neoliberalism—increasingly self-responsible subject manages risk according to expert and state-produced discourse (see Dean, 1999; O’Malley, 2009, 2012). As seen in the opening quote taken from qualitative interviews presented in later chapters, the management of everyday risk such as throwing out your frying pans may be a relatively simple act, and may not qualify as a “large-scale” risk; however, such behaviour highlights the need to examine how self-disciplining subjects manage everyday risks.

1.2 Risk and Narrative

To further examine the above theoretical framework, this thesis draws on specific news media texts that reflect the earlier observed lack of experts. Replete with familiar characters and topics, the stories surveyed in this thesis often cover issues which have the potential to affect our day-to-day understandings of everyday people facing everyday problems. These problems may be as straightforward as dangerous cooking utensils, untrustworthy tradespeople or the cleanliness of our bathrooms.

News is part of the rapidly changing media environment. There have been significant shifts in news formats and distribution mediums, with the rapid growth of online news and the distribution of news through social media (see Newman, Levy, & Nielsen, 2015; Watkins, Park, Blood, Breen, Fuller, Papandrea, & Ricketson, 2015). The growth of online news, and audiences finding news through social media—which is curated and filtered—creates a potentially unrealistic yet convincing view of the world (Pariser, 2011). This growth opens up the possibility for democratised risk information; expert knowledge no longer holds sole dominance over public opinion (see Bruns, 2015a; Carlsson & Nilsson, 2016; Ceron, 2015; Hermida, 2016). Regardless of form, the media
has often been conceived of, and analysed as, an institution that can reveal something about the reproduction of cultural and social knowledge. In this sense the media, and in particular the “mass” media, has been examined as a mediator of various social/cultural artefacts and presumed necessities including ideology, social reality, cultural forms and discourse, to name a few (Holmes, 2005). A starting point for examining risk communication considers the role of the media in terms of its ability to influence individual understandings of social phenomena.

Narratively framed news reporting has become increasingly popular, including its long history in television. The narrative style uses recognisable characters who are part of the story and thus serve to drive the story forward. In his *Reflections on crime, criminals, and control in news-magazine television programs*, Kenneth Tunnell (1998) presents an analysis of the content of several of what he terms ‘newsmagazine-style’ television programs in the United States. A newsmagazine is ‘a television program typified by its journalist-celebrities, usually devotes several minutes of coverage to a single contemporary and often controversial issue’ (Tunnell, 1998, p. 112). An important characteristic about these programs is their style of presentation. They usually present stories in a news-like fashion, but they are also “infotainment”: part information and part entertainment (Tunnell, 1998). Tunnell cites the rise of infotainment as, quite simply, ‘reflecting current trends in the commodification in crime’ (Tunnell, 1998, p. 112). Once the formula for this type of program was discovered and found to be popular and so profitable, many similar programs emerged.

Narrative-style news reporting is not only popular with the audience but is a type of journalistic story curation. It classifies as curation because only certain types of ‘master myths’ would make it into the narrative telling (Lule, 2001). Many journalists argue that telling the story and thereby employing a specific type of narrative form is an important tool when it comes to capturing the attention of the audience:

We thought of each day as a chapter unto itself, with its own emotions and rhythms, crescendos and revelations. We looked for flashes of insight, moments that went against the grain, glimpses beneath the surface. We thought, always, in terms of scenes—scenes that could open and close the different sections, scenes that defined, scenes that could anchor the entire day. We also kept an eye out for the daily title. With narrative, good titles are extremely important; they can set a tone, frame the action, invite the reader into the story (French, 2000, p.14).
Thomas French, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1998 for a seven-part serial news narrative, highlights how he approaches the art of telling a story using narrative. The above statement highlights an important position: meaningful and therefore successful news reporting requires the journalist to embrace a particular form and structure—narrative. A similar argument has been put forward by other journalists. Journalist Carolyn Mungo feels that perhaps the most important aspect of a news story is to have a compelling main character whose presence will lead the audience to ‘see things in ways they haven’t seen before’ (Mungo, 2000).

Journalists such as these have argued that the use of narrative makes the news more than the simple presentation of information. Bureau chief for the New York Times Rick Bragg makes the tongue in cheek claim that ‘A little bit of narrative, like sugar, just makes everything better. Narrative conveys emotion. Narrative shows, not tells’ (Bragg, 2000, p. 30). Narrative provides an emotional and evocative link between the story being told and the audience. For Bragg then, narrative-based news information is seen as more meaningful to the audience, capable of drawing the viewer in. While Bragg is correct about news narratives, narrative is far more reaching in its ability to structure our understanding of the world. So important is it, this thesis uses the narrative dimensions of news as a framework within which to examine everyday risk communication.

1.3 The Thesis

This thesis uses a conceptual model consisting of what might best be called “analytical lenses” to examine the contemporary media–audience relationship with a specific focus on the negotiation of risk. The first of these three lenses is narrative in the construction of media representations of risk. Narrative form encompasses both the preferred meaning of news producers and the agency of audiences. Meaning construction relies on the audience’s common understanding of narrative conventions such as roles, characters and narrative functions. It also relies on the transient social knowledge the audience draws on in building their understanding. Finally, it is an information form that draws on experience, rather than expertise, to convey relevance.
The second lens focuses on the influence of broader social knowledge. Audiences understand the experiential knowledge present in news narrative as relevant. It is the late modern, reflexive media audience that constructs meaning from narrative news information. The reflexive media user is one who places particular reflexive demands on information sources. These are demands that validate experiential knowledge, and the vicarious hypothesis testing it allows, over traditional expert bodies of knowledge.

The third and final lens concerns authority. While there are many varieties of authority theory, this inquiry treats authority simply as an effect of discourse. Authority in this sense concerns the relationship between experiential knowledge and audience beliefs. It is mediated by popular and news narratives which allow information-evaluation in terms of validity and truth by late modern audiences. This lens draws on Foucault and, in particular, Foucault’s analysis of both the concept of parrhesia, and of the self-constituting subject. Whereas once expert knowledge and experts were evaluated as authority, now experiential proxies assume this status.

Three key research questions underpin the discussion in this thesis. The first of these concerns the theoretical framework this thesis; 1. Is there a compatible view of risk communication incorporating both the risk society and governmentality positions on risk? The second concerns the nature of media communication of risk; 2. How does the news media communicate information about risk, and how is information about risk received and understood by audiences? The third is about the power to speak with authority in such contexts; 3. How does of non-expert knowledge, such as may appear in narrative news stories, attain its authority? Together these three questions address a key gap in the risk communication literature. While there have been examinations of risk communication that integrate elements of the risk society and government positions (see Mythen 2014; Mythen & Walklate 2006), these research questions allow an examination of an active audience and previously unexamined notions of authority in late modernity.

1.4 Thesis Structure

Chapter two of this thesis presents an examination of the current theoretical positions concerning our understanding of risk, and how this theoretical basis is extended in
discussions of risk communication. The risk society analysis of risk is examined in this chapter, as is the governmentality analysis of risk. Chapter two further focusses on how these various theoretical positions view the role of expert versus lay knowledge in the context of risk communication. This chapter examines the risk society and governmentality understandings of risk most closely. It also examines other, competing theoretical positions. This chapter identifies theoretical gaps in the literature regarding risk and non-expert knowledge.

Chapter three then sets out an interdisciplinary methodology for examining the ways in which the audience may understand television news information presented through narrative and experience. Chapter three also includes a discussion of risk research methodologies and positions this research in a risk research paradigm that employs narrative analysis as a suitable way of examining the experiences of risk in everyday life (Henwood, Pidgeon, Parkhill, & Simmons, 2011; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). Questionnaires and interviews are advanced as the methods used to collect appropriate data.

Chapter four provides a discussion and overview of narrative theory and examines the components of narrative structure in the news, by providing an analysis of stories presented in mainstream newsmagazine television programs in Australia. This analysis utilises stories from these sources as case studies, and this use of case studies continues through subsequent chapters. The aim is to develop a theoretical understanding of how these programs may influence a viewer’s understanding or interpretation of risk information provided in the story. Five Australian current affairs programs have been selected as providing stories as case studies: Today Tonight, A Current Affair, 60 Minutes, The 7.30 Report and Four Corners. At the time of this analysis these were the mainstream television newsmagazine sources available to Australian audiences. Chapter four goes on to consider these case studies and media/audience theories concerned with what “effect” television may have on its audience (Ditton, Chadee, Farrall, Gilchrist, & Bannister, 2004). Other critical examinations of the media, such as those developed in the field of cultural studies, have focussed attention on the audience not as passive recipients of media.

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1 Governmentality is used throughout this thesis in the conventional Foucauldian sense. The word ‘governmental’ is only used when required in the popular sense.
information, but as active constructors of meaning (see Ang, 2006; Hall, 2001; Morley, 1992).

Chapter five explores truth and authority in the specific context of risk communication. Theory development in this thesis utilises an examination of how the news media communicates risk, with a focus on information structure. When examining who is relaying the risk information in the news media, this chapter develops a distinction between expert and non-expert sources. This chapter continues the examination of news story case studies; now considering how news narratives about risk is communicated in the news specifically. Dunn (2005) discusses news that adopts a narrative form, focussing on television news, as ‘narratives of the real’ (p. 141). These narratives of the real are constructed not only through the narrative structure employed, but also through assertions of truth and objectivity, as well as via particular audio and visual codes particular to news-based narrative. The goal of this chapter is to consider how risk information presented through narrative and experience may be an effective type of risk communication in late modernity.

Chapter six explores risk communication, but this time through experiential knowledge, treating this communication as a potential form of parrhesia, as discussed by Michel Foucault (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). Parrhesia is a rhetorical speech act that convinces the audience of the truth of information based on the status of the speaker, rather than the rational validity of the information. A parrhesiatic speech act is one where speakers make claims about the truth of what they say by claiming is dangerous for them to say it (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). This chapter examines this type of truth claim is considered in the context of risk information conveyed by non-experts, who are often the victims of an unwanted outcome; that is, a risk. The culmination of chapter six and those preceding it produces a theoretical position which regards experiential knowledge as a type of reflexive discourse.

Chapter seven presents the results both of a questionnaire and a series of observations based on a series of in-depth interviews carried out with television viewers. The chapter presents the results of a questionnaire that sampled approximately 150 residents from across Sydney, Australia. The sample was taken from various localities and, accordingly, differing demographics. These survey results represent a snapshot of television news
media usage by individuals from different age groups, occupations and households. The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate which media sources they relied on most, drawing on broad categories such as television, radio, newspapers and the internet. Respondents were then asked how they would rate these programs as a source of information. Another aim of this questionnaire was to enlist participants for the in-depth interviews that constituted the third stage of this research.

Chapter eight examines the perceived validity of experiential knowledge as a form of authority and reflexive discourse. This chapter builds on the interview data analysis carried out in chapter seven regarding the value of experiential risk communication, and asks whether experiential knowledge that gains authority, and therefore power, is a type of governmental discourse. If so, it would be a type of discourse where experiential knowledge replaces expert knowledge as an authority for self-disciplining individuals in reflexive modernity.

Chapter nine examines current online and digital news and risk communication using the theoretical position developed in earlier chapters. This chapter considers if online and social media sources of news act as a potential amplifier of experiential risk communication, intensifying the power of reflexive discourse and possibly exaggerating everyday risk.

Finally, chapter ten provides a summary of findings as well as a discussion of limitations and potential future research directions. Here it is argued that this research presents a view of risk communication that allows a much clearer understanding of risk communication in reflexive modernity by accounting for trust and authority. These have rarely been considered outside of interrogation of the communication and perception of large-scale, manufactured risks. Following from the initial observation of a lack of expert knowledge in the media, I found that a preference for experiential knowledge pre-dates the popularity of user curated and socially driven online risk communication. The reflexive discourse position developed in this thesis is therefore an important new theoretical lens for examining risk communication in emerging media environments and technologies.
Chapter 2: Risk

The place of the value system of the unequal society is taken by the value system of the unsafe society. Whereas the utopia of equality contains a wealth of substantial and positive goals of social change, the utopia of the risk society remains peculiarly negative and defensive. Basically one is no longer concerned with attaining something good but rather preventing the worst.

—(Beck, 1992, p. 49)

Risk and how it is communicated has become an increasingly key component of theorising in the social sciences. In this context, risk as a central and defining driver of behaviour has received considerable attention. Recent examinations into the place of risk in the social sciences note that the risk society approach of Beck, and applications of the governmentality approach of Foucault, remain influential (Denney, 2005; Lupton, 2013a; Mythen, 2014; O’Malley, 2009; Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006a; Zinn, 2009b, 2009c). While these are perhaps the most common theoretical deliberations on risk, other approaches such as cultural theory, systems theory, and ‘edgework’ are also commonly applied to risk (Denney, 2005; Lupton, 2013a; Lyng, 2008; Zinn, 2009b).

There is a growing body of research that examines risk as a core driver of social, political and cultural life. There is also a growing body of research that examines specific large-scale risks and their management. Recent examinations concerned into large-scale risks have covered topics such as terrorism (Mythen & Walklate, 2006a, 2006b) public health (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997; Tulloch & Zinn, 2011), Biosecurity (Rose, 2009) and volcanic ash clouds (Burgess, 2012). There are also broader examinations of the increasingly central role of risk in the management of institutions such as policing (Lee & McGovern, 2016).

More recently there has also been a growing interest in risk communication. Risk communication has become an important aspect of examinations of risk, both theoretical and applied, and is an increasingly inherent element of risk literature. The relationship between risk, risk communication and those individuals and groups dealing with risk in some way has attracted several conflicting interpretations in the social sciences. The precise theoretical definition of risk communication is, accordingly, contested (Boholm, 2008; Tulloch, 2009).
This thesis introduces an analysis of *authority* to risk and risk communication. Authority is a type of power that is defined differently depending on the theoretical positions taken in regard to risk. A significant theoretical approach to risk that examines authority and power directly is the governmentality approach (O’Malley, 1998, 2009, 2010; Tulloch, 2009; Zinn, 2009a). As discussed in detail later in this thesis, the ideas about risk developed in governmentality have provided a substantial amount of analysis of the role of expert knowledge in risk management. However, to date there have been few examinations of the connections between risk and authority that move beyond the governmentality framework.

This chapter first goes about exploring the contested nature of definitions of risk. From there it examines the various ways risk has been used in the social sciences. The theories outlined include the risk society thesis, the governmentality approach to risk, cultural theories and theories of risk and excitement such as edgework. It then moves on to discuss risk communications, risk and reflexivity and concludes with an overview of how risk and risk communication will be used in this thesis.

### 2.1 Defining Risk

Both individuals and populations have always had concerns about, and dealt with, negative outcomes—things going wrong. Pre-modern and pre-industrial societies understood negative outcomes as inherent dangers. Historically, risks and dangers were ‘largely attributed to agencies beyond human control: the ignorance of imperfect humanity, divine agency, luck, destiny, or fate’ (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006b). Dangers are those negative or “bad” things that transpire, which can affect us both individually and collectively. Understanding these “bads” as dangers is contingent on a view of them as negative and, importantly, entails a world view that understands these dangers as unavoidable, unpredictable and uncontrollable (Lupton, 2013a; Mythen, 2014; Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006b).

Risk has a long genealogy, and the contemporary understandings of risk are linked to transformations of the above long-standing notion of dangerousness. As Mythen (2014, p. 11) points out, ‘it is widely believed that the English word “risk” finds its roots in the
Latin *risco* ... a derivative of the verb *risicare*, meaning to run into danger’. Mythen (2014) goes on to point out that the origin of the term is, however, contested. For example, Mairal (2011) argues that similar historical examples of the word are found in French, German and Spanish documents. Ewald (1991) expands on the term *risco*, which he lists as meaning ‘that which cuts’, positing the later term ‘risk’ as a neologism of insurance. Common in the usage of the term risk, in its earliest adoptions, is a focus on the unknown and uncertainty, with a shift to considering the chance of something going wrong (Lupton, 2013a). The shift from simple dangers to risks occurred most distinctly during the 16th and 17th centuries as the world became both larger and less knowable (Denney, 2005). As social life came under the increasing influence of rationality and other precursors of modernity, prediction and the control of risk arose as a response to growing dissatisfaction with uncertainty as an unavoidable and uncontrollable state. This response was evident in, for example, an emerging maritime insurance industry that was attempting to interpose between positive and negative outcomes (Lupton, 2013a; Mythen, 2014).

Ewald (1991) defines the conception of contemporary understandings of risk through an analysis of the link between it and insurance. The rise of insurance influenced the understanding of risk significantly. The common understanding of the term may remain ‘a synonym for danger or peril, or for some unhappy event which may happen to someone’ (Ewald, 1991, p. 199). In insurance terms, however, risk does not refer to an object or event. Rather it refers to a ‘treatment of certain events capable of happening to a group of individuals’ (Ewald, 1991, p. 199). A more precise term than ‘to a group of individuals’ is to populations; hence, ‘Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyses the danger, considers the event’ (Ewald, 1991, p. 199). Dean (1998) summarises this definition of risk as ‘a form of rationality, a way of thinking about and representing events’ (p. 29).

The rise of probabilistic mathematics, inexorably linked to managing insurance, can also be traced to examinations of risk. This mathematical approach was applied not only to insurance but to gambling where probability, the chances of winning or losing, are central (Mairal, 2008). Hacking (1990, p. 3) views this change as having a significant impact on our view of causality, where ‘Determinism was subverted by the laws of chance’. A
definition of risk that develops from these historical antecedents is one where risk is not an object or a fact. Rather, risk is a ‘tool used to bring together objects, facts, events or any other entities which can produce harm and others which can be harmed’ (Mairal, 2008, p. 42).

Underlying assumptions about risk shifted historically from referring to an earlier general uncertainty to an actuarial process centred on calculation and probability as a central aspect of modernity (Ewald, 1991; Wales & Mythen, 2002). Kemshall (2003, p. 9) explains:

The risks of modernisation have been characterised as increasingly calculable, knowable and controllable through mathematical models and the advances of science. The risks of nature could be tamed, and the ‘will of the Gods’ need not be accepted.

From this perspective, risk is not always conceived of as a negative factor. There may be a calculation of not only the likelihood of a negative event, but also of the goods versus “bads” with some “bads” accepted as an inevitable, albeit unenviable, aspect of producing or managing goods (Kemshall, 2003). However, the contemporary understanding of the term “risk” is negative, referring to some possible harm, and is therefore historically contingent. Risk ‘is a way of structuring reality and rendering it intelligible’ (Wales & Mythen, 2002, p. 122). Therefore, the following section discusses how these changes to the definition of risk, and understanding of risk management, have assumed an increasingly central role in modern social science.

2.2 Theories of Risk in the Social Sciences

An examination of how risk is positioned in the social sciences shows that the epistemological status of risk is highly contested. To establish the position of risk in this thesis, the following sections review the various ways the social sciences have scrutinised risk.

As should now be clear, for the purposes of the thesis there are two theoretical positions that receive the most attention: the risk society approach and the governmentality approach. These two theoretical approaches are among those that have had the most impact on a broad number of social science disciplines (Lupton 2013a; O’Malley, 2010;
Mythen, 2014; Mythen & Walklate, 2006b). The cultural approach to risk is an increasingly prominent theoretical approach to risk (see Lupton, 2013a; Mythen, 2014). However, it receives less attention in the following discussion due to the theoretical approach adopted in this thesis. The risk society and governmental theoretical approaches receive detailed attention in later chapters, and inform the analysis carried out in this research.

Risk is ubiquitous in critical considerations of modern, late modern and postmodern living. Social science inquiries into risk tend to be linked to questions of who defines risk and how, and related policy implications (Denney, 2005). An examination of theoretical approaches that explain the emergence of risk is useful when developing both a definition and an understanding of risk in a social science context.

Our focus is often drawn to those large-scale catastrophes that fill the news. Environmental challenges, pollution and terrorism are all examples of large-scale risks that are often the most conspicuous. However, we also feel as if we are faced with constant risks in our everyday life (Zinn, 2009b): ‘We are concerned about whether and whom to marry, what to study, which occupation to learn, how to be financially secure in retirement, and even what to eat or drink’ (p. 1). At all levels, risk and managing risk have become politicised, and the management of risk increasingly contested (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006b). The conjunction between the everyday nature of risk and contested approaches to dealing with risk is central to the recent growth of social science inquiry into risk. Zinn (2009b, p. 2) argues that:

A discourse into social risk behaviour is as much a discourse on defining a problem, about different values and lifestyles, power relations, and emotions as it is about ‘real’ risks and their rational management.

It is not surprising then to see examinations of risk as important tools for social scientists. However, as Zinn (2009b) points out, viewing social issues from a risk perspective denotes a position and potentially a way of viewing the world. The following sections expand on the discussion of risk in the social sciences, concluding with a discussion of how this thesis theoretically positions risk.

There are several extensive and high quality summaries of the various theoretical positions of risk (e.g. Denney, 2005; Lupton, 2013a; Mythen, 2014; Taylor-Gooby &
Many summaries of risk theory focus on three or four key approaches. These approaches differ in important details, although there is a crossover of ideas. There are differences in nomenclature across such summaries. For example, Denney (2005) lists the theoretical approaches as individualist, culturalist, risk society, phenomenological, post-modern, and regulatory. Other authors highlight similar categories but often use a different naming scheme. Lupton (2013a), in the second and most recent edition of Risk, for example, categorises risk theory through related yet different conceptual frameworks, linking ideas such as ‘risk and culture’, ‘risk and reflexive modernisation’ and ‘risk and governmentality’. These categorisations cover much the same theoretical approaches as the Denney example above, but focus on the language found within the theories, rather than on the broader ideas inherent to the approach. The following sections of this chapter discuss several theoretical approaches to risk. I begin by examining two of these approaches in detail: Beck’s risk society thesis, and Foucault’s governmentality approach.

2.3 The Risk Society

As has been foreshadowed, the risk society position proposed by Beck (1992, 2002, 2009a) is broad reaching and has been influential in the social sciences since its release (Mythen, 2014; Zinn, 2009c). Beck’s ideas have been so influential that they have ‘generated a small industry into risk research’ (Jarvis, 2007, p. 24). This popularity has also led to an expansion of research and theorising about risk in sociology (Mythen, 2014; Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006b).

A central theme of Beck’s risk society position is the paradoxical impact modern industrialisation and technology have on our lives. As discussed earlier, Beck argues that modernity produces both goods and bads. The goods are those things we have commonly linked to the progressive and liberating aspects of modernity and industrialisation. The bads, however, are also a product of these same facets of modernity. They are the unintended consequences of modernity; the side effects which are a paradox of late modern society. Liberation and progress—hallmarks of modernity—suggest a process of making the world more predictable and therefore controllable (Beck, 1992, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Beck et al., 1994).
Beck argues that producing wealth goes hand in hand with the production of “risks” (Lupton, 1999). These risks are the unanticipated consequences of industrial modernisation (Denney, 2005). Broadly, Beck (1992) defines risks as hazards and insecurities brought about by modernisation. Large-scale risks such as pollution, climate change and unemployment present a rather narrowed view of what risk is (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006b). Beck’s discussion of risk tends to stay within the boundaries of technical and environmental risks, and to some extent fails to address the complexity of sociocultural awareness and responses to risk. This limits the ability of Beck’s theory alone as an explanation of how varying social groups both interpret and respond to “risks” in different ways (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006b; Zinn, 2009a). Of course, Beck was aware of ‘cultural relativism’ as an approach to understanding risk. Cultural relativism ‘in Beck’s view, rightly emphasises the contextual aspect of risk responses, pointing out that what concerns one group in one historical era may not worry another’ (Lupton, 1999, p. 91). Ultimately, Beck’s position on risk sees the allocation of risk as more and more central to social life. New risks, which for Beck are harms or dangers, emerge and need to be dealt with. Therefore, for the individual the need to deal with risks, a risk logic, replaces traditional concerns about their life course and the decisions that direct it, such as the outcomes of social class (Zinn & Taylor-Gooby, 2006).

From the risk society perspective, modernity and its liberating claims drive the shift from risks as a danger outside our control to risks that are calculable, predictable and controlled. For Beck, the liberating mechanisms that allow prediction and control are the very same mechanisms that now create bads (Beck, 1992, 2006, 2009b). This outcome problematises our relationship with these mechanisms, including expert knowledge, which I discuss in section 2.9.

The risk society theoretical tradition focusses on the problems individuals face in the contemporary social world. Central to the risk society position is the notion that risk management is an individual problem and not a social one (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997). People are ‘constantly faced with risks as a phenomenon that must be negotiated in order to live a reasoned and “civilised” life’ (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997, p. 5). This need to manage risk as a problem for individuals contrasts with earlier historical stages in which misfortune was attributed to things such as fate or other factors that did not fall under an
individual’s control, or as social issues during modernity. Thus, risk supposes human responsibility in the handling of misfortune (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997).

One outcome of modernisation and industrial modernity has been a rapid increase in globalisation. Globalisation entailed a spatial reorganisation where industrial modernity has become more widespread and where it can easily affect once-disparate cultures, crossing borders with ease (Jarvis, 2007). From the risk society perspective this change is not without its problems. Of particular concern for traditional nation states is the challenge globalisation places on their sovereignty and their legitimacy as viewed by the population (Jarvis, 2007).

2.4 Individualism—Increased Riskiness or Emancipation?

As discussed above, one of the key aspects of the risk society position is the nature of technological risks that come about because of modernity. This is a position that focusses on large-scale risks or potential harms. A focus on large-scale risk, however, restricts examinations of the impact of the social changes of late modernity on our everyday life. How does the late modern distribution of “bads” affect our everyday dilemmas like those mentioned earlier (who do we marry, what job do we get and so on)? The risk society thesis also considers increased individualism and reflexivity, which deals with societal and self-transformation (Zinn, 2009c). From the risk society perspective, late modernity brings with it significant changes to ‘social experience’ (Denney, 2005, p. 32). Individuals are increasingly required to make decisions about their life in a knowledge environment where traditional structures and accompanying beliefs that informed these decisions are being constantly questioned (Denney, 2005).

As highlighted by the quotation from Beck at the outset of this chapter, ‘the utopia of the risk society remains peculiarly negative and defensive. Basically one is no longer concerned with attaining something good but rather preventing the worst’ (Beck, 1992, p. 49). Beck’s broader perspective views the world as an intrinsically risky or bad place. However, incorporated with this is the possibility that a shift to a risk society is also inherently emancipatory. This emancipation is the result of increased freedom from restrictive social structures such as class.
Traditional modernist–industrial institutions have resulted from social order and social and economic reproduction structured by, for example, employment patterns, social class and traditional gender roles (Jarvis, 2007). There has been a trend in some areas of social science to see this as emancipatory as we become ‘Freed from these constraints by greater choice, social mobility through education, travel and relocation through globalised work practices and migration’ (Jarvis, 2007, p. 27). This change is emancipatory because individuals are liberated from modern industrial constraints such as class, clanship and religious feudalism (Jarvis, 2007).

For Beck, however, increased individualism does not simply mean increased emancipation. For him, instead:

Individualization means, first, the disembedding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life with new ones, in which the individuals must produce, stage, and cobble together their biographies themselves. Thus the name ‘individualization’ (Beck et al., 1994, p. 13).

The erosion of certainty provided by traditional structures creates uncertainty (Zinn, 2004). This uncertainty must then be considered as risk to be managed; as individuals are forced to make decisions and choices in their lives, new forms of risk are created that can ‘back up on themselves in a reflexive manner’ (Denney, 2005, p. 32).

This position suggests a paradox where a life experience that is no longer shaped by traditional modern industrial structures leaves the emancipated individual capable of greater self-realisation. However, life is less certain and therefore more risky, and risk is to be avoided. Setting out to examine the risk society thesis, Taylor-Gooby and Cebulla (2010) carried out a longitudinal study that found that ‘The social world has become less certain, and one’s success in steering a course through it now contributes more strongly to one’s satisfaction with one’s position in life’ (p. 748). There is, therefore, satisfaction gained through managing everyday risks.

Later sections of this chapter examine risk communication and in doing so return to the risk society as introduced above. In the following section, I turn to the governmentality approach to risk.
2.5 Governmentality Approaches to Risk

In this section I discuss the “governmentality” approach to risk. The governmentality approach to risk draws on the work of Michel Foucault and his discussion of power and self-discipline (see Denney, 2005; Mythen, 2014; Mythen & Walklate, 2006b; O’Malley, 1998, 2009, 2010, 2012). O’Malley (2009, p. 52) points out that governmentality is an analytical technique that gained popularity after Marxist theory fell out of favour with critical theorists interested in examining both politics and power. Whereas the risk society position discussed above focusses on the impacts of large-scale risks, governmentality has focussed on how ‘discourses of risk are constructed, normalised and reproduced through everyday social practices’ (Mythen, 2014, p. 33).

An important distinction between the risk society and governmentality positions can be found in the way they view or define risk. Lupton (2013a) points out that the risk society position takes a weak social constructionist position on risk where governmentality assumes a strong social constructionist position. The governmentality perspective defines risk as ‘A specific way to manage uncertainty by calculative techniques and a specific way to govern society by allocating responsibility to a prudent subject’ (Zinn, 2009a, p. 178).

When considering risk, O’Malley (2012) argues that the risk society position is incorrect as it leans towards a unified definition of risk. From the governmentality model, risk as a set of techniques can be conceived of in several ways. The first of these draws on Ewald’s (1991) insurance risk where the focus is not on reducing risks or harm; rather, the focus is on spreading the harm of risks by ‘distributing them across time and populations’ (O’Malley, 2012, p. 21).

O’Malley (2012) also lists ‘clinical risk’, a term from Weir (1996) that refers to the use of risk-based technologies to reduce risks in specific circumstances. Clinical risk is characterised by ‘the deployment of risk to govern a specific individual. That is, the individual is treated not simply as a representative of the risk category but as a unique case to which certain risk factors apply’ (O’Malley, 2012, p. 25). Risk becomes an organising principle applied to individuals through the application of strategies. For example, drug users are managed through harm-reduction policies, such as safe-injecting
rooms (O’Malley, 2012). A further example comes from Castel (1991) where mental health practitioners become increasingly bound to risk management routines. While often applied to this medical context, the clinical risk approach is argued to apply to a growing number of other risk reduction-focussed endeavours such as crime prevention and education (O’Malley, 2012).

Castel (1991), in discussing practices such as mental health and welfare interventions, highlights that state policies aimed at risk that are preventative policies constitute a contemporary form of surveillance. Surveillance does not need a traditional ‘watcher’ and ‘watched’. As Castel points out, this relationship is no longer needed or possible as there is no longer a subject because policies aimed at prevention ‘deconstruct the concrete subject of intervention and reconstruct a combination of factors liable to produce risk’ (Castel, 1991, p. 288).

A third category of risk is the ‘epidemiological model’ introduced by Dean (1999). The ‘epidemiological model’ shares important similarities with clinical risk as outlined above. It shares the risk identification/risk reduction approach of clinical risk but, like insurance risk, is more concerned with reducing harm for populations rather than individuals.

Governmentality understands a key driver of behaviour to be the management of the self. The self is made and managed through a constant appraisal of ‘normal’ and adjustments made as required:

Central to these technologies is normalization, or the method by which norms of behaviour or health status are identified in populations and sub-groups of populations. Through normalization, the late modern individual is fabricated within a network of instruments and techniques of power (Lupton, 2013a, p. 116).

Governmentality relates this to a situation where the state, through a variety of regulatory mechanisms, increasingly views the government of populations as an end. From this relationship a set of ‘social practices’ progress and these become ‘modes of subjugation’ (Denney, 2005, p. 35). Individuals (and populations) are then required to act according to their moral obligations, including the obligation to avoid risks (Denney, 2005). Therefore, governmentality is very much concerned with ‘the kinds of subjects government programs wish to make us into – for example, irrational drug addicts versus rational but drug dependant “drug users”’ (O’Malley, 2010, p. 14). Building on the clinical risk
discussion above, this positioning of subjects leads to particular techniques. The irrational drug addict is subjected to interventions such as compulsory detox while the rational drug user is provided needle exchanges (O’Malley 2010; 2012).

In the social and political operations of everyday governmentality, populations are regulated and constituted via discourses of expertise, and these traverse the modernist-industrial and neoliberal eras. Neoliberalism, however, brings a renewed focus to self-responsibility, a key conduit for governmental power and authority (O’Malley, 2012). Discourses of risk that are thought to be based on expert forms of knowledge dictate forms of proper action. Within this framework the state can govern through technologies of risk management that regulate social practice (Mythen, 2014). Governmentality does not only provide tools to analyse state interventions or government programs. Governmentality can be applied to ‘any way of shaping conduct, right down to the ways in which shopping centres try to govern young people’s loitering, or individuals try to govern their lives by subjecting themselves to certain risk regimes, such as making their homes more secure against crime (O’Malley, 2010, p. 14).

In summary, the governmentality theoretical position understands risk as a set of internalised beliefs, driven by expert discourse, that ‘provide the boundaries of (in)appropriate action’ (Mythen, 2014, p. 37). Freedom for individuals in a neoliberal society is a product of strategies and schemes that direct an individual’s behaviour. This power occurs through the empowerment of individuals who can manage ‘their bodies, souls and way of life’ (Zinn, 2009a, p. 172). In this framework, not to do so—not to take up risk-avoiding behaviour—constitutes a failure. To avoid risk becomes a moral enterprise and a form of self-government (Lupton, 2013a).

The examination of risk communication in the media carried out in later chapters of this thesis relies most heavily on these two approaches, risk society and governmentality. However, there are several other ways in which risk has been treated in both practice and theory. To highlight the many approaches that discussion of risk attracts, the following section outlines further theoretical approaches to risk, in particular the cultural approach and ‘edgework’.
2.6 Further Theoretical Approaches to Risk

The cultural approach to risk was popularised by Mary Douglas (see Douglas, 1986; Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983). In defining risk in a way similar to some of the positions outlined above, the culturalist position argues that risk is not measurable or objective. Rather it is socially constructed through culture and politics (Denney, 2005). The cultural approach argues that ‘Objects, things and processes are therefore not risky in and of themselves, they acquire dangerousness through social processes of attribution’ (Mythen, 2014, p. 40). Risk is therefore important in the development of a cultural understanding of the social world.

Earlier versions of the culturalist position, such as that of Douglas, were influenced by the structural functionalist approach of earlier theorists such as Emile Durkheim (Denney, 2005; Zinn, 2009a). Of particular influence was the notion of boundaries, which are central to the culturalist approach. Risk in contemporary, modernised societies carries out a function similar to the role that danger served in earlier ones. Dangers, or risks, become a threat to the moral boundaries of a social group (Denney, 2005; Lupton, 2013a). For example, asylum seekers and refugees may be represented using language that infers riskiness and danger which has been argued to not only control asylum seekers as a group, but also calm public fears about security (Malloch & Stanley, 2005). Risk therefore carries out the positive function of increasing social solidarity. This relationship also applies to questions of what becomes perceived as a risk. The definers of risk from this perspective are created culturally by social groups (Denney, 2005). In relation to everyday experience, the cultural approach is concerned with the ways risk is understood by different people and how they construct their identity in reference to risk (Zinn & Taylor-Gooby, 2006).

A contemporary approach to risk that moves to an examination of risk as a positive rather than a negative is edgework. A key focus of edgework is voluntary risk taking where such risks are pleasurable (Lyng, 2008). Importantly, this is a different type of positive effect to the “emancipation” of the risk society thesis. For Lyng (2008), examinations of voluntary risk taking behaviour have moved beyond commonly envisioned leisure activities such as extreme sports to include dangerous occupations such as police work.
and firefighting. Even occupations that do not elicit high danger but suggest high risk or high stakes—such as stock and bond trading, day trading and other high-risk endeavours in the financial sector—can hold a similar attraction (Lyng, 2008). The edgework position is one that draws on a particular interpretation of uncertainty. Uncertainty is, as discussed earlier, a central component of many considerations of risk. For Lyng (2008), uncertainty carries with it positive connotations. Uncertainty drives the positive attraction of risky behaviour. If there were certainty of outcome, there would be no pleasure in the risky pursuit:

Confronting and responding to uncertainty is what edgeworkers value most, even if they devote significant effort to managing risks in order to reduce the likelihood of hazardous outcomes. Indeed, it would perhaps be more accurate to describe the edgework perspective as a general theory of uncertainty seeking rather than a theory of risk seeking per se (Lyng, 2009, p. 109).

Uncertainties become what Lyng (2008, p. 133) calls ‘manufactured uncertainties’ where individuals manufacture uncertainty for themselves through their pursuit of dangerous and risky activities. The attractiveness of edgework can be partly explained through the pleasure that ‘edgeworkers’ attain from risky behaviour. This inclusion of emotion stands in contrast to an explanation that would assume risk-taking activity based purely on rational decision making (see Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008; Katz, 1988; Lyng, 2008). Importantly, risky behaviour shapes pleasure through ‘the nature of the experience into exploring consequential boundaries’ (Lyng, 2008, p. 134). This relationship provides a link between the pleasure derived from edgework practices and social context. The relationship between edgework and risk extends beyond considerations of pleasure to include responses to risky behaviour. In reference to criminal behaviour as edgework, as popularised by Katz (1988) and the later cultural criminology approach, Ferrell et al. (2008, p. 72) argue that ‘efforts to stop edgeworkers will only heighten the risk of their edgework, force them to further hone their skills, and so amplify the very adrenaline rush that participants seek and authorities seek to stop’. From this perspective there remains a dynamic link between risk and emotion. While the wider application of this theoretical approach to risk is limited, it highlights the possibility of a link between risk and emotion.

As can be seen, risk and insecurity are understood theoretically in a variety of ways. Later sections of this thesis examine some of the contrasts between these positions in more
depth. Following from the above discussion of theoretical positions, the next section examines the related area of risk communication.

In the next section I examine risk communication. While chapter four examines risk communication through a worked analysis of risk in the news media, the next section introduces some of the key discussions and themes in the theoretical positions examined—the risk society and governmentality approaches. The following section focusses most directly on risk communication and perception elements of the theoretical positions above. The following section focusses on drivers of risk perception, followed by a discussion of forms of risk information and knowledge with a focus on the validity of expert versus lay knowledge.

### 2.7 Risk Communication

There are a number of ways to define and discuss risk communication. Common to discussions concerned with policy implications, there is a technical discussion of risk and risk reduction, linked to communicating information about risks to the public (Boholm, 2008). Boholm (2008, p. 1) notes that in this form, risk communication ‘is a point of intersection of social communication, practical management and policy making. It covers such diverse activities as to inform and educate the public about risk, and risk management in order to influence attitudes and behaviour’. This individualist approach to risk suggests risk communication that is favoured in policy settings. From this position, risk becomes an independent and objective variable. It is a position on risk that is stripped of social and cultural context (Denney, 2005).

Alaszewski and Burgess (2007) provide a more nuanced conceptualisation of risk communication in this setting. They discuss three types of risk communication. The first is what they call a “common-sense” approach, within which an obvious, if at times complex, body of statistical information and evidence from the past is used to guide the future. The second is the “forensic” approach where harmful events that have previously occurred are analysed and this analysis is used to inform recommendations to avoid harmful events in the future. Finally, there is the precautionary approach, which is aligned with Beck’s risk society position, where evidence is not accepted in the management of
risk. Rather, experience and emotion are dominant leading to potentially unrealistic assumptions about risk and the likelihood of harmful events (Alaszewski & Burgess, 2007).

As discussed in earlier sections of this chapter, the definition of risk from perspectives that consider social and cultural context has a contingent relationship with public perceptions of risk. It is contingent on those things that receive attention as problems to be dealt with. It is also contingent on scope. In terms of overt harms, the risk society position is one that focusses mostly on large-scale, sometimes global, risks (see Beck, 1992, 2002, 2009a). Conversely, as discussed earlier, governmentality focusses its attention on the everyday experiences of risk and would find the individualist objective view of risk to be a key area of interest when considering discourse and power.

Beyond considerations of scope, temporality and location are important considerations. There are localised risks, for example crime, which needs to be considered as temporary in perceptions of risk, and locally focussed:

Myriad risks confront us, from voluntary risks we choose to run (such as smoking, alcohol use, bungee jumping) to involuntary risks imposed upon us (such as environmental pollution), from personal risks (such as choices on lifestyle) to public risks (such as crime). Risks also come in different sizes, with differing levels of probability, impact and consequence (Kemshall, 2003, pp. 3–4).

When considering the example of crime, Jewkes (2015) argues that the media presents crime stories that are ever-more victim centred. When this practice is common there is a transformative point for individual understandings of risk where vulnerability becomes the central theme at the expense of accurate accounts of actual victimisation (Jewkes, 2015). Stories that test commercial products and report on which one represents the best value would therefore meet this definition as well; as does the regularly aired story of a dishonest car salesman or “shonky” builder. Vulnerability as a definer of risk, or being at risk, is transformative. Consideration of the risks that individuals need to navigate includes passive risks which expands to include everyday risks that exist ‘out there’—risks that may affect those who are not prepared or aware. Individuals are increasingly responsible for seeking new risks and ways to manage their needs (Taylor-Gooby, Dean, Munro, & Parker, 1999). Therefore, a general view of risk communication includes more than those things a viewer could see as an overt threat, or as the possibility of a negative
outcome. It is everyday life that is the focus of risk communication (see Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006b; Zinn, 2009b, 2009c). Information, whether media based or other, could then be understood in the same way as broader risks. News media stories that deal with crime, for example, would fall into this category even though the media audience may not be at direct risk of becoming a victim.

There is an important difference in the ways individuals react to information about risks. First, as we saw with edgework earlier (see Lyng, 2008; Zinn, 2009a), risk communication does not always lead to the perception of a negative event or threat. There may be a calculation of not only the likelihood of a negative event, but also a calculation of the goods versus bads, with some bads accepted as an inevitable aspect of producing or managing goods (Kemshall, 2003). As discussed, the edgework perspective views risk communication in this way. Lyng (2008) goes further to highlight that edgeworkers hope to maintain a level of uncertainty, as without uncertainty there is no risk.

All the above suggests that how risk is perceived is an act of negotiation even though the risk society and governmentality position fail to move beyond simple definitions of risk. There is also an assumption from both perspectives of individuals and populations as passive receivers of risk information (Tulloch, 2009). However, describing risk communication as a negotiation suggests striking a deal, with an attempt from both sides to achieve a favourable outcome. On this point the cultural perspective differs from the risk society and governmentality approaches, as this negotiation becomes a formative part of the process of defining risks:

When individuals weigh up risks or decide what a risk is, they are making an assessment of the social meaning of phenomena and their place within cultural norms. They are deciding how these phenomena cohere with their values about what is acceptable and harmless against what is dangerous and threatening. (Lupton, 2013b, p. 638).

### 2.8 Reflexivity, Late Modernity, and Individualism

A key area of discussion when considering risk communication is the concept of reflexivity. Reflexive modernisation erodes the traditional and recognised parameters of industrial society. It dissolves things such as class culture and consciousness, and gender
and family roles, and their form in the consciences collective (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994, 2003). The social and political institutions of industrial society rely on these structures for their validity and existence (Beck 1992). These changes are occurring in what Beck has called ‘a social surge of individualisation’ (Beck 1992, p. 87).

Beck (1994) states that the word reflexive does not necessarily show “reflection” or more specifically the term “reflexive modernisation” ‘does not imply (as the adjective “reflexive” might suggest) reflection, but (first) self-confrontation’ (Beck et al., 1994; emphasis in original). Not that Beck dismisses the notion of reflection; the opposite is true. Beck (1994) is distinguishing between what he sees as two separate aspects of late modernity. One, ‘reflection’, refers to the more generally understood ‘increase of knowledge and scientization in the sense of self-reflection on modernisation’ (Beck, 1994, p. 6). Conversely, the ‘reflexive’ in ‘reflexive modernisation’ denotes a confrontation of the foundation of modernity and industrial society. This foundation is a consensus for human progress and domination over nature. With this consensus comes the unintended consequences and risks produced by modernity and industrialisation (Beck, 1994). As Beck has said:

Then ‘reflexive modernization’ means self-confrontation with the effects of risk society that cannot be dealt with and assimilated in the system of industrial society—as measured by the latter’s institutional standards. The fact that this very constellation may later, in a second stage, in turn become the object of (public, political and scientific) reflection must not obscure the unreflected, quasi-autonomous mechanism of the transition: it is precisely abstraction which produces and gives reality to the risk society (Beck, 1994, p. 6).

Therefore, risk, and managing risk, is a central aspect of life for the contemporary individual. Individuals as the broader institutions relied on to manage risks in modernity are no longer capable of doing so. They are instead a source of unintended risks. Debate about risks now dominates public, political and private arenas (Lupton, 1999): ‘Individuals living in these societies have therefore moved towards a greater awareness of risk and are forced to deal with risks on an everyday basis’ (p. 59).

In his later work, Beck has been more precise in his definition of ‘reflexive’ in the context of ‘reflexive modernity’:

Reflexive does not mean that people today lead a more conscious life. On the contrary … Simple modernisation becomes reflexive modernisation to the extent that it
disenchant and then dissolves its own taken-for-granted premises. This eventually leads to the undermining of every aspect of the nation-state: the welfare state; the power of the legal system; the national economy; the corporatist systems that connected one with the other; and the parliamentary democracy that governed the whole (Beck et al., 2003).

To Giddens (1990, 1994), the reflexivity of modern social life is defined by the fact that social practices are continually scrutinised and transformed. This scrutiny occurs through the negotiation of incoming information and this negotiation changes their constitution (Giddens, 1990). No knowledge is as absolute or definite: ‘No knowledge under conditions of modernity is knowledge in the “old” sense, where to know is to be certain’ (Giddens, 1990, p. 40). Giddens does not equate this uncertainty to a post-modern condition. Its basis is in the long-standing nature of human action not based on ‘chains of aggregate interactions and reasons’ but on a ceaseless and all-encompassing ‘monitoring of behaviour and its contexts’ (Giddens, 1990, p. 36).

Giddens is not arguing that individuals lead a ‘more conscious life’. Giddens is drawing on the same notion of the loss of utility on behalf of the modern state. Yet reflexivity as imagined by Giddens2 has a different genealogy than the reflexivity imagined by Beck. The two have contrasting views (Lash, 2003). Scott Lash has posited the distinction between these approaches:

Both [Habermas & Giddens] featured a stress on the importance of agency in contrast to structure. This is perhaps the key to understanding reflexivity in second modernity. It equally has little to do with the (partial) determinacy of agency by structure, it is not about structure at all. First modern reflexivity was a matter of reflection. Indeed, Habermas’s communicative action might be paradigmatic, of not reflexive but reflective modernisation. Second modernity is about the emergent demise of the distinction between structure and agency altogether (Lash, 2003, p. 49; emphasis in original).

Lash (1994, 2002, 2003) has articulated an account of reflexivity that is similar to Beck’s. The difference lies in Lash’s (1994) focus on the aesthetics and cultural determinants that impact on reflexivity (Lash, 1994; Mythen, 2004) The strength of this approach lies in its addressing of one of the central criticisms often directed towards the work of Beck. Beck’s version of the risk society fails to take into account the “cultural milieu” in which meaning construction and “sense making” takes place. (Mythen, 2004, 2014; Mythen &

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2 Lash also counts Habermas and his theory of ‘communicative action’ as aligned with the position on reflexivity taken by Giddens.
Walklate, 2006b). Mythen sides with Lash in positing that ‘everyday attitudes about risk are structured by a range of emotions, values and beliefs’ (Mythen, 2004, p. 146). This position is in contrast to Beck’s with its emphasis on the information-producing role of experts which come from within larger institutions such as the government and the media. This distinction is important not only when considering reflexivity but also the interrelated process of risk construction (Mythen, 2004).

### 2.9 Expert versus Lay Knowledge

One of the key debates in discussions of risk, and particularly risk communication, is centred on sources of knowledge about risk. This debate is most commonly centred on types of knowledge starting with the role of experts and thus expert knowledge. Counter to this is “lay” knowledge: knowledge about risks derived from non-expert sources.

As discussed earlier Beck (Beck, 1992, 2009a; Beck et al., 1994), recognises there are new risks, new threats and new dangers, and that these risks are not natural phenomena but rather an outcome of modernity and its ideals. The ideals of modernity are reliant on the presumed liberating forces of expert knowledge. As expert knowledge produces bads (risks) it becomes problematised (Beck, 1992, 2009a; Beck et al., 1994).

From the risk society perspective, the problematisation of expert knowledge is, as discussed at length later in this thesis, a problematisation of authority. Expert knowledge becomes a potential risk, a possible producer of further danger. Importantly, from the risk society perspective, expert knowledge retains a central position as a definer of risk (Beck, 1992; Denney, 2005; Mythen, 2014). Tulloch (2009) argues that as expert knowledge becomes less trusted, individuals are ‘thrown increasingly onto ourselves in constructing our own risk narratives by way of local and mediated cultural representations’ (p. 148).

The problematisation of expert knowledge inherent to the risk society position differs from the view of the governmentality approach. The view of expert knowledge as a risk-defining authority is also central to governmentality. Expert knowledge is central to the governmentality approach. It positions both the defining and governing of risk as operated
through expert discourse. (Dean, 1999; Denney, 2005; Mythen, 2014; Mythen & Walklate, 2006b; O’Malley, 2009).

From a governmentality perspective there is, as we have seen, a shift of focus to expert-driven knowledge about risk being utilised by individuals to actively maintain “normality”. The individual is motivated to self-discipline, and riskiness is straying from what is “normal”. Lupton clarifies the relationship between governmentality and reflexivity as:

Foucault, like Beck and Giddens, emphasizes the role of expert knowledges in the constitution of late modern subjectivity. Expert knowledges, he argues, are integral to the reflexive techniques and practices of subjectification, or the formation of certain types of subject. For Foucault, however, expert knowledges are not transparently a means to engage in reflexivity. Rather, they are seen as pivotal to governmentality, providing the guidelines and advice by which populations are surveyed, compared against norms, trained to conform to these norms and rendered productive (Lupton, 2013a, p. 116).

There have also been examinations of the role that lay knowledge can play in the questioning of expert knowledge (see Lidskog, 2008; Wynne, 1996). This same question has also been examined in the context of risk communication, as discussed in later chapters (see Burgess, 2006, 2012; Mythen, 2010; Walklate & Mythen, 2011). An important area of consideration that has yet to receive extensive consideration is the active construction of meaning by those receiving the risk information. Neither the risk society nor governmentality approaches have been able to completely account for an active audience (Tulloch, 2009).

Problems arise when comparing the risk society and governmentality position on expert knowledge. While both argue that expert knowledge is a central risk definer, they differ starkly in assumptions about the role of experts in negotiating or managing risks. Rather than the distrusted expert of the risk society position, governmentality suggests that the influence of experts may be increasing. Experts are ‘presented by governments and organisations, and often by individuals themselves, as having an ability to understand danger, and so they are in a strong position to predict risk. This gives the expert and expert opinion increasing power’ (Denney, 2005, p. 36). The role of expert and lay knowledge is a central aspect of this thesis and is a relationship examined in later chapters.
2.10 Risk and Risk Communication in This Thesis

In summary, the risk society position constructs individuals as negotiating a social world where everything can be understood as a risk. Even when considering everyday issues the risk society approach assumes we are risk-averse individuals who are concerned primarily with avoiding negative outcomes. While there is an element of emancipation, a freeing from traditional structures of industrial modernity, the individual nevertheless faces an increasingly uncertain world (Beck, 1992, 2009b). There is an assumption in Beck’s position that avoiding risks is a fundamental approach to living life. Everything we do hangs first on a framework of avoiding “naturally” occurring “bad” outcomes.

Beck’s focus is on manufactured risks but much discussion about risk and riskiness assumes both the real and unavoidable nature of riskiness and danger. Beck and others who conceptualise risk this way see it as problematised for the individual due to their lack of recourse to authority. They are “cut loose” to negotiate or navigate risk but not to eliminate or control it. Regarding the role of lay knowledge, ‘people’s intuitive experiential knowledge is less effective, and hazards are determinable by experts because of their magnitude and their invisibility to the senses’ (Tulloch, 2009, p. 147). However, as we see with issues such as climate change, experts disagree, and are actually seen to disagree with each other on matters of dealing with risk, along with expert knowledge being seen as the cause of unintended risks. This lack of agreement leaves individuals in a state where nothing can be seen as eliminating risk. This state then reinforces for individuals the idea that risk is a naturally occurring phenomenon. However, the self-disciplining subject conceived by governmentality approaches this negotiation or navigation of omnipresent riskiness through familiar mechanisms, authoritative knowledge and discourse (O’Malley, 1998, 2009, 2012). Authority informs a key position about risk this thesis sets out to examine. Expert knowledge has been problematised for the contemporary subject who is both reflexive in the risk society meaning, and self-disciplining.

Therefore, this thesis attempts to address several gaps. First, the risk society position—that expert knowledge is problematised yet still essential in defining risks—requires further examination. When coupled with the governmentality approach that positions
expert knowledge as increasingly powerful, there is a tension between the roles of expert knowledge for contemporary individuals. The risk society position attempts to overcome this tension with a consideration of social rationalities (Zinn, 2009a). In a related set of questions, this thesis also examines the role of authority when trying to understand the contested role of expert and lay information about risks. Second, as identified by Tulloch (2009), the governmentality model in particular ‘tends to ignore two decades of research within media and cultural studies on the active audience’ (Tulloch, 2009, p. 155). I would argue that this lack of consideration of ‘meaning construction’ is also relevant outside the media–audience relationship. Indeed, an examination of meaning construction via the news media, as carried out throughout this thesis, will significantly improve our knowledge in this area. This approach lends itself to an examination of the ‘discursive and calculative technologies employed culturally by … media and risk victims’ (Tulloch, 2009, p. 166). Finally, recent work into risk and risk communication has considered the role of narrative and experience in communicating information about risk (see Mairal, 2008, 2011; Tulloch, 2009). The role of experience is an under-researched area examined in later sections of this thesis.

The following chapter outlines the methodology employed in this thesis. The methodology focusses on narrative analysis as an analytical tool used to examine risk communication in the media. Further, research methodologies concerned with the examination of risk in everyday life are discussed. Throughout the following chapter I detail a number of rationales and processes employed in the data collection and analysis strategy of this thesis.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the methodology employed in this thesis. The following methodological discussion is presented in two broad sections, which align with two stages of research carried out in this thesis. The first of these concerns the selection and use of news stories from Australian current affairs television programs. The second section details a questionnaire and set of interviews. These questionnaires and interviews targeted respondents who were viewers of the television programs examined in the first stage of this research.

The first stage of this methodological approach aims to develop a qualitative analysis of media content that focusses on the narrative structure of the information. A further focus of this stage is on specific roles within the story presentation. These roles may be filled by experts or non-experts. This first stage of the methodology aims to develop an understanding of how risk is communicated by selected media sources, and by whom.

The second goal is to move to questioning the audience about their relationship to these sources of risk communication. A specific objective of this second stage is to determine how the presentation of risk information is understood by the audience, with a focus on the concepts of trust and authority. In a sense this represents an interdisciplinary methodological approach which employs a qualitative narrative analysis of media content which is then examined in relation to audience understandings of the risk communication the content represents. The following sections discuss each of these stages in turn.

3.2 Media Narrative Case Studies

The news media presents a large number of sources from which audiences gain the impression that they are free to “pick and choose”. Some media sources available to Australian audiences are more suitable to narrative analysis than others. This relationship is further limited when examining inherent narrative structure that conveys information
to the audience about risk. This research focuses on long-story-format news programs available on Australian free to air television. In Australia, this type of program is commonly labelled as a “current affairs” program.

The programs selected as case studies in this research were chosen for several reasons. Firstly, they all represent a newsmagazine format, presenting longer, more in-depth stories than a regular nightly news report. Secondly, all these programs employ a similar story style, but they were selected for their varied lengths, in order to establish points of contrast. For example Today Tonight and A Current Affair are both broadcast following a nightly news bulletin and present discrete stories of around five minutes in length. The 7.30 Report is also a nightly program with a similar format but stands in contrast as it appears on the ABC network, a government-funded television free to air network that does not include or accept paid advertising. Today Tonight and A Current Affair both appear on commercial free to air networks.

The other two programs, 60 Minutes and Four Corners, are weekly current affairs programs that present stories that are generally longer in duration than those programs mentioned above: typically 10–20 minutes. Inclusion of these programs provides a further point of comparison as 60 Minutes appears on a commercial free to air network, while Four Corners appears on the ABC. A selection of stories from these sources were used as case studies in chapters four, five and six. Using narrative analysis as an analytical tool, these three chapters develop a theoretical position by critically examining the content of these case studies.

Story-type informed the selection of stories for examination. Stories were selected from those presented in each of the five programs over two separate two month periods. Stories were picked when they that presented a risk of some sort, and employed a narrative format to explain this information. Therefore this is a purposeful sample and it is not suggested that this is representative of all media content concerning risk. Some story types were excluded from selection. For example, it is not uncommon for programs such as The 7.30 Report, A Current Affair and Today Tonight to have the host interview someone with little or no back story presented other than an introduction. In some cases, for example, the interviewee is a serving politician or celebrity. Story segments based mostly or entirely on this type of interview were not selected.
Nonetheless, there is an examination of some stories that were interview-based. It would be an uncommon story that did not include an interview or discussion with, or the opinion of, interested parties. Interested parties for a particular story can take on many guises. They always fulfil the function of a character when viewed through the analytic lens of narrative. It is through the synthesis of many story factors that the entire narrative becomes evident. How does the reporter/narrator introduce the story? What comments are included? How does the reporter/narrator link different pieces of information and comment? Who is given a voice and who is not? These aspects, and others, constitute the features examined in this analysis.

3.2.1 Narrative Structure

The following section discusses the methods of examining how risk communication is embedded in narrative structure employed in this research. This exploration will inform the subsequent analysis of the media–audience, risk communication relationship. Several approaches to a structural, or formal, explanation of narrative structure have been put forward. Narrative theorist Todorov argued that narrative is more than just a simple transition from beginning to end. Rather narrative is a “causal transformation”. A narrative contains some logical change. In a conventional narrative these types of transformations are specific (as cited in Lacey, 2000). Todorov argued that narrative structure, at its simplest, consists of an initial situation, a problem that disrupts this situation, and then a resolution of the problem that allows the reinstatement of the initial situation, although often with minor changes.

Although this is a simple description of narrative, it is elegant in what it allows narrative analysis to reveal. Another description of this structure would be thesis–antithesis–synthesis. It is the notion of synthesis that gives this approach its utility. This synthesis stage signifies transformation. Todorov went on to develop a more complex model of narrative structure than the “situation–problem–resolution” model, expanding his categorisation of narrative structures to include five stages: a state of equilibrium at the outset, a disruption of the equilibrium by some action, a recognition that there has been a disruption, an attempt to repair the disruption, and finally a reinstatement of the equilibrium (Lacey, 2000, p. 29).
Another narrative theorist, Vladimir Propp, identified two common components that are beneficial to an analytical framework of narrative structure: roles, fulfilled by characters; and functions, which constitute the plot (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998). These are further divided into seven ‘spheres of action’ (Silverman, 2001). The same characters can fulfil several roles, and more than one character can take on some roles. These characters are the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero (Hansen et al., 1998, pp. 148–149). Propp further identified 31 separate narrative functions which are grouped into the stages of preparation, complication, transference, struggle, return and recognition. Despite the different nomenclature, these stages are reflected in Todorov’s later model of equilibrium, disruption, new equilibrium, and so on (Lacey, 2000).

There is an important difference between the categorisations of these two theorists when analysing the ways in which the audience may construct meaning from narrative. Todorov focusses on what a narrative can tell us about the characters and their situation. He also considers the broader context in which the action takes place, which involves simpler explanation of the constituents of narrative when compared to the more detailed categories of Propp. However, it is one that offers the possibility of more detailed analysis when applied to media narratives of risk. Todorov concentrated more on change and, by proxy, how this change affects the characters. This change reveals both the story and information that provides meaning beyond the internal description of the story. The media can rely on the audience basing their evaluation of information on this type of accepted structure. The story is then a reflection of presumed common beliefs about what constitutes equilibrium or normalcy. This also applies to the constitution of disruptions, what or who is required to repair this equilibrium, and the make-up of any new equilibrium.

The above informs a specific form of qualitative content analysis which ‘comprises a searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analysed’ (Bryman, 2015). In this case the material analysed is television content of a specific narrative format. Whereas qualitative content analysis of media sources aims to extract themes from content in a broad sense, the analysis in this research has a different aim. The focus in this thesis is on meaning implied by the narrative structure used, as well as an exploration of
who fulfils particular character roles. Further, the use of narrative analysis of texts is often carried out through the collection of quantitative data that is similar to that collected by media content analysis (Silverman, 2001). Even when narrative analysis is carried out this way, the functions of the narrative receive specific attention, often being coded and counted. The goal of the qualitative analysis carried out in this thesis, as detailed above, was to analyse these examples as a text, and to develop an understanding of how narrative structure “works” (Silverman, 2001, p. 126).

To examine the relationship between media and audience further, the second stage of this research utilised a multifaceted methodological approach that employed both questionnaires and semi-structured audience interviews. Throughout the methods described in the following sections, the newsmagazine programs discussed in the preceding chapters are used as a basis for survey and interview questions directed to viewers of these programs. Survey/questionnaire results were collected prior to the semi-structured interviews, which used a number of the same respondents. As such, there is an inductive research process being put into practice (Crowther-Dowey & Fussey, 2013). For example, some elements of the semi-structured interviews were adjusted based on the results of the questionnaires. This adjustment was not done uniformly across respondents. Rather, the interviews were adjusted on a case-by-case basis. This procedure was made possible by information gathered in the survey stage concerned which, for example, revealed the respondent’s specific news media viewing habits and preferences. This method is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

3.3 Researching Risk

Research into risk and risk communication has most often been concerned with large-scale risks and how information about these risks is communicated to the public (see Kitzinger, 1999; Tulloch & Zinn, 2011; Zinn & Taylor-Gooby, 2006). Methodologically, this type of research has often assumed both the objective nature of a particular risk and a probabilistic analysis of the likelihood that a dangerous event might occur (Henwood et al., 2011). Probabilistic analysis as a methodological tool underpins scientific understandings of risk, which ‘fixes (or reifies) risk, obscuring essential questions about
the social, cultural and political processes that give risk its meaning, and how this occurs within the situations, places and spaces, where people encounter risk in their everyday lives’ (Henwood et al., 2011, p. 252). Accordingly, such an approach is problematic when considering everyday risk, which is the aim of this research.

Risk research has also adopted behavioural approaches influenced by psychological perspectives (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006c). In line with this approach is a body of risk research that adopts the main arguments of psychometry. This approach has set out to examine how people respond to risk through categorisation. This is a heuristic examination of risk where people tend to view existing or familiar risks as less pertinent or dangerous than exigent ones (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). This approach is a first step away from the methodological reification of risk (Henwood et al., 2011).

Henwood et al. (2011, p. 254) have identified a “reflexive turn” in risk research that is reflected in methodological approaches. As a shift away from the technical and realist approach, this reflexive turn not only represents an objective view of risks but also allows a consideration of ‘its contextualisation in social and cultural settings’ (Henwood et al., 2011, p. 254). This type of approach can account for the social and cultural differences in understandings of risk, including how different groups may come to understand similar risk information in different ways (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). However, as a methodology this approach may suffer from an objectification of the risk information audience as well. Tulloch and Lupton (2003, p. 8) argue that findings reflecting the above dichotomy ‘assume a universal, rational agent who is focused on avoiding risk, or else is ignorant in her or his assessment of risk’. The methodology employed in this research adopts some elements of this reflexive turn. It does assume that individuals are focussed on avoiding risk—an inherent outcome of individualism and reflexive modernisation (Beck et al., 1994). However, this research positions the risk communication audience as active in the way they make particular judgements about the type of risk communicative act in which they are taking part, and self-disciplining in their desire to avoid risk.

The practice of examining risk as a part of everyday life, as proposed by Tulloch and Lupton (2003), guides the research methodology adopted in this research. This approach overcomes or limits some of the criticisms levelled at research following the risk society by challenging ‘those contentions that tend to make sweeping generalisations about how
“late moderns” respond to risk’ (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003, p. 10). However, the research carried out in this thesis extends this approach to also examine how people come to understand risk and how they evaluate knowledge about risks.

Focussing on the experience of risk in everyday life, as outlined above, takes the form of asking ‘about people’s reflexive risk biographies—about how they produce their own biographies in a social and cultural climate where people’s daily lives have become imbued with risk’ (Henwood et al., 2011, p. 266). It is a methodological approach to risk that asks people about their awareness of risk and further, about the ways they respond to it (Henwood et al., 2011; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003), and is the overarching approach adopted in this research.

### 3.4 Audience Research

The analytical approach detailed above employs a narrative thematic analysis of media case studies, constructing a theoretical position based on those data (Bryman, 2015). As mentioned, a mixed-method approach was used with both qualitative and quantitative data collected at different stages of the research process. The first method used was a questionnaire that focussed on collecting quantitative data. Mixed-method approaches that utilise demographic quantitative data and qualitative data allow for higher levels of corroboration between data sources (Schatz, 2012). Where there is the possibility to examine qualitative data such as those captured through semi-structured interviews alongside demographic data there is potential for more robust assessment and the generation of meaningful descriptions (Schatz, 2012). This research also incorporated a “nested” design where interview respondents were questioned in line with the responses they had indicated during the survey stage. This model allowed for semi-structured interviews where the questioning could remain consistent across respondents who indicated a range of media use habits, news format preferences and levels of trust. It allowed for these issues to be given full attention during the interview stage.

The strength of this approach lies in the inductive research process it represents. This tactic granted the ability to collect data at the interview stage that were more detailed and
exploratory than other methodological approaches would allow (see Crowther-Dowey & Fussey, 2013; Schatz, 2012).

3.4.1 Audience Questionnaires

The first audience-focussed stage of the research methodology was the distribution of a questionnaire. The initial aim of this questionnaire was to gather data about the news media sources utilised by the respondent. A list of specific sources was provided for respondents to choose from with the media sources discussed in the earlier sections of this thesis all included as possible options. Also included were various other television news and newspaper sources and a general question about online news sources. The inclusion of a selective list of media sources allowed some comparison to the issues examined in the case studies in earlier sections of the thesis. Further, the results from this survey could then be related to the discussion of media format included in chapters four, five, and six.

This questionnaire was self-administered and was distributed through researchers as a convenience sample, and to the public via hard copies delivered randomly, left in mailboxes with a return paid envelope. This method was chosen as there were no specific demographic requirements and because it was an effective and convenient way to administer the questionnaire and collect data (Bryman, 2015). Approximately 500 questionnaires were distributed, with 140 completed and included in the results reported here. A full copy of the questionnaire is included at Appendix A.

The questionnaire was broken into three main sections. The first consisted of a series of general demographic questions designed to gather responses for variables including gender, age, marital status, children, occupation, income, location, residential status and internet use. These data were used to build a basic but serviceable demographic profile that, as a rough indication of life stage and reflexive demands, could be used to analyse media choices and evaluations with respect to demography.

The second section of the questionnaire collected data about news consumption habits including types of media. This section also asked respondents to indicate which newsmagazine programs they watched, and how often. Utilising the programs examined
analysed in chapter four, five, and six: *Today Tonight, A Current Affair, 60 Minutes, The 7.30 Report* and *Four Corners*, respondents were asked to indicate if they watched the program and how often they watched it. They were further asked to rate the program as ‘a source of information’, which was achieved using a Likert scale that ranged from 1–10, with 1 being a rating of poor, 5 being a rating of average and 10, a rating of excellent.

The third section contained a direct question asking survey respondents if they would be willing to take part in an extended interview with researchers. This step was the main avenue for recruiting interview participants. Finally, the questionnaire presented respondents with an open question that asked if they could think of a time when information from any of these five programs had personally been of practical use. They were asked to also detail the specifics of any example given, if they indicated yes. The data gathered by questionnaire was manually recorded and coded in ‘SPSS’. ‘SPSS’ was then used to analyse the questionnaire data as presented in chapter seven. The questionnaire data were analysed and cross-tabulation was performed between demographic categories and newsmagazine evaluations (see section 7.1).

3.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

To ensure a focus on the experience of risk in everyday life, semi-structured interviews were chosen. The aim of these interviews was to examine the views of a subset of questionnaire respondents.

This method of “nesting” semi-structured interviews in survey-style data has several benefits (Schatz, 2012). First, it allows for questionnaire data to streamline the semi-structured interview process for each participant based on their media use patterns and evaluations. This approach provides an easier avenue into more detailed discussions of issues of interest to this research, such as the utility of experiential knowledge, trust and authority. Questions can be posed to address these issues directly. The second advantage to nesting these methods was more directly related to allowing respondents to link their media evaluations to larger issues such as risk and experience, which is an approach that allows for a topic to be examined at both the macro and micro level (Elliott, 2008; Schatz, 2012).
The semi-structured approach was used to collect data that allowed respondents to explore their views of trust and authority. These are terms contingent on a respondent’s unique understanding of what these terms mean. Semi-structured interviews are well suited to this type of questioning. The questions utilised in this research were open ended and designed to allow the respondent more scope in answering the question. This same method was also chosen to allow respondents to more freely express their ‘diverse experiences and perceptions’ (Crowther-Dowey & Fussey, 2013, p. 142). This method fit well with the above goals of this research, which were to allow respondents to express their everyday biographies of risk in relation to news media risk information. These methods, the audience questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, were ultimately chosen to allow a consideration of the relationship between ‘everyday risks’ and media utility and access the particular narratives of respondents concerning trust and authority. This stage of the research was directly designed to address research question 3 (see section 1.3.) which asked: How does of non-expert knowledge, such as may appear in narrative news stories, attain its authority?

Another practical advantage of using semi-structured interviews in this research was flexibility and the ability to extend discussion on specific topics through further questioning if required (Bryman, 2015). To provide this flexibility and allow for the above nesting, an interview guide was developed that allowed a great deal of flexibility in questioning while remaining focussed on the media sources examined earlier. This interview guide also avoided closed questions where possible. A copy of the interview guide is available at Appendix B.

As mentioned above in section 3.4.1., the final stage of the audience questionnaire required participants to indicate their willingness to take part in a more detailed interview. The recruitment of the interview sample through the questionnaire led to 13 participants taking part in semi-structured interviews. As the interview participants were recruited through the administration of the audience questionnaire, the interview sample reflected the same constitution as the questionnaire detailed above. This was a mix between two samples. The first was a convenience snowball sample where questionnaires were distributed through the researcher’s social contacts and these contact were also asked to pass on the questionnaire to their contacts and so on. The second sample was gathered
through random letterbox drops of the questionnaire across several suburbs in Sydney, New South Wales. All interview participants were recruited through this process and interviewed between 2005 and 2007. Of the 13 participants, 10 were drawn from the convenience snowball sample and 3 form the random sample. The snowball nature of the convenience sample meant that a limited number of this sample were known to the researcher. All questionnaire respondents who indicated a willingness to take part in the interview stage formed part of the interview sample.

3.4.3 Narrative Analysis of Interview Results

The data collected through these interviews were subjected to a narrative analysis. Narrative analysis can take several forms; the form utilised in this research was a thematic analysis. According to Henwood et al. (2011), narrative analysis of interview data is beneficial when examining understandings of risk. Where there is an attempt to move away from overly realist views of risk, narrative methods allow for a greater consideration of people’s risk perceptions (Henwood et al., 2011). While focussed on the imposition of large-scale risk events in their respondents’ lives, Henwood et al. (2011) suggest that a narrative analysis approach is suitable to examinations of the social and cultural processes of construction and reconstruction of risk phenomena and events, arguing that it ‘requires analysis of people’s efforts at reflexive meaning-making’ (p. 268). They further argue that narrative approaches utilising risk biographies and risk awareness are appropriate methods of examining risk. While Henwood et al. (2011) focus their methodology on understandings of large-scale risks, they do integrate elements from Tulloch and Lupton (2003) and their focus on the everyday experiences of risk. This tactic provides a fitting bridge between the above methodological approach and the aims of this research. The thesis shifts the focus to everyday and existing risks. However, the methodological advantages of the narrative analysis approach remain.

Accordingly, at the beginning of each interview, participants were asked if audio of the interview could be recorded. When this occurred, audio was recorded. The captured audio was then transcribed into text format for subsequent thematic analysis. The thematic analysis of interview data was informed by the categories drawn from the questionnaire data previously provided by respondents. The analysis employed was one where the
narratives of respondents that concerned key themes including utility, everyday risks, and expert knowledge were identified and examined.

The following chapters present the analysis of these interview data via a particular mode of narrative analysis most accurately described as a thematic analysis (see Bryman, 2015; Riessman, 2005). Thematic analysis is an appropriate method for presenting these interview results as it is carried out with ‘an emphasis on what is said rather than on how it is said’ (Bryman, 2015, p. 412). Given the research aims of this thesis, this type of analysis is an important strategy as it allows for an examination of the mechanisms through which ‘people develop a personal awareness of risk in their own lives’ (Henwood et al., 2011, p. 266).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This research utilised using human participants in both the questionnaire and interview stages, and accordingly the ethical conduct of research procedures was of paramount importance. The methodological procedures carried out for this thesis were approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the distribution of questionnaires or any other contact with potential respondents.

At all stages of this research informed consent was sought from participants prior to their engagement with researchers. The questionnaire included a cover page that detailed the nature and aims of the research, an indication of the type of questions included, an assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, assurances that consent could be withdrawn at any time, and contact numbers for both the principal researcher and the approving ethics committee. The interview consent form included the same information and additionally asked the respondent to indicate their agreement to take part in the interview, and to indicate if they agreed to the interview being recorded.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the questionnaires gathered no identifying information unless the respondent indicated they wished to take part in the later interview stage. Hard copies of all completed questionnaires, and tapes of interview recordings, were kept in a secured location only accessible by the principal researcher.
During interviews the participant’s names were coded and they were given pseudonyms. These pseudonyms were aligned with the reported gender of the participant. Wherever possible any information that may have revealed the identity of participants’ was excluded from reporting.

The interview questions were designed to investigate the relationship between media use and risk. Investigating risk presents the possibility that participants would discuss issues that may cause upset or distress. The interviewer made it clear to the participants that this was the case and that they could choose not to answer any questions they wished, and could withdraw from the interview at any time. The interviewer was also equipped to provide contact information for counselling services if required.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the methodological approach utilised in this research. The first stage of this methodology involves an analysis of media risk narratives and this analysis informs the theoretical development that occurs in the following chapters, chapters four, five and six. This methodological discussion has also positioned the second stage of this research methodology as part of a reflexive turn in methodological considerations of risk. The methods chosen—a questionnaire and nested semi-structured interviews directed at audiences—were also situated within current views of risk research methodology that suggest the examination of experiences of risk in everyday life. The results of the questionnaire and interview stages of the research will be reported in later chapters, chapters seven and eight. The following chapter examines risk narratives in the news, and includes the first stages of the narrative analysis outlined in this methodology chapter.
Chapter 4: Narrative in the News

As news consumers we are in a perpetual relationship with information about risks. We are anxious to determine how we should navigate these risks and what knowledge we need to do so. The constitution of risks is determined by content choices made by the media as well as the needs of the audience. A risk can range from an overarching issue such as the threat of terrorism, to more everyday concerns such as the effectiveness of our washing detergent or, as we have seen, the dangers of frying pans coated with Teflon. We need to navigate these risks and doing so can change our beliefs and behaviours. Although it seems incongruous, it may be that we make decisions about the effectiveness of washing detergent and the dangers of frying pans in the same way we make decisions about our risk of becoming a victim of terrorism.

An examination of the Australian news media suggests that we can choose between a large number of sources that present news about risks—both big and small—in similar ways. The story format remains similar despite the availability of information through a variety of mediums. The available range of mediums has undergone extensive change over recent decades. The news audience was once limited to obtaining print news; then also radio; then also television. More recently, digital sources of news have multiplied rapidly as well. Beginning with data collected shortly before the rapid expansion of internet-based news delivery, the following section examines trends in the Australian news landscape.

4.1 The Australian News Audience

In May 2001, the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) in conjunction with researchers from Bond University published Sources of news and current affairs (Pearson, Brand, Archbold, & Rane, 2001). The findings presented were based on research into the Australian news media which examined two main areas. The first of these was “the industry”, that is, professionals employed in the news media, and the second was the audience. It is this second stage that is of particular interest. The older
results of Pearson et al. (2001) provided the background required to make sense of the nature of changes which have occurred since this time.

Among other things, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports on how Australians use their leisure time. Back in 1998, the most popular leisure activity for Australians was the utilisation of ‘audio-visual’ media including television, with an average of 2 hours and 11 minutes spent on these activities each day (Pearson et al., 2001). Using data collected from the United States, the researchers hypothesised that ‘free to air television will dominate news and current affairs activities of Australian audiences, followed by radio and newspapers’ (Pearson et al., 2001, p. 284).

Of particular interest to this research is an approach to measuring audience based media behaviours reported by Pearson (2001). At this time, this method was gaining favour in Australia and elsewhere. Titled ‘media typology research’, it aimed to identify types of media users by creating profiles through ‘measuring volume and variety of media use in relation to other lifestyle characteristics and thereafter creating group profiles in which audiences are classified’ (Pearson et al., 2001, p. 284). Following this typology there were nine identified classes of media user: high involvement, self-development, net focus, filling time, heavy readers, heavy viewers, all day radio, mags and movies, and low involvement (Typology Research Pinpoints, 2000 as cited in Pearson et al., 2001, p. 284). It was noted that the heavy readers, filling time and low involvement groups have been on the decline in Australia whereas net focus and self-development groups are expanding (Typology Research Pinpoints, 2000 as cited in Pearson et al., 2001, p. 284-285). The decline in groups such as heavy readers and filling time groups in this data suggests that sources such as television may indeed have been in prominent positions as news providers. Further, the rise of the “self-development” group is of interest to this research as an indication of self-directed news acquisition.

Of the participants in the 2001 ABA research, the majority spent between 30 minutes and two hours each day consuming news or current affairs. There was some association with age: retirees with an interest in current affairs might spend three hours or more consuming news while younger participants reported spending the least amount of time consuming news and current affairs (Pearson, 2001 et al., p. 325). With respect to the type of media used, free to air television rated the highest with 87.5% of respondents indicating use of
this source, followed by, in order, radio (75.8%), newspapers (75.5%), magazines (16.8%), internet (22.8%) and Pay TV (45.0%) (Pearson et al., 2001).

Table 3.1, taken from Sources of news and current affairs (Pearson et al., 2001), shows which free to air television news and current affairs programs respondents indicated that they used most to access news.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most watched program</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National nine news</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC news</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven nightly news</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten news</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A current affair</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBS world news</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.30 report</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today tonight</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 Minutes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign correspondent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lateline</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four corners</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local edition</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1319</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pearson et al. (2001, p. 330) (bold added)

As can be seen in Table 3.1, the programs that are examined later in this thesis (*60 Minutes, A Current Affair, Today Tonight* and *The 7.30 Report*) were grouped closely together below the regular nightly news programs. The longer-format *Four Corners* was less preferred than the other programs.

When most used source for news or current affairs was considered alongside all other sources (radio, newspapers, etc.), *A Current Affair* was ranked as the fifth most used of 23 possible news sources, while *The 7.30 Report* ranked sixteenth, and *Today Tonight*
ranked twenty-first (Pearson et al., 2001). *60 Minutes* and *Four Corners* did not rank in the top 23. Of note is the preference for standard news broadcasts—that is, regular news bulletins—over newsmagazine programs including those examined earlier.

The data in Table 3.2, also taken from *Sources of news and current affairs*, show which news and current affairs media personalities were most preferred by respondents at that time. Personalities associated with the programs examined in later in this chapter figure prominently in these data, with the top two positions filled by the hosts of *The 7.30 Report* and *A Current Affair*. There is also a strong association between the preferred programs as shown in Table 3.1 and preferred journalists as shown in Table 3.2.

### Table 4.2: Preferred journalist, reporter, presenter or columnist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred source</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kerry O’Brien</td>
<td><em>The 7.30 report</em></td>
<td>122</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Munro</td>
<td><em>A current affair</em></td>
<td>105</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Byrne</td>
<td><em>Foreign correspondent</em></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan Jones</td>
<td><em>Jones</em> (2UE)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Henderson</td>
<td><em>National nine news</em></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Carlton</td>
<td><em>60 Minutes</em></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Kitchener</td>
<td><em>National nine news</em></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine McKew</td>
<td><em>ABC world</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Kostakidis</td>
<td><em>SBS world news</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra Sully</td>
<td><em>Ten news</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Leiberman</td>
<td><em>Today</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi Robson</td>
<td><em>Today tonight</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Negus</td>
<td><em>60 Minutes/ABC</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Waley</td>
<td><em>Nightline/Sunday</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indira Naidoo</td>
<td><em>SBS world news</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon Faine</td>
<td><em>ABC radio</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff McMullin</td>
<td><em>60 Minutes</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jana Wendt</td>
<td><em>Dateline</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Laws</td>
<td><em>Laws</em> (2UE)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray Martin</td>
<td><em>60 Minutes</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip Adams</td>
<td><em>Late night live</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>223</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>635</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pearson et al. (2001, p. 337) (bold added)
To summarise, the 2001 ABA data found that the Australian news audience relies on free to air television for much of their news and current affairs content. The programs introduced and examined later in this chapter rate highly as preferred news sources, though not as highly as regular nightly news services. Along with the broad popularity of these programs, the audience’s preference is also influenced by the presenters and journalists found in these programs.

It is now time to address the situation in more recent years. Television has remained the most popular news sources, however, the use of newspapers and other print sources has declined dramatically. Per capita newspaper sales in Australia were stable for an extended period. Little significant change was found for several decades until the 1980s when per capita newspaper circulation began its decline (Young, 2009). Data suggest that there has been a similar change in the use of radio and television news as well. Data from 2003 to 2007 suggest that the daily use of commercial television declined over that period, from 65% of respondents to 49%. There was, however, a small increase in the percentage of respondents who reported using commercial television news ‘several times a week’ (Young, 2009, p. 149). During this time, internet use for news rose significantly (Young, 2009).

In 2001, commercial free to air television had long been the most popular source of news. (Pearson et al., 2001). While this trend continued, by 2007 there was a noticeable drop in ratings for many television news sources, including some of those examined in this thesis. Young (2009) reports that between 2001 and 2007 ‘A Current Affair’ lost 16.0% of its audience and 60 Minutes lost 14.2%. In comparison, The 7.30 report audience rose by 3.2%, the Today Tonight audience increased by 7.2% and Four Corners by 10.4% over the same period. However, for Today Tonight this popularity did not last in some markets and in 2014 the Sydney version of Today Tonight was cancelled in favour of a longer-format standard news hour (Lallo, 2014). The other programs examined remain on air as of writing.

There has been a dramatic change in the technology utilised to convey news. These changes have had a substantial effect on consumption, especially when considering accessibility and consumption patterns. Those ‘traditional’ television and newspaper sources, even in 2001 when the above ABA data were collected, simultaneously
represented long-standing information dissemination technology and deep-rooted practices of information consumption. In 2001, newer technological methods of delivery were emerging at best and saturation remained relatively low compared to the levels found today.

Van Heekeren (2010) notes that Melbourne’s Age newspaper became the first Australian newspaper to publish online in 1995, when it only published around 10 stories per day. With the explosion of internet news sources post-1995, audiences were able to access news from a growing variety of sources, regardless of location and ownership. This expansion suggests that the cross-media ownership laws in Australia, designed to regulate concentration of media ownership, were unable to regulate as intended (Van Heekeren, 2010). Indeed, media ownership became more concentrated as traditional news sources, particularly newspapers, utilised online delivery as an unregulated extension of concentrated ownership (Van Heekeren, 2010).

Other research has noted similar changes to news consumption in recent times. However, in most Western countries, including Australia, television remains the most popular source of news (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2013). Age may be a key predictor of media format preference. Papathanassopoulos et al. (2013) find that news audience members aged 55 and over were more likely to use traditional sources such as newspapers and television, with television being the most common source. Young adults aged 18–34 were most likely to use online sources of news. Young (2009) reports similar results from 2001 to 2007, with television news sources suffering their sharpest decline in popularity among those aged under 24 years. Conversely, the audience aged 55 years and over grew for all Australian television news sources. Young (2009) argues, however, that although there has been a sharp decline in news consumption in recent times, not all of this decline can be accounted for by a shift to online news sources:

The implications for these shifts away from conventional news forms are significant, and the youth audience is of particular interest. At present, the younger audience is not showing signs of ‘picking up’ either a newspaper or TV news habit, nor has it performed a simple migration to reading newspapers online. These traditional formats may have dwindling appeal for younger Australians who are instead choosing news sources that are brief, fast and enable them to filter out in advance the content they do not want (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2013, p. 131).
The implication is that online sources that reflect traditional news formats are losing popularity, particularly with younger audiences.

Newman et al. (2015) in research published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report some stark changes in both international and Australian news consumption patterns. Some of the main findings support the abovementioned trends internationally. Television remains far more popular than radio and printed newspapers. However, online sources are also more popular than radio and printed newspapers. Age is also an important variable internationally, with those in younger age groups more likely to have used online sources in the preceding week, as compared to older age groups, who were more likely to have accessed television news (Newman et al., 2015). Newman et al. (2015) find a distinct preference for television in older age groups.

In research important to this thesis, Watkins et al. (2015) also investigated the issue of trust in news sources, drawing on the data above. Generally there was a level of trust in personally chosen news sources. Of the news audience, 52.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they can trust the news source they most commonly use. The level of trust reported when considering individual news sources showed that online sources, especially social media, were rated as the least trustworthy. Those who used traditional news sources showed a high level of trust: ‘55.2% trusted TV news, 56.2% trusted radio, 56.8% trusted newspapers, compared to 50.5 trusted for online news and 44.2% for social media’ (Watkins et al., 2015, p. 24). Of online news sources other than social media, the most popular among Australian news audiences are those published by traditional media organisations. The most commonly reported sources in the study by Watkins et al. (2015) are Ninemsn, ABConline/iview, News.com.au, Yahoo7 and the Sydney Morning Herald.

Social media is cited as a common source of news in addition to traditional news sources with an online presence. Social media is a rising source of news, especially for users in younger age groups. According to Watkins et al. (2015), 48.0% of Australian news audience members indicated they had used Facebook for news in the prior week, 15.4% had used YouTube and 7.5% had used Twitter. Clearly these changes represent a shift in the Australian media in terms of delivery. Of most interest is the possible consumption patterns that different delivery formats may entail. The following section examines the
content and information structure of news delivery, with a focus on the earlier current affairs programs listed above.

4.2 News Narratives

Regardless of the source, the style of reporting employed by much of television current affairs uses an expansive range of techniques that can be grouped under the working definition of “narrative style”. I use this term to refer to a type of reporting that tells the story through the actual characters involved. It uses their voices and experiences, rather than reporting the information second-hand. The narratively structured information seen in many news sources carries with it a set of possible outcomes of meaning construction for the media audience and their knowledge of these risks.

Traditional narrative structure is a mainstay of the news media and it is thus possible that narrative devices have become so familiar to us they no longer stand out. Hodge and Kress (1988) assert that narrative-styled information is not a neutral information structure. Even though its commonplace nature may render it invisible to the audience and researchers alike, it remains imbued with cultural meanings and significations:

Narrative is a culturally given way of organising and presenting discourse. The characteristic structures of narrative themselves carry important meanings. Narrative links events into sequential and causal chains, and gives them a beginning and end. These features are transparent signifiers of coherence, order and closure. One effect of the use of these persuasive transparent signifiers is to naturalise the content of narrative itself. By presenting various contingent cultural categories in a narrative frame, the categories themselves take on the appearance of naturalness, and come to seem as inevitable as nature itself (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 230).

Information that has a narrative style deserves analysis from the perspective of the media–audience relationship. It exists between the two and acts as a conduit for understanding that carries its own normative set of rules and meanings. When attempting to understand how audience members negotiate their management of risk, we ignore narrative structure to our peril.

The following sections examine how specific news formats utilise narrative. The analysis focusses on newsmagazine-style television programs. These are news programs that draw on a specific style of news reporting employing various storytelling devices.
These share many features with more traditional, narrative-based forms of storytelling. This chapter examines a selection of stories as presented by these programs and develops a more formal description of the narrative form used.

This following sections also examine the relationship between the media and its audience. Central to this examination is a consideration of previous theoretical models concerned with the transmission of information from media to audience. Discussed are several key approaches that trace the development of theoretical positions on this relationship. There is a focus on how these particular theories have conceptualised the media–audience relationship. Also considered is how an analysis of narrative structure may contribute.

The following example from *Today Tonight* ‘Gold Mine’, demonstrates how the movement through these narrative stages presents itself in television news stories. This story is centrally concerned with a risk. It is a story about the health impacts of a mining operation on local residents. It begins with the introduction of the main character, who proceeds to explain his story:

Voice over – Five years ago, Jock Pollock moved to picturesque Mt Edgerton near Ballarat in Victoria, for a dose of the quiet country life after 33 years as a city fireman.

JOCK POLLOCK – I’ve always been pretty healthy and pretty fit; ah, I’m not healthy and I’m not fit now.

Voice over – But now 68-year-old Jock’s too sick to admire the view, let alone climb the hill that gives the town its name.

This introduction establishes an equilibrium and introduces a disruption. The story goes on to explain that Jock’s symptoms may be due to mining operations in the local area as a result of exposure to harmful chemicals. The story then introduces new characters who reiterate the problem:

GRAHAM YELLIN – I’ve got lung problems and um, my doctor can’t say exactly what caused it, but I’ve got white scarring on my lungs now.

Voice over – Graham Yellin’s another Mt Edgerton resident fast running out of puff. The locals are so angry they’re lobbying the mine’s owner, Terry Delahunty, to shut the operation down altogether.

The narrative introduces a new character, the mine owner:
Voice over – Mr Delahunty denies any illegal air, water or noise pollution. He says he’s cleaning up the site after decades of neglect and refuses point blank to accept any responsibility for the town folk’s ills.

Sue Thomson – We’ve been good friends with you for four and a half years and you mislead us.

Voice over – This once-peaceful community is now divided and angry.

The concluding stages of the story provide some details about the continuing operation of the mine. There is also a reiteration by one of the victims that they are afraid to go out into their garden. The reporter provided several voice overs during the story, but is not seen on camera.

There are segments of the story that relate well to Todorov’s five narrative stages mentioned above. The initial equilibrium is clear: a retiree moves to the country for some of the “quiet life”. It is so that this individual, like any, can live in comfort or in good health without exposure to outside risks. This exposure represents the disruption to equilibrium —the main character, and several others like him, become sick. The cause is living near a mine. There is recognition of this disruption. First, a doctor asks the main character if he lives near a mine. Further, the narrative makes it clear that other residents are also affected. ‘The locals are so angry’ is a telling narrative device used to this end. Further it marks a response to risk, in this case an emotional one. An attempt to repair the disruption is also evident. The reporter—voice over states that the local residents are lobbying for the closure of the mine. The story provides no information about how this closure might happen or through what channels.

There is no return to equilibrium, or at least not to the original equilibrium as presented at the outset. Instead we have a new equilibrium presented by the narrative that does not resolve the story in a traditional sense. There is no “happy ending”. There is no return to the original equilibrium nor a move to a new equilibrium; no solving of the problems created by the initial disruption. Instead, there is a new equilibrium presented as a type of synthesis—a synthesis because the equilibrium has changed in light of the events of the narrative. There is some evidence of this new equilibrium provided in the closing stages of the story, which mentions that the mine is licensed to operate for several more years. The story also closes with a statement by the main character: ‘I can’t go out in the garden in the hot, north winds without some form of protection’. From a narrative point of view
this statement is important. It brings some finality to the story while being descriptive of the new, negative and risk-laden equilibrium.

The following comes from a longer example of narrative-styled newsmagazine information. Taken from a story aired by 60 Minutes titled ‘Identity crisis’ this story examines the issue of identity theft. Once again there is a clear movement demonstrated through narrative stages. The reporter introduces the story as follows:

RICHARD CARLETON – Now to a story that should make you very nervous indeed. It’s about a new breed of criminal, those who have found an ingenious way of stealing your money and your good name. Even more alarming, they could be cleaning out your bank account right now and you’d never know. It’s called ‘identity theft’ and it’s a remarkably simple operation; maybe starting with the crooks just taking your mail or old documents from the rubbish. But one way or another, it’s costing Australians billions each year and the police and the financial institutions can’t stop it.

Television producer Nick Greenaway’s life is no longer his own. His identity has been stolen by a new kind of criminal—a stranger he’s never met who now has access to everything he owns.

The initial equilibrium is not expressed as clearly in this story as in the previous one. The earlier story constructed an equilibrium or normality early on that was acted upon by a disruption. This story does not present equilibrium in the same way; rather it presents an initial disruption. A character has their identity stolen. This disruption follows an introduction that informs the viewer that this is ‘a story that should make you very nervous indeed’, followed by ‘It’s a new breed of criminal, those who have found an ingenious way of stealing your money and your good name. Even more alarming, they could be cleaning out your bank account right now, and you would never know’.

The narrative form of this introduction does not include a direct statement of initial equilibrium. It is present none the less. The narrative form draws on pre-existing knowledge about narrative flow itself. The audience makes sense of the disruption using existing knowledge. Through this process, the audience comes to understand the equilibrium. The narrative form in this example relies on the audience’s pre-existing knowledge of narrative structure to exert itself. It also attempts to construct both an initial equilibrium and disruption based on the viewer being part of the story:

RICHARD CARLETON – By all accounts this sort of crime is not small beer. It’s embarrassing for the banks, so they don’t talk about it, but it’s thought the cost could run to billions. The Commander of the NSW [New South Wales] Fraud Squad,
Detective Superintendent Megan McGowan, says it’s relatively simple for crooks to assume another person’s identity.

DET. SUPER. MEGAN MCGOWAN – There are some very commonly known methods that include, for example, stealing your mail from your mail box until I have enough information, going through your garbage and removing items from your garbage in order to gather enough information, falsifying documents, so usually there’s a starting point. I need to gather some information first. So it's not very hard for me to get your full name. It’s useful if I have your date of birth, obviously useful if I have your address, your driver’s licence is even better.

RICHARD CARLETON – And once they have your details, modern technology takes over. Quality printers and scanners are the great advance identity thieves have harnessed to forge documents that really do look like the real thing.

The story introduces several other victims of similar identity theft who share a similar story. This story differs from the shorter story presented earlier. The longer format allows for more extensive comment from the characters.

The following excerpt from 60 Minutes, ‘Wasted’, also includes equilibrium change through the use of characters. This story also highlights how the introduction of equilibrium to a story can act to ‘set up’ the narrative in a similar way:

TARA BROWN – They call it getting wasted and it’s become a ritual, a badge of honour for thousands of Australian teenagers, children really, some as young as 10, binge drinking, getting hopelessly drunk on anything they can find as long as it’s alcohol. Then there are the parents, some blissfully unaware, others actually buying the booze. For all the debates we have about young people and illegal drugs, the alarming fact is it is the legal one that is causing the most grief; that is responsible for the most deaths …

STORY, TARA BROWN – This could be any weekend, anywhere in Australia. They’re just average teenagers and they’re absolutely wasted.

The story interviews several teenagers asking them to discuss their drinking habits, including a character who identifies as a victim of teenage drinking, identifying as an alcoholic. The narrative also includes a villain or obstacle by interviewing the mother of one of the underage drinkers. This inclusion serves the narrative by identifying the functions of particular characters, which reinforces the nuances of the equilibrium and disruption.

TARA BROWN – Why are you crying?

KATIE’S MOTHER – Basically because I thought I’d … I mean I just didn’t expect her to get that drunk. To me, when you said she’d been drinking and that, I thought
maybe a couple and she was just being silly and merry, but they’re rolling around the
ground and can hardly stand.

TARA BROWN – You never considered that that is what your daughter was getting
up to?

KATIE’S MOTHER – No. I knew she was out drinking. I didn’t realise it looked like
that. No, I didn’t, no.

TARA BROWN – You’re her mother and you’re acting surprised?

The beginning of the story establishes a clear disruption. The disturbance is underage
drinking, with an implied equilibrium of teenagers not drinking. The introduction of
characters who provide further similar evidence reinforce the disturbance. Another
character, the mother of one of the offenders, serves as both an obstacle and a
complication. Filling these roles presents her and her actions as inherently negative.

The equilibrium this particular story represents is once again not expressed at the outset.
In a similar fashion to ‘Identity Crisis’ discussed earlier, the opening of the story avoids
a direct reference to an equilibrium or normality; rather, the narrative style depends on
the viewer drawing inferences from the disruption to decide what the equilibrium or
normality is, and importantly what the risk is. In this sense, risk is implied to be the
starting point of the narrative. In this story the introduction presents the subject of the
story: Australian teenagers binge drinking or “getting wasted”. The story also
presents ignorant or bad parents, as well as a policy focus on illicit drugs rather than
alcohol, as complications.

The final narrative comes from Four Corners, ‘Riot in Redfern’ and carries with it the
longest story format of all the programs discussed. Narrative structure functions in a
similar way in this example, despite the extended format:

LIZ JACKSON, REPORTER – In the middle of the afternoon of Sunday, 15 February,
a police report came in—that bricks and bottles had been thrown at Redfern Railway
Station in the centre of Sydney. Only one police car went down to investigate, as this
was nothing out of the ordinary in Redfern. But this was not an ordinary day. In the
early hours of that morning, an Aboriginal youth had died in the Children’s Hospital.
He’d been impaled on a metal fence after coming off his bike within a three-minute
cycle ride from Redfern station. His family say the police were chasing him at the time.

And you hold them responsible?

GAIL HICKEY – Yeah, I’m holding them responsible for my son’s death, yeah.
LIZ JACKSON – If the police were chasing Thomas Hickey, would the police accept some responsibility for his death?

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BOB WAITES, NSW POLICE SERVICE – Not at all.

LIZ JACKSON – In the late afternoon, the Redfern police radioed for assistance. It was getting dangerous for passers-by and staffing at Redfern on Sundays was low. But in a lull at around 7.40, all cars not from Redfern were told to leave. By 9.00, the seven or eight police who were left at the station started to feel uneasy.

(FOOTAGE OF RIOT PLAYS)

LIZ JACKSON – Hour after hour, the barrage continued. More police were getting hurt and frustrated. The frontline bore the brunt of years of allowing the tensions in Redfern to fester. That night, they exploded into the worst race riot the country has seen for decades.

SENATOR ADEN RIDGEWAY – I describe it as a race riot because I think this is something that has been coming for some time.

CLIVE SMALL, FORMER DIRECTOR, NSW CRIME PREVENTION – Having said that, this government’s been in office now for nine years, and we’re quite entitled to ask, ‘What’s happened in the nine years?’

INSPECTOR DARREN BENNETT, REDFERN CRIME MANAGER – It’d be a brave person saying it won’t happen again.

LIZ JACKSON – Tonight on Four corners, we expose what lay behind the riot in Redfern.

There is an indication of equilibrium through a discussion of the circumstances outlined in the reporter’s opening statement. The story then goes on to provide us with further details through interviews with members of the Hickey family. The main topic of discussion is the relationship between the community and the police. The narrative brings in other community members to discuss this issue. The topic then returns to the story of the accident. The narrative structure presents a more ambiguous position of the reporter/producers. In the earlier examples, the position of the reporter/narrator was more pronounced. There remains, however, an indication of normalcy provided by the narrative’s implied equilibrium. Later in the story, a discussion with community members and police is also provided to tell the story of an ensuing riot. Several people involved in the riot are interviewed, along with representatives of police management. Finally, the discussion turns to issues such as drugs in the community and the assumed frustration of police at an ineffective justice system.
Of particular note is the often-implied nature of an assumed equilibrium. In the previous examples, the disruption was often communicated first. The original or former equilibrium is understood only in relation to the negative disruption—the risk. Disruption, in the earlier examples, is a negative act of deviance: the polluting mine or the thief stealing a character’s identity. There is little other information provided in the story itself that the viewer can utilise to understand any prior equilibrium, or normal state, that this element disrupts. Therefore these narratives directly situate how we understand risks and position risk, or riskiness, as a primary or normal state.

The implied equilibrium, or state of normalcy, is crucial. It limits the audience to understanding a state of equilibrium defined only by the risk. With the disruption presented at the outset of the story a viewer could reject the act as a disruption. This rejection would replace the equilibrium with one that aligns itself with views that differ from the intended meaning, or the audience could accept the act as a disruption and accept the initial equilibrium it suggests. By presenting the disruption first, narrative form limits the likelihood of rejection. The narrative “does the work” for the viewer in both defining the risk and positioning it as relevant and ordinary. As discussed at the outset of this chapter, this process matters. Despite the nature of the risk presented, our beliefs and actions are affected. As the first lens of the theoretical model developed in this thesis narrative holds valuable analytical power when examining the conveyance of information about risk.

In summary, the use of narrative serves as a conduit for the producer to convey meaning and the audience to construct understandings of risk in a particular, delineated way. The use of narrative structure, particularly in the form seen in the news stories discussed, is an important factor when attempting to understand the media–audience relationship and risk communication that occurs via this format. It is my position that narrative carries with it a unique set of commonly understood rules that delineate our understanding and meaning construction of risk information as discussed above. Further, it implies a sense of normalcy to risk, and both imagines and constructs an inherently risk-averse audience. This framework is an important starting point as this relationship between media and information consumer is central to an analysis of meaning construction, as the following section discusses.
4.3 The Media and the Audience

As the popularity of television grew in the 1950s, so too did interest in this medium grow within the social sciences. Television, as a new, mass-produced technology rapidly grew in popularity with the public. While the humble radio had resided within many homes for some time, the advent of the television age brought about substantial change. A new type of information and entertainment was now transmitted into the private sphere of the family home. Given how the public accepted this new medium it was no surprise that the number of television stations also rapidly multiplied. With the swift ascension of the television medium, many stakeholders became interested in what audiences would choose to watch and what the effect of their viewing habits would be. The first stakeholder was the television stations themselves, whose revenue depends on advertising. The second was the government, which has an interest in regulating and classifying content. The third stakeholder—the social sciences—realised that although television was in its infancy, this new medium would have a significant effect on both the lives of individuals and the social world more generally.

As a result, media studies, defined as the study of the media and its cultural, sociological and psychological effects, has undergone major expansion and revision (Webster, 1998). These changes have related to our fundamental understandings of the media as producer, the audience as information consumers and the relationship between the two. These fundamental issues are important for any consideration of risk communication. While there has been a gradual evolution of media studies and later cultural media studies theory, so too have there been various shifts in the way the media presents information about risks. The relationship between media theory and its objects of inquiry are dynamic and shifting. There has, moreover, been a change in the type of media presentation popular with audiences. Further, risk communication as discussed in chapter two presents a new avenue that requires further analysis.

The focus of media studies has shifted from the studying of the media and their audience to a broader sociological analysis. This shift was partly a response to the growth in popularity of television in Western society. Early research in this area, particularly into television, tended to see the relationship as simple and deterministic, often concerned
with issues of socialisation (McQuail, 1997; Schiller, 1993). James Webster argued, in his 1998 analysis of media studies literature entitled The audience, that one of the key elements to this view is the ‘audience as mass’ (Webster, 1998, p. 192). This is a view of the media audience as unconnected individuals, dispersed across time and space. They behave relatively autonomously while having little or no knowledge of one another (Jewkes, 2015; Webster, 1998). This was an approach where ‘a theoretical preference is given to macro-level determinants of exposure rather than dwelling on individual cases’. (Webster, 1998, p. 192).

The use of the term “mass”, as in mass society or mass audiences, had its roots in the thinking of the Chicago School theorists, particularly Herbert Blumer (as cited in McQuail, 1997) who first coined the phrase “mass” in relation to media audiences. The mass audience was considered to be a new form of collectivity made possible by the nature of modern society. This change was an important reconsideration and one that differentiated the notion of “the mass” from earlier iterations such as the group or the crowd or even the public. The mass is a large collective of individuals, detached and anonymous, who have their attention focussed on an object of interest that is outside their immediate control. Further, the mass has no fixed location nor does it have the will or means to act for itself (McQuail, 1997). Importantly, the media ‘were seen as both an aid to people’s well-being under difficult circumstances and as a powerful force for controlling people’s thoughts and diverting them from political action’ (Jewkes, 2015, p. 14), and this remains a persistent view. In this context risk communication can potentially inform contemporary considerations of ways in which the media may act according to an imagined audience requiring “aid”.

The early research that arose from these ideas of the audience aimed to discover the nature of the mass audience. Its composition, its size and its satisfaction with the media were the central concern. In the early years of television, these were unknown commodities. The nature of the mass audience was most important to the television producers themselves and accordingly this approach, in part, gave rise to ‘an immense industry interconnected with that of advertising and market research’ (McQuail, 1997).

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3 This is not the only typology of the media–audience relationship put forward; see also McQuail, 1997.
4.3.1 Media ‘Effects’

A sub-model of the mass audience, as outlined by Webster (1998) is that of the audience as outcome. This understanding of the audience constructs the mass audience as ‘acted upon by the media’ (Webster, 1998, p. 194). It draws not only on mass audience theory but also on broader ideas taken from behaviourism (Jewkes, 2015). This deterministic view sees the media as having some type of detrimental effect on the audience as individuals; thereby society in general (Webster, 1998). The effect could take several forms such as a persuasive, a learning, or a behavioural one. The effects model is one that views the audience as passive, unwitting and indeed vulnerable recipients of media stimuli (McQuail, 1997; Nightingale, 1996). Early “effects” research looked at the issue using unsophisticated models; for example, violence in the media resulting in violent audiences (Ditton et al., 2004). This concern of the effects tradition has been criticised as a ‘uniformed view of the social and cultural role of the media’ (Nightingale, 1997, p. 364). It is a view that overestimates the direct effects of the media and overplays the media’s autonomy with respect to social and cultural influences (Nightingale, 1997).

Most early media research in the United States took place within university departments concerned with communication or rhetoric. Attempts to understand how the media could change people’s behaviour dominated effects research in the United States during the post-war period, driven by the success of wartime propaganda campaigns (Turner, 1997). The focus of the research carried out was on the persuasive effects of the media. The assumptions and the quantitative methods of behavioural psychology and sociology informed much of this approach (Turner, 1997). In addition to this academic tradition, a main proponent of the effects approach has been the advertising industry. The advertising industry is closely related to media industries and has a vested interest in actually “effecting” the views of the television audience.

Well-known research in this tradition was carried out by George Gerbner and colleagues (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). This approach is often referred to as cultivation analysis or cultivation theory. The basic tenet is that the more people see a distorted view of the world presented through the media, especially television, the more they would come to see this view as a true reflection of the world around them (Haferkamp, 1999). Cultivation analysis draws on the idea that television “cultivates” a particular view of the world.
Television information tends to create a convergence of views about the world among viewers and therefore develops what are to become the dominant and accepted cultural beliefs and world views (Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003). This incremental approach represents a shift in focus away from earlier effects research and when applied to risk communication, suggests that long term exposure to narratives that focus on risk may cultivate a view that risks are increasing. Effects theory has retained a place in media research, despite coming in and out of favour at various times since its inception. A clear, and somewhat contradictory, criticism is that it does not consider the needs of the audience as relevant, or as having an impact on their consumption of information (O’Neill, 2011).

Turning away from the simple paradigm of, for example, ‘violence leads to violence’ of earlier media effects studies made Gerbner’s work important. He connected media representations to audience anxieties, thereby positioning the audience as potential victims, and therefore in need of risk information. This view was in contrast to earlier research that linked media content to viewer aggression, thereby positioning the audience as potential offenders (Ditton et al., 2004). The work of Gerbner has been criticised as simplistic and the results have been difficult to reproduce (Ditton et al., 2004). It remains important, however, for the shift of focus it provided. This negative view of television content is not the only issue identified in the media studies literature. Less direct negative audience outcomes such as television addiction have also been considered within this research tradition (Nightingale, 1997).

There are later social-psychological research projects that draw on this theoretical approach. Like Gerbner’s original studies, and other effects research, these research projects have adopted a quantitative methodological approach (see Haferkamp, 1999; Reber & Chang, 2000; Reith, 1999; Wyer Jr, Shrum, & O’Guinn, 1998). Cultivation analysis, according to Webster (1998), sits somewhere between the two models of the audience discussed so far: audience as mass and audience as outcome. The audience remains a ‘mass of isolated individuals who are inherently susceptible to manipulation’ (Webster, 1998, p.194). Subsequent research has focussed on the role of the audience more specifically.
The area of research known as “reception studies” had its genesis in the 1970s and 1980s, becoming increasingly popular due to its more critical and comparatively sophisticated view of the media–audience relationship. This theoretical position corresponds with Webster’s (1998) third main audience paradigm: audience as agent. This model sees the audience as ‘free agents choosing what media they will consume, bringing their own interpretive skills to the texts they encounter, making their own meanings, and generally using media to suit themselves’ (Webster, 1998, p. 197). It is from this theoretical starting point that the ‘cultural studies’ tradition of media research emerged.

### 4.3.2 The Audience and Cultural Studies

Cultural studies treats the audience member as more involved and active in their interpretation of the media message. This focus on the active audience is an outcome of criticisms levelled at the ‘overly structuralist approaches’ (Morley, 1993, p. 16) of effects research, and the perceived determinism of structural textual analysis. Gone was the passive viewer or “receiver” as conceived of by effects, or audience-as-outcome theorists. Informed by the work of Stuart Hall and his 2001 essay *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*, this body of media research considered the role of the ‘active audience’. Jensen (1993, p. 21) has described this stage of reception analysis as:

> A qualitative form of audience-cum-content analysis, comparing the discourses of media contents and the discourses of the audience—as recovered through interviewing, observation, and textual analysis—in order to interpret and explain the process of their interaction in specific social contexts at a particular historical juncture. Media and audience thus contribute to the production and circulation of meaning in society.

This understanding of the audience–media relationship draws on the structural textual analysis approach of Sassure as developed by theorists such as Roland Barthes. The difference is that where textual analysis focussed purely on the text and the reading of the text, cultural studies was less deterministic and gave more attention to the ideological and historical context in which the texts were produced (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). The original structural textual analysis approach, popularised by the journal *Screen*, assumed that textual analysis revealed the meanings of a text. That text could be written, or presented in film or any other media. It was further assumed that this presentation produced particular subject positions. Meaning then was a product of the text, and there is little or no space for any sort of dialogical relationship to exist between the text and the
subject/audience. To put it another way, ‘the reading of texts is conceived in “Screen theory” as entirely dictated by textual structures’ (Ang, 2006, p. 177).

Cultural media researchers opposed this position of the passive subject. Instead they searched for a theoretical and methodological middle ground. They would show that the audience, and in particular television viewers, were more than “‘prisoners’ of the text’ (Ang, 2006, p. 177). In the cultural studies tradition, a text could be read in different ways by different social and cultural groups. Moreover, it could be read in a way that differs from the producer’s intended meaning (Ang, 2006; McQuail, 1997; Morley, 1980). One of the main themes of this approach is recognising that ‘audience actions are somehow determined by their social and cultural milieu. In fact, in many applications of this model, audience actions are deemed to be uninterpretable without reference to some broader structure’ (Webster, 1998, p. 196). The “active audience” is important to consider in an analysis of risk communication. The risk society position, for example, assumes an individual and audience “hypothesis testing”—an audience making meaning out of competing discourses concerning risk.

The work of Stuart Hall was influential in this area and deserves consideration. Hall (2001) argues that to understand television discourse or its effects, there must first be an understanding of the process of media consumption which should be informed by an examination of both the producers and the audience. From the producer’s side of this relationship, the media content they produce has a meaning or a message they are trying to convey to the audience member. This message has a structure that is ‘a sign-vehicle, or rather sign-vehicles of a specific kind organised, like any other form of communication or language, through the operation of codes, within the syntagmatic chains of a discourse’ (Hall, 2001, p. 163).

Important is the notion of the media message as sign but at the same time as something that can have more than one meaning. Hall (2001) argues that once the media message is ‘produced’ it must, by definition, take the form of a sign. However, it is important to remember that from a cultural studies point of view, this sign, even when it has become a communicative event, can still mean different things to different audiences:
In the moment when the historical event passes under the sign of language, it is subject to all the complex formal ‘rules’ by which language signifies. The event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a communicative event (Hall, 2001, p. 164).

Hall’s encoding/decoding thesis argues that the media carries a preferred meaning and this meaning is part of, or a reflection of, dominant hegemonic discourse. Hegemony, simply defined, is rule by won consent (see Gramsci, 1971, 2006). Hegemony is more than having control over something, it is not something achieved by force. Rather, hegemony is achieved when various institutions or groups are able to bring about consensus. It is this consensus that makes the ideology and thus the power of the ruling class legitimate and natural (Gramsci, 1971, 2006). In his theory of hegemony, Gramsci (2006) points out that it is linked most closely to ‘ideology’. The media are one of the key parts of this ‘ideological structure’ (Gramsci, 2006, p. 16).

Intrinsic to this theoretical formulation is the suggestion that both encoding and decoding need to be understood first as dialectic constructions. They are contingent on a place in social and cultural history, including all that went before. This position emphasises media use as a reflection of the sociocultural position of the receiver. It is therefore a ‘process of giving meaning to cultural products and experiences’ (McQuail, 1997, p. 18). In this sense, early cultural studies was able to adopt the Frankfurt School position that saw the cultural industries as hegemonic while rejecting the Frankfurt School’s view of the audience as passive (Durham, 2006).

From this theoretical position, the media message must not only be encoded but must also be decoded by the audience; it is this decoding that is influenced by the social structure and the cultural milieu of the audience:

Before the message can have an ‘effect’ (however defined), or satisfy a ‘need’ or be put to a ‘use’, it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully de-coded. It is this set of de-coded meanings which ‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. In a determinate moment, the structure employs a code and yields a ‘message’; at another determinate moment, the ‘message’, via its de-codings, issues into a structure (Hall, 2001, p. 3).

The “television producers or encoders” are trying to get their message across to the audience in a way that will produce the most audience members reading the message “as intended”. When the audience is not doing so, the producers will try to address the
problem by changing the way the message is communicated, in an attempt to improve the efficacy of their message (Hall, 2001).

Hall argues that there are three common readings of the media message by the audience. When the audience member accepts the meaning of the message as the producers intended, or ‘decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded’ (Hall, 1973, p. 16) they are working within the “dominant” or “hegemonic” code—hegemonic ‘precisely because they represent definitions of situations and events which are “in dominance”, and which are global’ (Hall, 1973, p. 17). Therefore, rejection of the message indicates resistance; hence the second category, rejection. Third, there is the possibility of a negotiated reading. The audience member accepts the dominant message, but negotiates some new meaning that is more suitable to their needs. Other theorists have taken up Hall’s coding/encoding thesis when examining the media–audience relationship.

One of the most influential and well-known pieces of research to take up this theoretical position was The ‘nationwide’ audience (1980) by David Morley. Morley investigated the viewers of Nationwide, a United Kingdom-based current affairs program. Doing so through the lens of Hall’s encoding/decoding model, Morley concluded that the audience was far from passive; rather they interpret the media message based on many cultural and social factors. Morley outlined what he saw as the three main readings/positions adopted by audiences: dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading (Morley 1980). Morley’s work became quite influential in the cultural and media studies field (Ang, 2006). When investigating the Nationwide audience, Morley (1980) used readings of media texts based on individuals’ sociodemographic positions, drawing on factors such as class position, race and gender and the assumed ideological outlook these produce. These broader structures served as a conduit to understanding how audience members constructed meaning from media texts. This reconceptualization of the audience as active lends itself to considerations of risk communication where the audience is imagined as reflexive as part of the risk society. These were audience-based studies that examined the social environment of the audience and therefore was concerned with understanding their needs and how these needs influence meaning construction (O’Neill, 2011).
The paradigm employed by Morley in *The ‘Nationwide’ Audience* is particularly difficult to define operationally (Kim, 2004). Suejong Kim (2004, p. 103) argues that ‘all readings are negotiated; the three ideal types exist on a continuum and their boundaries may be unclear’. Despite these criticisms, Morley’s work has become quite influential, inciting a more contemporary analysis of his findings. Kim (2004) revisited Morley’s data, analysing it quantitatively. Kim argues that the results of this analysis show that class, in particular, as well as other variables such as race and gender are predictive of a particular reading of media texts (Kim, 2004). While this approach is useful, the same criticisms must be brought to bear on Kim’s research as on the original. By examining the original data and using similar categories, Kim has analysed only the sociodemographic variables first used by Morley, thus limiting the range of possible sociodemographic factors. The cultural frames of reference used are no more clearly defined.

These theorists are arguing that there is an inherent meaning imbued by the producers of media information, although this meaning may not be given to this information at the decoding stage. Where this approach further falls short is that it does not allow for an understanding of the decoding process outside of the constraints of the encoding process. Hall’s work and the later adoption of it by Morley shows the encoding process is only considered to be given meaning when considered as a reflection of dominant ideological, hegemonic interests, which is the same paradigm used to understand the decoding of the information. The only possible categorisation available for understanding the decoding process is one of accepting or rejecting the preferred meaning. Morley did this when categorising his respondents into those who demonstrated dominant readings, negotiated readings and rejected meanings. The ability to understand what the preferred meaning of producers may be difficult, and if so, an understanding of acceptance, negotiation, or rejection would be difficult to determine (Greer, 2010).

The culture and ideology of the viewer influence their reading of media texts, including information concerning risk. However, are the viewers decoding and giving meaning to this information? Unfortunately, this question is not the focus of these categories. What these categories are going to show is whether the viewers are willing to accept the dominant or hegemonic discourse of the media message or whether they will, in part or in full, reject it at an ideological level. While Hall intended for an understanding of the
decoding process to go beyond such an undemanding analysis, by its own nature the model he proposes cannot easily surpass this. As Grossberg (2006, p. 9) points out:

cultural studies was initiated into a constant search for the ethnographic reality—what the audience does with the text—that would anchor the effects of the texts outside of its own readings. This ethnographic reality was almost always understood in terms of the relation of subjectivity and identity (thus bringing it back under the sign of the text and ideology).

Later cultural studies research moved away from the text and instead focussed on the moment of reception; more specifically, the audience and the context of reception (Hermes, 1993). Morley, in his *Family television: Cultural power and domestic leisure*, focussed on the routines within the family and their media use (Morley, 2005). This approach further:

mark[s] the radical challenge to the central position of the media text in how the audience was researched and theorized. The text was to be dethroned, no longer the centre that generates meanings or subject positions but an object that becomes meaningful given specific surroundings, specific contexts. (Hermes, 1993, p. 494).

The idea of a cultural frame of reference is contentious as it is difficult to define what this frame may be in any given circumstance. In response, cultural studies theorists have expanded upon the notion of cultural transmission by the media. They have more closely examined the social and cultural factors that affect an audience member’s reading of the information. Risk-averse viewers and a desire for risk information presents as an important frame of meaning construction. This also applies where the cultural studies approach has also focussed on the hegemonic devices employed by the producers.

We can conceptualise the news media and its treatment of risk in this way. Fiske argues that the audience watches not only for the gathering of “top-down” information that is essential for the proper functioning of a democratic society, but also for pleasure (Fiske, 1989, p. 149):

It is watched for its relevance to everyday life; its viewers do not simply receive the information it gives, they are productive, and they do make their sense of its representations of the world. The struggle over meanings, the contest between top-down homogenising forces and bottom-up diversifying ones, still occurs, though the balance of power may be more tilted in favour of the top.

When examined with discourse and power in mind, it is important to look at how the news is presented and how it is structured if we are to understand how it exerts its
discursive power. Fiske (1989) argues that there are many “tools” used by the news media to produce reality or truth. The truth then is a creation of the production studio, not the reality of the event (Fiske, 1989). Production is an area where there have been changes in media presentation, such as the use of narrative style discussed earlier. The narrative structure of news information deserves further consideration. Narrative bridges the gap between studio and active meaning construction in a structural way. For the producers, or encoders, this change is a vital development as the audience may be more likely to accept their preferred meaning due to the use of this information structure.

Further, as a corporate entity pursuing profit through ratings, media institutions profit most by providing information that does not reflect only the interests of the powerful. The media would profit most (when profit is considered as reliant on ratings) by reflecting the interests of the audience. As noted above, media information that presents hegemonic discourse would achieve this popularity while serving the interests of the powerful. Media products, especially news, achieve hegemonic power and popularity by presenting information in a narrative form that draws on the audience as reflexive. Information presented by the media is a discursive construct based on the preferred cultural imperatives and preferred meanings or “encoding” of the producers. Narrative structure ensures this same constructed reality is palatable to the audience, and in demand.

A recent analysis of risk narratives and their role in media presentations of risk information comes from Gasper Mairal (2008; 2011). Mairal (2011) argues that narrative provides a link between probabilistic examinations of risk and how this essentially scientific or expert knowledge is communicated to the public. For Mairal, (2011), science remains a central pillar of risk communication, representing ‘a hybridisation between science and culture is characteristic of our times and of contemporary narratives of risk’ (p. 69). Mairal further argues that:

The narratives of risk derive from previous situations, events which happened before and turned into a lesson to be learned. This lesson comes to be a “narrative matrix” or narration pattern, inspiring new narrations which can arise if it is the case that a similar situations reappears (Mairal, 2011, p. 72)

Mairal’s (2008; 2011) focus when discussing risk narratives remains on large scale risks, disasters and catastrophes where there is a need to convey scientific knowledge to the public in an easy to understand format.
Hall considered the dominant reading a “hegemonic” reading and this is an important point if we consider the role that narrative plays in this relationship. The narrative style of television news is encoded and decoded within culture. The structure of the information suggests not only a particular ideological point of view adopted by the producers of the message; it also delineates the decoding of the message. The decoding process is not open to unlimited significations as narrative structure is a central mechanism of the decoding process. Narrative structure carries with it independent rules for understanding the story. This is not to say that the audience is passive or acted on by the media, rather that narrative is a particular structure that allows an examination of encoding and preferred meaning. This takes on heightened importance when considering risk communications and a risk-averse, reflexive audience who may demand risk information. When considering the production of journalistic content that reports risk, Kitzinger (1999, p. 64) points out that ‘journalists write “for” an imagined audience’.

4.4 Narrative Style and Context

Narrative, when considered from this dominant ideology point of view, does not preclude the categorisations used by theorists such as Hall (2001) and Morley (1980, 1992, 2005). Indeed, the decoder can still accept or reject the dominant reading. A more central conceptualisation of the role of information structure is part of the relationship undeveloped in these approaches. They rely on understanding the reasons for accepting or rejecting the message that draw on factors outside the information. Factors that relate to the cultural milieu of the decoder are independent of information structure and antecedent to the moment of reception.

How we come to construct meaning from narratively structured information relies on rules about stories and characters that are external to the viewer. These are not reliant on determinants such as political ideology, class position and socioeconomics. They are unaltered and omnipresent across these cultural divisions, especially those based on power and economics. When the narrative style is the chief means of conveying information, the rules for understanding the events and characters of that narrative are clear and consistent. While the understanding of the narrative is still the same system of
signifier, signified and sign, the narrative is not open to an infinite number of subjective readings. The signification must occur along the rules set out by narrative structure, which is in line with the structural approach of textual analysis made popular by Screen. The focus of analysis was only on the text as a singularity. This thesis situates narrative once again in a different space.

The shift of focus provided by cultural studies, while remaining focussed on the text, was a step in the right direction. However, the focus was only on the ideological constituents of the text and the audience. This model ultimately provides an unsatisfactory set of criteria for analysing differences in reception in the case of narrative-style news.

To summarise, narrative presents as an important mechanism of meaning construction that exists between the producers of news and its audience. Narrative news belongs in a unique category as an information source as it exists as a separate conduit of meaning construction between the media and audience. Second, it carries with it structural rules that operate without a reliance on the agency of either the media or the audience member. Third, the particular influence that narrative style has on meaning construction can act independently of both the truth claims that are inherent to the information style and the demands of the audience.

The model outlined at the beginning of this chapter narratives of risk as the first theoretical “lens”. The effect of increased use of narrative in media risk communication is the provision of heightened relevance between the media and its audience. This first lens is then an analysis of the “producer” side of the negotiation of risk. It is this notion of relevance that is highlighted by the second lens concerned with broader social knowledge and judgements. The second lens examines assumed relevance and experiences of the audience in the negotiation of risks. This model is expanded on in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: Risk and the News Media

Following from the analysis of narrative structure presented in chapter four, this chapter develops a broader theoretical discussion of risk in the news media and examines how narrative structure reflects a particular and contemporary type of relevance for the viewer. The main claim examined in this chapter is that televisual narrative, such as the examples introduced in chapter four, is relevant to the viewer based on their preference for risk communication presented as mediated or vicarious experience.

Narratively structured media information may have been relevant to the audience previously but for more pragmatic reasons. This second theoretical lens, however, posits a contemporary relevance based on the reflexive nature of the audience. Reflexive modernity explains factors outside of the media–audience relationship that allow an examination of relevance. This position argues that industrial society has moved from the “modern” era to a “late modern” or reflexive post-industrial era. The effect of this shift on the negotiation of risk can be examined through the contemporary media–audience relationship. Reflexive modernity provides the theoretical basis for the second lens outlined in the introduction to this thesis.

As a starting point we can continue examining the news story examples given in chapter four. The story about mining pollution covered the plight of local residents who lived near a mining operation. This story focussed on the characters. Indeed, it was the characters who provided the impetus to move the narrative forward. When a voice other than that of the characters was present it was a voice that provided narration—one that filled in the gaps. This voice was that of a reporter and not that of an expert on the content of the story. Below is part of the narrative presented earlier in chapter four (Today Tonight, Gold Mine):

Voice over – Graham Yellin’s another Mt Edgerton resident fast running out of puff. The locals are so angry they’re lobbying the mine’s owner, Terry Delahunty, to shut the operation down altogether.

Another character is introduced, the mine owner:
Voice over – Mr Delahunty denies any illegal air, water or noise pollution. He says he’s cleaning up the site after decades of neglect and refuses point blank to accept any responsibility for the town folk’s ills.

Sue Thomson – We’ve been good friends with you for four and a half years and you mislead us.

Voice over – This once-peaceful community is now divided and angry.

An expert who holds specific and specialised knowledge about the subject matter was not a direct character in the story. This story could have included an expert on the risks of mining, or a medical doctor; the information they would have provided is instead provided through the main character. He retells his experience of visiting a doctor and the narrator provides some further details. This example provides an important starting point.

As seen in the preceding chapter, the audience learns of important risks through the experience of the characters. They are not told or informed in a third person way but through mediated experience.

The content of the story informs only a negative outcome. The main character cannot walk outside anymore without damaging his health. This example demonstrates a clear negative outcome or equilibrium. It is important to note the influence of this narrative form (i.e. how the story is presented) on possible meaning construction. It differs from the influence of content (i.e., what the story is about). The narrative structure provides a meaning to the viewer while the actual content would be interchangeable. The topic of the story could be any number of problems. There could be a variety of characters, or events. The viewer must construct meaning or understanding of the story based on the narrative flow independent of such content.

Early theorists such as Propp noted that the elements of the narrative are interchangeable (Silverman, 2001). The functions of the narrative are all “played out” through the action (Silverman, 2001). The characters are interchangeable. Silverman (2001, p. 124), drawing on the work of Propp, gives us the following example of this interchangeable nature of roles or characters:

we could rewrite ‘a dragon kidnaps the king’s daughter’ as ‘a witch makes the chief’s wife vanish’, while retaining the same function for each element.
This interchangeability forms a delineation. Narrative style limits the number of interpretations or meanings available to the viewer. Consider the story discussed above; it would be difficult for a viewer to conclude who may be the victim outside the structural confines of the narrative. The flow of the narrative tells the viewer first what the equilibrium is and thus what to consider normal or “good”, as demonstrated in the example above. Equilibrium is then disrupted, or broken; thereby signifying to the audience exactly what forms a disruption, or ‘bad’ act. On these two levels the content is interchangeable. What is “good” or “bad” exists in a dynamic relationship with the conventions of the narrative style.

Here we return to the *60 Minutes* story, Wasted, about underage drinking introduced in chapter four. This story presented interviews with teenagers who drank alcohol, and with their parents:

TARA BROWN – David Keeley lost four years of his life getting wasted. At just 18 he’s an alcoholic.

DAVID KEELEY – It got to the stage where I was drinking methylated spirits with orange juice to get drunk because it was a cheap way to get alcohol; you know, it’s only $3 a bottle and it’s something like 90% alcohol.

TARA BROWN – What did that taste like?

DAVID KEELEY – It was awful, it tasted disgusting. It was…

TARA BROWN – So why did you drink it?

DAVID KEELEY – Because it was alcohol, because it was there. You know, at the time I didn’t care what it tasted like or, you know, what it looked like. It was alcohol and it was there.

TARA BROWN – David started drinking at 13 to drown his sorrows after the death of his stepfather. It wasn’t long before he was on the booze before breakfast and stealing to feed his habit.

As seen in other stories, the introduction of other characters who share a similar story or experience reinforces the narrative form. This tendency raises a question about what function these characters serve for propelling the narrative. An added “victim” character does not bring new information into the story. When a character does not supply new information or meaning, their function is one of reinforcing the nature and importance of
the equilibrium and disruption. Further, the “villain” character, in this case a negligent mother, as seen in chapter four, further reinforces the “right and wrong” claims of the story. The story does not state directly that the mother is negligent. Rather, the narrative function of the characters positions the mother as villain, it is not expressed overtly. The introduction of such characters serves a normalising role for the narrative, by assuring the viewer that the information provided is both legitimate and worthy of being representative of both an equilibrium and a disruption.

In this story there is also an expert present who takes on a character role within the narrative:

SENIOR CONSTABLE CHERYL WHARTON – The major cause of deaths for people under 25 is alcohol.

TARA BROWN – Senior Constable Cheryl Wharton runs Your choice, a program for underage drinkers and their parents. These kids have actually been picked up by the police. It’s their choice—either attend the meeting or pay a fine. Tonight Katie’s here in the audience—grudgingly.

Here the expert is a police officer responsible for addressing the problem of underage drinking. What is the narrative function of this character? Do they provide new information? Are they the hero who addresses and rights the disruption? In this particular story, the expert initially provides “reinforcing” information. Constable Wharton runs a program for underage drinkers, so it seems that this character does serve a “hero” type role. The information garnered from this character focusses on the severity of the problem in relation to other characters. The expert only reinforces the seriousness and relevance of the disruption.

The viewer is left with little doubt about what the disruption is in this particular case. In that sense, the introduction of this character and the information they provide adds little extra information. While it does provide some information about a response to the disruption, this response is not the focus of this character’s interjection into the narrative. Instead we see the familiar reinforcement of the information already provided with Senior Constable Sheryl Wharton saying: ‘she would do it every night of the week if she could’ and then, as the expert, confirming for the viewer ‘scary isn’t it’.
The result of the official intervention and thus the ‘attempt to repair the disruption’ is clear, especially its influence on Katie. The familiar narrative structure of equilibrium, disruption, repair, new equilibrium is not provided to the viewer. In this story the only ‘attempt to repair’ presented is a failed one, as demonstrated by its lack of effect on Katie as one of the main characters.

After the introduction discussed above, the narrative moves to setting out this new equilibrium: ‘This could be any weekend, anywhere in Australia. They’re just average teenagers and they’re absolutely wasted. What sort of things do you drink?’ The victims themselves inform this new equilibrium. They are also an obstacle to repairing the disruption and therefore preventing a return to the original equilibrium. This pattern suggests that it is the narrative form, and the functions it ascribes to particular characters, that determine the classification of normalcy. The viewer must then utilise these elements of narrative structure to make sense of the story and the risks its characters navigate. This was a common factor found across not only the examples examined—it was a common feature of the stories presented by these programs. Across stories in general, the topic and thus the risk can be quite interchangeable. The characters and the changes to equilibrium they represent remain present.

How the media communicates risk has been a topic of interest to researchers for some time. The ‘effects’ approach of George Gerbner and others is an example of this history. Gerbner and Gross (1976), for example, changed the focus of effects research from a simplistic ‘violence on television causes violent viewers’ hypothesis to a paradigm that positioned violence as leading to anxious viewers. These are audience members who, by definition, felt they were at risk of violence. So too has risk been a central tenet of later research, in particular criminological research into the “fear of crime”. Therefore, risk is not a new aspect of media research. What are new are the macro theories that have focussed on the mediation of risk.

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4 The transcript of this section of the story (not included here) outlines some of the measures taken in the intervention program *Your choice*, including the story of another underage drinker who was sexually assaulted while under the influence of alcohol.
5.1 The Risk Society and the News Media

As discussed in chapter two, the risk society theoretical approach focusses on the risks individuals face in the contemporary social world. Central to this position is the notion that the management of risk is an individual problem and not a social one (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997). People are ‘constantly faced with risks as a phenomenon that must be negotiated in order to live a reasoned and “civilised” life’ (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997, p. 5). This view contrasts with earlier historical stages when misfortune was attributed to things such as fate or other factors that did not fall under an individual’s control. Thus, risk supposes human responsibility in the handling of misfortune (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997). However, what exactly are the problems people face that come to be understood as risks, as communicated through the news media?

There are two broad categories of risks and accordingly risk communication; “large-scale” risks and “everyday” risks. Large-scale risks are catastrophes and disasters, or those unintended consequences of modernity such as climate change or other large-scale manufactured risks such as terrorism. Large-scale risks have more recently become a growing focus of examinations of risk communication in the media (Burgess, 2012). Accordingly much risk in the media research examines this type of risk, and not “everyday” risks.

Research into media coverage of large-scale risks is often concerned with how to best communicate risk information to the public, especially risk information that has “helping” the public avoid or manage risk or dangerousness as its goal (Tulloch & Zinn, 2011). However, how the public come to understand these risks is contested. Discussing the risk society view of large-scale, manufactured risks, Burgess (2006) is critical of Beck’s objectification of large-scale risks, arguing that:

For Beck, it is the hazard posed by radioactivity, toxic waste, or GMOs [genetically modified organisms] that compels an assessment or response. There is a process of construction, but really only in the sense that the elusive qualities of dangers such as radioactivity necessitate us to imagine the consequences that have not yet (but will surely) come about (p. 335).

Beck’s approach also represents a problematic conflation between risk and uncertainty, which further reduces the leverage of the risk society position when applied to public
consumption of information about risks, especially large-scale manufactured risks (Mythen & Walklate, 2006b).

The risk society position has been further criticised as a basis for understanding risk communication because it ignores not just the technical details of risk but also the historical considerations that can be utilised to make recommendations aimed at better management of risks (Alaszewski & Burgess, 2007). This problem is also bound to a shift towards uncertainty with—drawing on the risk society position—precaution becoming a driver of risk understandings. Alaszewski and Burgess (2007) argue that the precautionary mode of risk communication is one where ‘the experiential and emotional components override the rational use of evidence derived from past experience as the past is no longer accepted as a trustworthy guide to the future’ (p. 356). However, experience and the experiential do not now need to remain distinctly separate when considering risk communication in the media. Past experience in this sense refers to technical or expert information of past occurrences and an educational approach to risk communication. This inclusion is mediated, however, by a need for journalism to transform such knowledge into news (Tulloch & Zinn, 2011).

The second type of risk refers to the management of our everyday lives. As mentioned in chapter two, everyday risks are those uncertainties that need to be navigated. From the reflexive modernity position, any number of news stories could be about a risk and the risk would not need to be large scale. Stories that deal with crime would fall into this category even though an audience member is not at direct risk of becoming a victim. This generalised view of risk that includes those everyday risks that need to be navigated covers any number of different story types. The nature of the risk may change but what defines it as a risk does not. How the information is presented and consumed is key. Thus, we may find that a news story about the threat of terrorism and a story about the potential dangers of Teflon-coated frying pans share significant similarities. The ongoing examination of narrative risk communication in this thesis expands on this observation as an example of ‘everyday processes in news production rules and meaning-making practices’ (Tulloch & Zinn, 2011, p. 13). Risk is not necessarily always conceived of as a negative. There may be a calculation of not only the likelihood of a negative event, but also a calculation of the “goods” versus “bads”, with
some “bads” accepted as an inevitable, albeit unenviable, aspect of producing or managing goods (Kemshall, 2003).

Wales and Mythen (2002) highlight the notion of risk—as used in the risk society thesis of Beck—as contingent. Risk ‘is a way of structuring reality and rendering it intelligible’ (Wales & Mythen, 2002, p. 122). As discussed at length in chapter two, the meaning of ‘risk’ shifted historically from referring to an earlier general uncertainty to an actuarial process centred on calculation and probability as a central aspect of modernity (Wales & Mythen, 2002). Kemshall (2003, p. 9) explains:

> The risks of modernization have been characterized as increasingly calculable, knowable and controllable through mathematical models and the advances of science. The risks of nature could be tamed, and the ‘will of the Gods’ need not be accepted.

Risk in late modernity is one where experts are no longer capable of responding or providing responses to calculations of risk. Beck (1992, p. 19) said of risks:

> the problems and conflicts relating to distribution in a society of scarcity overlap with the problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition and distribution of techno-scientifically produced risks.

What made risk manageable during modernity was, in part, the role of expert knowledge. Expert knowledge was both a key responder to exigent risk, and a driver of actuarial management of ongoing or structural “bads” (Beck, 1992). The risk society approach views risk as now unmanageable in a modernist sense:

It is from this view of reflexivity that the role of narrative presented in the news media can say something about the construction of meaning and active audiences, an area that has not received a great deal of attention in discussions of risk communication (see Hoskins & Tulloch, 2016; Tulloch & Lupton, 1997; Tulloch & Zinn, 2011). It also influences the positioning of those things that are to become accepted as risks. It is one that indeed draws on the ‘range of emotions, values and beliefs’ (Mythen, 2004). These are structured for quick and easy consumption by the viewer. Narrative structure provides experiential knowledge, thereby creating complex emotional and moral constructs. This development is coupled with an intensification of media coverage of risks and risk conflicts where ‘the media serve to “socially explode” risk issues which would otherwise be secreted from the public’ (Mythen & Walklate, 2006a, p. 124)
The following are extracts from a story also presented by *Today Tonight*, ‘Brushing Up’, which highlights how stories employing the narrative style rely on a dynamic relationship of meaning construction. This story was presented in a shorter format than those discussed above and constructs its narrative in some different ways. The story begins with the voice of an expert:

Professor Lawrie Walsh – It’s actually pretty surprising what you can find growing on a normal toothbrush.

Reporter – In our lifetime we use more than a hundred toothbrushes, but have you ever thought how your toothbrush could be affecting your health?

In this story the disruption is again revealed indirectly. The story begins with a vague reference to the fact that many normal toothbrushes are unhealthy. The reporter then asks the viewer directly: have you thought about this? This question serves as the introduction to the story. The disruption is not stated in any clear manner, only hinted at. The equilibrium is once again assumed by the viewer and informed by the disruption itself. In this particular story, there is an equilibrium or state of normalcy hinted at—the opening comments that it is surprising what you will find on a normal toothbrush. This type of narrative device serves two distinct functions in relation to meaning construction. First, it hints at an equilibrium as mentioned; yet this equilibrium is dismissed by the first piece of information given by the reporter. The reporter tells the viewer that this is a type of disruption, a type of bad occurrence. The viewer must deduce the equilibrium based on the disruption.

At this stage the narrative has not introduced a victim beyond the viewer. Nor has it provided enough information to construct an equilibrium. The narrative has not yet provided enough context or relevance. This structure provides the second function of this type of narrative: it creates relevance between the information and the viewer. It stipulates that this disruption is relevant to the viewer. It does this at an early stage and in a direct manner. Information such as ‘growing on a normal toothbrush’ or ‘toothbrush affecting your health’ are signposts for the viewer that this information is relevant to them. It is a signpost only, as evident from the next section of the narrative. The next section introduces a family and their toothbrushes, beginning with a scene showing the children in front of a bathroom mirror brushing their teeth. The voice over introduces the family as one facing the pressures of everyday life.
The earlier part of the story signposted the relevance of the information. Now we have the characters introduced as, not surprisingly, a family who use toothbrushes. We must assume that given the signposting carried out in the earlier introduction, this family is included to provide character roles. The viewer draws on them in meaning construction and understanding of the risk.

Narrative also arises as an informational strategy that intersects with Beck’s general articulation of reflexivity as well. The media is an institution at a macro-level. It presents information in a narrative style designed to create relevance based on the desire of individuals. This is a desire to construct biographies that are not based on expert information given to them by a “modern” institution. Therefore, a dynamic relationship exists between reflexive modernity and individualism. Given this relationship, it can be argued that people are compelled to make themselves the ‘centre of the conduct of life’ (Tulloch & Lupton, 1997, p. 5).

Individualisation is one of the key aspects of the risk society thesis. Individualisation, as used by Beck, refers to the fact that the late modern individual is more responsible for constructing their own biographies than in previous epochs. These biographies are free from institutional and obligatory norms and traditions (Beck, 1992; Lupton, 1999). Beck sees individualisation as the outcome of the modernisation process which reduces the influence of the traditional structuring institutions of society in the formation of personal identity. Such factors as mass education, improvements in living standards, the second-wave feminist movement and change in the labour market have contributed to the trend towards individualisation. Beck’s view is that taken-for-granted forms of ‘collective identity’ are no longer prominent. These are replaced by routines of personal choice that are inherently reflexive (Mythen, 2004).

As should now be clear, a common and relevant aspect of the narrative style is an implicit equating of certain characters of the story with the viewer. In some of the examples above, this process was one that occurred overtly. Whether it performed overtly or otherwise, it was achieved through the use of narrative. The positioning of elements of the narrative creates a figurative correlation between the characters of the story and the viewer. Most often it was the victim/protagonist of the narrative, which is a dynamic and normalising aspect of narrative when used by the media in this way as it positions
characters as experiential proxies for the viewer. The term experiential proxy has previously been used in a limited way such as in considerations of language and epistemology (see for example Gaskin, 2006, pp. 101-104). In this respect, the context of usage in this thesis involves analysis of media content and audience responses to that content. Therefore, the term is used in this thesis to refer to narrative characters presented to the audience as having a direct experiential relationship to, and therefore possessing experiential knowledge about, risk, and who communicate this risk information to the audience.

The risk society approach understands the driver of behaviour as managing an inherently risky world. In this risky world some risks are accepted or negotiated to avoid worse ones. Risk is everything and everywhere and we negotiate the best deal we can. Risk managing behaviour of individuals is proactive in the sense that they actively seek to minimise risk, and the relationship with the world is inherently negative—everything is a risk to be managed.

5.2 Expert Voice, Lay Voice and Experiential Proxies

Another argument central to the theory of risk society notes the diminishing value of scientific discourse, especially concerning the management of risk. Beck (1992, p. 29) says:

In definitions of risk the science’s monopoly on rationality is broken. There are always competing and conflicting claims, interests and viewpoints of the various agents of modernity and affected groups, which are forced together in defining risks in the sense of cause and effect, investigator and injured party.

Consider what was accepted as truth before late/reflexive modernity. It has been argued that during modern times, what came to be accepted as truth arose from techno-rational knowledge:

To the enlightenment thinkers, and many of their successors, it appeared that the increasing information about the social and natural worlds would bring increasing control over them. For many, such control was the key to human happiness; the more, as collective humanity, we are in a position actively to make history, the more we can guide history towards our ideals (Beck et al., 1994, p. 58).
Giddens further argues that modernity enforces the rule of “radical doubt”. All knowledge must be open to revision. It must adopt the structure of hypothesis. In this way, information is true but it is known that at some stage this knowledge may have to be abandoned (Giddens, 1991, p. 3). Others argue a similar point about the late modern condition:

The growing respect for consumer activism goes hand in hand with the decline of public trust in conventional authority. We question long established institutions, anticipating corporate and government cover-ups on risky products and technology. We are cynical about the claims of science and industry, and simply disbelieving of those made by politicians and civil servants. This widespread public disenchantment with conventional institutions has created an opening for new, alternative forms of authority. And the main beneficiary has been the politics of consumerism (Furedi, 2000, p. 28).

Furedi (2000) argues that radical doubt has become a central part of late modernity and highlights the politics of consumerism as somewhat “filling the void” as authority. Furedi’s position has been described as linking management of risk to growing fear about negative outcomes (Walklate & Mythen, 2010). This model can be applied to the earlier example of a viewer throwing away their frying pans. However, Beck and Giddens also argue for this central position of radical doubt (Beck et al., 1994).

The role of information is of key importance to theories of risk. Information and subsequent knowledge play a key role in the management of risk, especially from the reflexive modernity position of Beck and Giddens. The value of information has risen to prominence in recent decades across many theoretical positions within the social sciences.

However, Beck and Giddens make a point of talking about modernity or late modernity—not post-modernity. One of the major doctrines of the enlightenment project was the striving of social science to be scientifically legitimate (McLennan, 1992). Giddens does not see reflexive modernity as separate to this; rather, he posits reflexivity as an inherent part of modernity and the enlightenment promise (McLennan, 1992). The position of Giddens on reflexivity is an attempt to find some type of middle ground between the enlightenment ideas of progress, including emancipation through science, and the post-modern position that attempts to deconstruct these notions (McLennan, 1992).
A middle ground between progress and deconstruction could be a trait of individualisation as outlined above. However, it would seem that even if people do constantly evaluate information they may also rely on epistemological and rational evaluations of information. The difference is that under the late modern condition, they are less willing to accept information, which undermines science’s monopoly on knowledge. Does this mean that experiential knowledge can simply replace it and come to be accepted as true?

Much of the above draws on particular theoretical views of the recipient of information about risk. Kemshall (2010) argues that a long-standing approach to receivers of risk information has seen individuals as rational and calculating. Alike in some ways to the late modern individual as outlined by Beck, these are then rational actors who will make reliable choices about managing risks if provided with reliable information. Ultimately, in Beck’s account, this reliable information eludes victims of risk. The rational actor contrasts sharply with the social or situational actor. Examining the distinction between rational and social actors, Kemshall (2010, p. 1249) notes:

These critiques of the rational actor introduced the notion of the social actor and the concept of situated rationalities, namely rationalities embedded in place, time and network. Whilst the rational actor construed the subject as one in need of correction, re-moralisation and as a neutral receptor of correct, normative information, the social actor is seen as an adaptable actor, mediating social and personal constraints on their choices, and acting prudently within a situated rationality in which options to act otherwise can be severely limited by structural constraints and lack of power to act otherwise.

In many risk definitions, expert discourse is still considered to be dominant. Politically, scientific knowledge ‘remains a forceful disciplinary technique’ (Wales & Mythen, 2002, p. 130). Scientific discourse is viewed as factual while experiential knowledge is more irrational. Scientific discourse ‘still regulates the formation of “truth”’ (Wales & Mythen, 2002, p. 130) and this is particularly true within institutional assessments of risk.

Alternatively, Scott Lash posits reflexivity, in part, as hermeneutic reflexivity that is separate to, though not exclusive of, both cognitive and aesthetic reflexivity. It operates at a communal level rather than just an individual one. The key aspects of this particular type of reflexivity, and why it is more communal, is a predominance of storytelling through symbolism and access to truth through situated practices. According to Lash (1994), the privileged semiotic element is signified as that which provides meaning.
Hermeneutic reflexivity possesses an ethical mode that includes values, needs and the ethics of the same. This understanding of late modern reflexivity offers a stronger explanation of the popularity of narrative-based information. It does so by granting some credence to the idea of truth and meaning construction through situated practices. Situated practices suggest that there is some truth telling utility in vicarious experience (Lash, 1994). Thus, while the debate about risks can indeed be a reflection of ‘an ongoing process of political contestation between the public and expert systems’ (Wales & Mythen, 2002, p. 127), the expert systems are only exposed to scrutiny by the audience as an underlying discourse presented through experiential knowledge.

To further explore the role of experiential knowledge and experiential proxies, consider the following story presented by The 7.30 report, Patient Fights for Justice after Surgical Nightmare. This program is not shown on a commercial network but on the ABC.5 In this example, the role of victim is somewhat clearer than in previous examples. A further point of difference is the clear introduction of an equilibrium or normalcy. It is well defined and appears early in the story, at least once the characters are introduced:

KERRY O’BRIEN – The NSW hospital system has been reeling in recent months from a series of medical negligence cases. Symptomatic of the problem has been a failure by medical staff to respond to patients’ complaints. In some cases, it’s resulted in death.

After Pat Skinner went under the knife at Sydney’s St George Hospital to have part of her colon removed, she was given a clean bill of health. But over the next 18 months, when she complained of severe abdominal pain she was told she was recovering. It was only after insisting on having an X-ray that she discovered a pair of 17-cm surgical scissors had been left inside her.

But having made that discovery, she’s now had to go through another 18-month nightmare trying to get an adequate explanation, let alone compensation.

ANDREW GEOGHEGAN – But as we shall see, Pat Skinner’s good news would be short-lived. Her operation had been carried out by a hospital registrar who is no longer at St George Hospital. A mistake on the operating table would leave her in pain for the next 18 months and seriously threaten the health of the 69 year old.

PAT SKINNER – The pain went for a while and then I started to get pains back again, a different type of pain. We were going over a bump in the car and I’d be screaming and I’d be saying, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ And I’d say, ‘It’s just so painful. Just don’t go over a bump’.

5 As stated earlier, this is a government-funded network that does not generate income from advertising.
The story goes on to involve the main character detailing her experiences of post-operative pain. The story presents facts through the characters involved and through their roles. This example follows a more defined narrative structure—the equilibrium is well defined and followed by the disruption. The obstacle is also well defined:

VOICE OVER – Pat and Don Skinner expected St George Hospital would apologise, as well as offer an explanation and compensation for Pat’s suffering.

They got the apology from Dr Lubowski.

PAT SKINNER – He said, ‘Well, the system normally works very well. Large items are not counted because scissors, items like scissors, are considered too big to loose’.

I said, ‘Well, that’s a nonsense’.

He said, ‘Well, yes, obviously this has proven that that doesn’t work’.

ANDREW GEOGHEGAN – But to the Skinners’ astonishment, the hospital did not admit liability.

PAT SKINNER – We did ask if we could talk to somebody that was in the operating theatre on that day that could perhaps give us some closure, but nobody wanted to talk to us or was able to talk to us.

At this point, the story introduces an expert voice. The issue addressed by the expert is one that more directly defines the function of obstacle and complication. In this case it is the inability of the victim to receive compensation:

PROFESSOR REG GRAYCAR, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY – Non-economic losses are all those things other than hospital and medical expenses, loss of earning capacity. Some of them are often quite intangible, like pain, suffering, loss of amenity.

ANDREW GEOGHEGAN – Reg Graycar is a professor of law at Sydney University and claims that very few people injured by negligence successfully recover damages. She cites research from the British Medical Association, which indicates there’s often a more effective alternative to legal action.

PROFESSOR REG GRAYCAR – Clients who get clear explanations and, indeed, in some situations where appropriate apologies, are far less likely to bring legal action or to seek compensation.

And later,

ANDREW GEOGHEGAN – The Skinners also face a $10,000 limit on claims for legal costs. Their legal bill could climb above $50,000.

PAT SKINNER – There’s no sake in it for people that have got really genuine claims, because it's been changed in such a way that even if you win a case, you can lose in that you’re still landed with a huge legal, huge legal costs.
ANDREW GEOGHEGAN – Pat Skinner still doesn’t know the extent the damage caused by the scissors. But both she and her husband know the mistake has for the past two years ruined their retirement.

DON SKINNER – At our age there is a window of opportunity, but it’s pretty small—or it gets smaller. So, in our minds, we feel that we’ve missed this opportunity. That was two years or more of our lives taken out through no fault of our own.

KERRY O’BRIEN – Just don’t know how you do measure the cost of all that.

END

Importantly, this example decentres the use of expert voice. It is not the role of the expert to convey the nature of the main risk. Nor is the expert reinforcing the main risk as presented by the characters of the story. The expert is enlisted to discuss a secondary risk. In narrative terms, an obstacle. The expert knowledge provided does little more than explain why the risk, and the main character’s story, is not easy to resolve.

The 60 Minutes story, ‘Identity Crisis’, referenced below and first introduced in chapter four discusses the issue of identity theft. In the initial analysis, it is a story that draws on the familiar narrative style and use of characters. It also presents expert knowledge and expert voice, initially as a character of the narrative. Later we find the following:

RICHARD CARLETON – By all accounts this sort of crime is not small beer. It’s embarrassing for the banks, so they don’t talk about it, but it’s thought the cost could run to billions. The Commander of the NSW Fraud Squad, Detective Superintendent Megan McGowan, says it’s relatively simple for crooks to assume another person’s identity.

DET. SUPER. MEGAN MCGOWAN – There are some very commonly known methods that include, for example, stealing your mail from your mail box until I have enough information, going through your garbage and removing items from your garbage in order to gather enough information, falsifying documents, so usually there’s a starting point. I need to gather some information first. So it’s not very hard for me to get your full name. It’s useful if I have your date of birth, obviously useful if I have your address, your driver’s licence is even better.

RICHARD CARLETON – And once they have your details, modern technology takes over.

And later in the story:

RICHARD CARLETON – Preventing identity theft has become a real cat and mouse game. As the authorities find new safeguards, the crooks find a way to beat them. And paradoxically, it seems the past may hold the key to the future.
DET. SUPER. MEGAN MCGOWAN – It used to be that you would bank at your local branch and they use facial recognition. So the person behind the counter actually recognised you and said ‘Hi, Richard’ and for anyone else to walk into that branch and pretend to be you would be virtually impossible. I think it’s a really good benchmark for the kind of system we need.

RICHARD CARLETON – The 21st century version of that is already with us. This scanner guarding a secure room at Ciscos Systems in Sydney may soon be installed at every automatic teller machine in Australia. This young lady’s name is Gaynor and let’s get a real good look into her eyes. The coloured bit around the black pupil is the iris and it's unique to her, just as yours is unique to you. This machine reads that iris, establishes that it belongs to Gaynor and so lets her in. It doesn’t know me.

There would be strong arguments against this sort of thing. You coppers would end up with huge data banks and one doesn’t trust you.

DET. SUPER. MEGAN MCGOWAN – Yes, that’s right. But my view is if the only person who can transact on my account is somebody who has my fingerprint or my eye, then I feel a lot safer about that. I actually think that gives me more protection, that gives my privacy more protection and police, as you can imagine, are fairly paranoid about their privacy. I don’t want people accessing my information or knowing where I live. So if I’ve got something that’s actually protected by me needing to be physically present, then that’s a good thing.

RICHARD CARLETON – While this crime wave is costing plenty, for the victims there’s a more personal burden: the loss of their good name and a nagging fear that any day it could happen again.

VERNON LEE – I knew someone was out there circulating in the community and tendering documentation and ID that was mine and not knowing who they were, not having any control over that, meant that every day that the postie rolled up, I was wondering what was going to be in the mail and was there another debt that I had to then fight to clear my name on. So yes, it was quite a profound effect on both myself and my family.

NICK GREENAWAY – I got the impression from the bank that yes, they accepted it was fraud, but they just wanted to, you know, keep it quiet, because it’s such a big problem and if people knew how banking security, just how weak it is and how easily breached it is, they’d be shocked, I think, because it is … I mean, your money’s not safe.

In this story the “expert” voices are those of police officers who specialise in the investigation of identity theft. This positioning has some effect on how the narrative flows from equilibrium>disruption>new equilibrium. The expert, a police officer who investigates this type of crime, presents information that is again secondary to the stories of the victims. For example, during the story the reporter was able to experience a faked identity theft, perpetrated by the expert. This demonstration aimed to show how easy it was to have one’s identity stolen. There is a new equilibrium. It is one of riskiness and a
need to inform the characters involved as potential victims. This need extends to the viewers.

The narrative remains propelled through personal stories and experiences of the victims. No less than three separate victims of identity theft are given voice. Each of them tells a similar story and do not provide new information. Rather, they are each providing an important narrative function extraneous to the actual topic or content of the story. They are each reinforcing the disruption of this narrative by recounting their personal experience of victimage, which validates the experiences of the other characters without recourse to expert knowledge. The introduction of several characters underpins a reliance on drawing in the viewer to first relate to the characters and to then construct an equilibrium based on the disruption. It requires the viewer to experience the risk through the characters rather than presenting information about risk through expert knowledge.

The use of narrative to present information through experiential proxies suggests audience demand for information that meets their requirements as reflexive subjects. The examples examined show an information structure that implores a reflexive or responsible subject. It also relies on such a subject to be meaningful and relevant. Without a reflexive subject—one that pursues information based on experience and individuality rather than expert or official interventions or solutions—the information conveyed would be less relevant and less popular as an information structure. If it was less popular, this style of information would have a short lifespan in the market-share/ratings-driven world of commercial television. This conclusion supports the position that the late modern subject is a reflexive one—one that invests authority in experiential knowledge over expert knowledge. It predicts a viewer that is reflexive in their meaning construction. They are dismissive of expert or modernist intervention in matters of ideology.

Narrative-based television news acts in between the encoding and decoding of information. The term conduit is apt in describing the role of narrative as it provides a type of easily digestible information that suits the reflexive needs of the viewer, while also allowing the information to reflect ideology and preferred meaning. Importantly, as discussed in chapter four, this preferred meaning is a reflection of dominant discourses about risk relayed to the audience through experiential knowledge/discourse.
Given the reflexive nature of the late modern subject, the viewer should prefer information of this type, where “the facts” are not presented as objective and impersonal. The programs discussed above implore the viewer to engage in meaning construction through experiential proxies, to create their own knowledge from this experience. Mediated experience is a desired avenue of meaning construction for the reflexive subject. As mentioned in chapter four, this meaning construction occurs in an environment where narrative structure delineates the possible meanings.

Further, narrative structure and the use of experiential proxies has as its basis the reflexive demands of the late modern media audience. In this sense, the original question posed in the introduction to this chapter has been addressed. The ensuing discussion provides a theoretical explanation for the popularity of media sources who use narrative and experiential proxies.

This chapter has discussed the role of experts and experiential proxies in late modernity. What is missing from this theoretical analysis is a more formal consideration of authority. The next chapter turns to the notion of authority. This chapter has drawn conclusions about the relationship between information and the subject position of the late modern viewer. The findings thus far rely on a positioning of authority and claims to truth assumed in many discussions of late modernity and reflexivity, which have rarely been explored in depth. The following chapter continues this analysis with a focus on the question of authority utilising the concept of parrhesia.
Chapter 6: Foucault, Parrhesia, and the Self-constituting Subject

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that the contemporary news media prefers narrative forms of information. Demand from media audiences shows a similar preference. This demand is driven by the late modern individual and their need to negotiate risk. These same individuals, as information consumers, also reject an uncritical reliance on expert knowledge. Inherent to late modernity is an assumption that through general disenchantment and the ongoing effects of unintended consequences, expert knowledge has lost status as an authority. This position has found support within this thesis where information presented by experiential proxies, rather than experts, has been shown to be a key and often-utilised information medium. This fact raises an important set of questions concerning the authority that experiential information may carry.

The late modern subject remains “set adrift” among competing and debated information sources, forced to fend for themselves to navigate an increasingly risky world. Narrative news information employs experiential proxies in answer to reflexive audiences actively seeking non-expert information sources. Trust or authority is an area that has not received adequate attention in discussions of risk and relationships to information sources. Missing from this picture of the individual wading through a sea of information about risks taking the form of competing discourses is a way to conceptualise how this type of information gains authority. How do they know that this is information they should trust and then act on? As mentioned earlier, the notion of authority is the final lens for understanding the contemporary factors of this relationship. To answer these questions, this chapter considers how the narrative form, and perhaps more importantly the experiential proxies it propagates for audiences, can assume the status of a contemporary and late modern form of authority.

To begin this examination, we can turn again to the now familiar news story concerning the bathrooms and toothbrushes, *Today, Tonight’s Brushing Up*. This story continues and relies on an expanded narrative that utilises additional relatable characters to convey information. Without characters, the disruption presented by this narrative could not take
place in the telling of the story. As a result of the story being introduced by drawing on general statements about the disruption such as “normal toothbrush” and “your toothbrush” and then telling the story through characters, these characters are acting as an experiential proxy for the viewer. This presentation is different to allowing experts to inform the viewer directly. Let us see how this plays out through another section of the story. We return to the story after the program has taken the family’s toothbrushes away for scientific testing:

Reporter – Now to our lab results and alarmingly, some showed very high levels of faecal coliform forms or in familiar terms, faeces, including one with a sickening count of over a million.

French daughter – I think that’s disgusting. Everyone should change their toothbrush before it gets to that stage.

Professor Laurie Walsh – These are bacteria you would hope never to find on a toothbrush, so when you see them there it’s an indication that there’s been some very strange type of contamination event that’s gone on in the person’s bathroom.

Reporter – Also worrying, bacteria that causes ear and eye infections, cuts and acne.

2nd French daughter – I think it’s kind of disgusting.

Professor Laurie Walsh – It makes you wonder what some people must use their toothbrushes for.

Reporter – To be on the safe side, it’s recommended that you throw out any suspect toothbrushes and remember to change them at least every three months.

The now familiar process of the victim telling their story is evident in this example. The victim in this case is the family whose toothbrushes were tested. Importantly, the experience of this family as victims is also situated as vicarious experience for the viewer; therefore the viewer is also a victim of this particular disruption. Also, as in previous examples, it can be seen that the victim is eventually situated, or functions, as an “obstacle”. This same process can be seen in the later stages of the story when, after testing the toothbrushes, the “expert” is seen to say ‘it’s an indication that there’s been some very strange type of contamination event that’s gone on in the person’s bathroom’.

There is a strong notion of self-responsibility on the part of the victim, which in this case is transferred to the viewer. This discourse of self-responsibility is constructed through the narrative form by having the same character serve these dual roles of victim and obstacle. There is a clear interplay between the use of experiential proxies, self-
responsibilisation and authority. This relationship is highlighted by further examples, such as the 60 Minutes story, ‘Wasted’, about underage drinking to which we now return:

DAVID KEELEY – I probably would have died. I probably would have died. With alcohol poisoning you dehydrate and you’ve got no liquid in your body.

TARA BROWN – Did the doctors tell you that, that it was that serious?

DAVID KEELEY – One of the doctors did tell me that it was serious.

TARA BROWN – Eventually, David did seek help. Now he’s sworn off alcohol, is engaged to Rebecca and is looking forward to a new and sober life.

DAVID KEELEY – It’s not who your friends are or what other people think; it is what you think of yourself. As a teenager you can’t put the responsibility on anybody else. You know, you’ve got to wake up and realise that it is not the way to go about your life and you can have fun and have friends without, yeah, without alcohol, definitely.

TARA BROWN – But sadly, that’s one message Katie doesn’t want to hear. She and thousands of kids like her really do believe they’re invincible. The sobering fact is they’re not.

This part of the narrative provides several different spheres of meaning. As a narrative function, this character has provided some closure to his story. Looking closely at the information this character provides, at this stage of the story it is clear that there is little concern about how he overcame the disruption (i.e., underage drinking) in a practical sense. The most information the viewer is provided with at this stage is the narrator’s ‘Eventually, David did seek help’, which can, once again, be understood as a discursive construct of self-responsibilisation.

The above extract tells the viewer only that David Keller overcame the disruption. What this character thinks about where responsibility lies is stated directly – ‘As a teenager you can’t put the responsibility on anybody else’. This notion of self-responsibility is then carried over to the final stage of the story. The reporter talks directly to one of the unrepentant underage drinkers, inquiring why she does it; the girl confirms that she intends to keep drinking regardless of what others think.

There is no return to equilibrium provided in the closing stages of the narrative. The notion of self-responsibility is once again centrally positioned, as evident when the main character of the story is discussed – ‘But sadly, that’s one message Katie doesn’t want to hear. She and thousands of kids like her really do believe they’re invincible’, thus
situating responsibility with the character or victim. That being the case, we have more than one narrative function being served by this same character. She is first a victim and, as a victim, her story highlights the disruption which, in turn, is reinforced by other characters. Once the notion of self-responsibility enters the narrative, the character also becomes, by definition, their own obstacle. The narrative situates the character as requiring change, requiring some work, if a return to equilibrium or a new equilibrium is to be reached. The character is an obstacle to repairing the disruption as defined earlier in the narrative. A direct connection is evident between self-responsibility, experiential proxies and audience members.

Positioning of the experiential proxy as both disruption and obstacle implores an active audience to view their relationship with risk in a similar way. They must ‘do something’ to ensure they are neither an obstacle nor a victim. The information required to ensure that this action occurs is provided by the characters of the narrative and the experiential proxy. The late modern consumer of experiential knowledge positions themselves in a way that understands, or makes the most sense of, the position of the speaker and the information they provide. This is subjectivisation; it produces a specific subject position, and when applied to a reflexive and risk-averse audience, it should then be considered a form of authority.

The central position of an experiential proxy emerges as an important part of this analysis. The relating of an experiential proxy to the risk-averse audience as outlined above requires an analysis that considers why risk information provided by an experiential proxy attains authority, as the above suggests it may. To examine this proposition further, this chapter employs the work of Michael Foucault. However, the following analysis focusses on parrhesia, as discussed in a series of lectures Foucault gave shortly before his death. This discussion aims to produce a theoretical picture of who the late modern risk-information consumer judges as holding the power or status to tell the truth. When examined through the lens of parrhesia, truth or authority in this sense does not relate to the validity of a particular piece of information or body of knowledge; rather, the evaluation is about who we trust to know or tell us the truth when an evaluation of the relevant truth claim is based on the position of the speaker rather than the epistemological validity of the information itself. Often information or knowledge is accepted and acted
upon by individuals even when they are unable to judge its validity beyond an evaluation of who is imparting the information.

Foucault has discussed at length the notion of a self-constituting subject and the subject’s relation to truth. In this chapter, however, the focus on Foucault’s body of work will not initially be on the better known and more fully developed area of governance. Rather, the lesser known, yet related, area of his work concerning parrhesia will serve as the basis for this discussion.

6.1 Parrhesia

6.1.1 ‘Discourse and Truth’

In October and November 1983, a year before his death, Michel Foucault gave a series of six lectures at the University of California (UC) Berkeley titled ‘Discourse and truth’. The subject matter of these seminars was the role of parrhesia and a genealogy of the use of parrhesia in Greek texts from 5BC through to the rise of Christianity. Parrhesia, according to Foucault and Pearson (2001) is generally translated into English as free speech, and the parrhesiastes, or one who uses parrhesia, is ‘the one who speaks the truth’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 11). In essence, an analysis of parrhesia is an analysis of what constitutes a parrhesiastic speech act at a given moment in history and who is accordingly afforded the position of the parrhesiastes, or one who can tell the truth.

Foucault also covered these topics in lectures at the Collège de France in both the preceding and following semesters (Flynn, 2002). These lectures, which were published in 2001 in a book titled Fearless speech, are not particularly well known, or at least not as well-known as some of Foucault’s other works. For this reason, as well as the place this particular aspect of Foucault’s later work will take in this research, I will discuss these lectures at length. As shall be seen, the stated aim of these lectures was to deal with the problem of knowing the truth not epistemologically but to deal with the problem of

6 For a summary of these lectures see also Peters (2003).
7 As Flynn (2002) points out, Foucault’s lectures the following semester would be his last.
telling the truth as an activity. An examination of truth telling as an activity informs the theoretical position that will position narrative media information in this analysis.

6.1.2 Parrhesiastic Speech Activity

A parrhesiastic speech activity is one that has particular inherent truth claims, which are based on the position of the speaker rather than the logical validity of what they say. According to Foucault and Pearson (2001), parrhesia occurs under a set of fairly strict conditions. It is precisely these conditions that give the parrhesiastic act its claim to truth. The first of these is that a parrhesiastic speech activity is one of frankness. By frankness it is meant that the speaker does not employ any rhetorical devices, which are designed to convince. A parrhesiastes conveys their opinion using the ‘most direct words and expressions he can find’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 12). This directness is in contrast to rhetorical speech, which employs words and expressions that are designed to convince the audience that what they say is true, or at least ‘prevail on the minds of his audience’ to use Foucault’s (2001, p. 12) words, regardless of the actual opinion of the speaker with reference to what they are saying. Parrhesia further entails that the speaker makes it clear that what they are saying is their own opinion, which is offered unfettered and completely.

Second, there is always an exact correlation between what the parrhesiastes believes (and therefore what they say as part of a parrhesiastic act) and the truth (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). According to Foucault, the parrhesiastes says only what they know to be true, and they know it to be true because it really is true. This reasoning may seem to be circular, however, Foucault premises this type of truth on a philosophical distinction on a particular understanding of truth possessed by, in this case, the ancient Greeks, who first used the term parrhesia. To the ancient Greeks, truth was denoted by the morality of the speaker. In other words someone who held a moral position to speak the truth spoke the truth: ‘[t]he “parrhesiastic game” presupposes that the parrhesiastes is someone who has the moral qualities which are required, first, to know the truth and secondly, to convey such truth to others’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 15).

There was no reason for anyone, including the speaker, to doubt the validity of this truth. Epistemologically, before the rise of the Cartesian view of knowledge, the ‘coincidence between belief and truth’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 14) took place in the speech act
of parrhesia, which differs from the Cartesian model that sees the coincidence of belief and truth as obtained through mental evidential experience. Due to the identification of a truth-teller not coming from the actual information put forward (episteme) but rather from the position of the truth-teller, one can assume that this judgement of the speaker’s ability to speak the truth comes from without rather than within. The position of truth-teller and therefore the quality of parrhesiastic acts is socially constructed and dependent on contingent social and cultural determinants. This dependence is the quality of parrhesia, which may be most relevant to discussions of the contemporary information sources such as the media, especially when considered from a reflexive point of view. This is an important point and one that will be examined later.

If there is some kind of “proof” required as to the “sincerity” of the speaker and thus of the parrhesiastic speech act, it can be found in the courage of the speaker. This courage is an outcome of the third condition that denotes a parrhesiastic speech activity: that there is some risk or danger for the speaker in telling the truth (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). Therefore, there is an inherent power relationship between the parrhesiastic speaker and those he speaks to or about, meaning that any speech activity where there is a coincidence between belief and truth, that is told frankly, is not a parrhesiastic speech activity unless there is some risk to the speaker. To highlight this, Foucault presents the example of the school teacher. Teachers may tell the truth to the children in their class and believe that what they are saying is indeed true but, due to the power involved in the relationship between teacher and student, the teacher is not a parrhesiastes. Foucault says:

the parrhesiastes is someone who takes a risk. Of course this risk is not always a risk of life. When, for example, you see a friend doing something wrong and you risk incurring his anger by telling him he is wrong, you are acting as a parrhesiastes … if, in a political debate, an orator risks losing his popularity because his opinions are contrary to the majority’s opinion, or his opinion may usher in a political scandal, he uses parrhesia. Parrhesia, then, is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 16).

Foucault and Pearson (2001) argue that because of this stipulation someone in a position of power, such as a king or a tyrant—to use Foucault’s example—cannot usually use parrhesia; there is no danger in them telling a truth.
The fourth proviso of a parrhesiastic activity is that it is a criticism. A parrhesiastic speech activity is what Foucault calls a ‘game’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 17) between the speaker and interlocutor and the truth being told is capable of hurting the interlocutor in some way. Therefore, to use Foucault’s (Foucault & Pearson, 2001) example again, if someone on trial was to say something that could then be used against them and they believed what they said was true, they were sincere and, perhaps obviously, they were endangering themselves, this act would not be considered a form of parrhesia. In this case there is no “game” between the speaker and an interlocutor. In a parrhesiastic game, the speaker always runs the risk of hurting the interlocutor.

The utility of parrhesia is not necessarily to demonstrate the truth to another; rather its function is one of criticism. This can be criticism of either the speaker or the interlocutor. Foucault (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 17) offers the following exemplars of this point:

- ‘This is what you do and this is what you think; but this is what you should not do and should not think’
- ‘This is the way you behave, but this is the way you ought to behave’
- ‘This is what I have done, and was wrong in so doing’.

As can be seen from these examples, a parrhesiastic speech activity occurs within a specific relationship between two (or more) parties or groups and is wholly dependent on this relationship, not only for its claims to truth but for its content as well. While parrhesia takes the form of criticism, it remains that the parrhesiastes is always in a less powerful position than those with whom they speak. In this sense, parrhesia is something that comes from ‘below’ and is directed towards ‘above’ (Foucault, 2001). Another note on this relationship between parrhesiastes and interlocutor is that not everyone can use parrhesia: there is a certain status required of the speaker, at least in the case of parrhesia in the ancient Greek texts that Foucault examined.

The final characteristic of parrhesia discussed by Foucault is that for the parrhesiastes, telling the truth is seen as a duty. Despite the less powerful position of the parrhesiastes, they are not forced to speak. In fact they are free to keep silent, but choose to speak despite the possible negative consequences because they see it as their duty. (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).
To summarise the elements that make up a parrhesiastic activity, in Foucault’s (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, pp. 19–20) words:

parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognises truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.

These, therefore, are the conditions that make a speech activity a parrhesiastic speech activity, as it appeared at first in classical Greek literature and to some extent, throughout the genealogy presented by Foucault. He proceeds to trace the evolution of parrhesia throughout classical Greek literature, not from the point of view of simply how the conditions discussed above changed, but more specifically how parrhesia became problematised throughout classical Greek literature. In doing so, Foucault showed how parrhesia as a truth telling activity obtained new meaning not only in the aims of a parrhesiastic act but also in how the relationship evolved between parrhesiastic speakers and those to whom they spoke; that is, the parrhesiastic game.

6.1.3 The Evolution of Parrhesia

Foucault identified three main areas or types of parrhesia found in classical Greek texts. These were centred on the relationships of parrhesia and rhetoric; parrhesia and politics; and parrhesia and philosophy. In regard to parrhesia and rhetoric, as mentioned above Foucault pointed out that in the earliest Greek texts, parrhesia was not a device of rhetoric. This was a distinction that was ‘so clear cut’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 21) throughout the work of Plato and indeed is one that lasted for centuries within Western philosophy. Even when parrhesia appeared in later works in the field of rhetoric, such as that of Quintillian (Born 35AD), it is still categorised as a form of natural and free speech (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).

The second aspect Foucault (2001) considers in the evolution of parrhesia is the relationship between parrhesia and politics. In the classical Greek texts examined by
Foucault, such as the plays of Euripides, parrhesia is positioned as an essential element of Athenian democracy. Parrhesia played a role as a constituting guideline for this model of democracy along with an ‘equal right of speech’ and ‘the equal participation of all citizens in the exercise of power’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 22).

This was also a period where a new and negative connotation of parrhesia emerged that was inexorably linked to democracy. Democracy was based on the notions of free speech and equal participation as mentioned above, which meant parrhesia lost some of its ability to position the speaker. To put it simply, when everyone has the ability to speak it is dangerous for democracy if all those who do speak are given the position of parrhesiastes and the truth claims that go along with this position. This was an area of concern for many classical Greek thinkers (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).

The works of Plato also show another element in the evolution of parrhesia that is related to the negative view of parrhesia in relation to democracy mentioned above. In Foucault’s (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 84) words:

For Plato, the primary danger of parrhesia is not that it leads to bad decisions of government, or provides the means for some ignorant or corrupt leader to gain power, to become a tyrant. The primary danger of liberty and free speech in a democracy is what results when everyone has his own manner of life … For then there can be no common logos, no possible unity, for the city.

Here we see Foucault’s analysis turning to a new view of parrhesia, which is more concerned with how it relates to the individual. This concern will be expanded on shortly.

This political meaning of parrhesia changed with the advent of the Hellenistic period and the rise to power of the Hellenic monarchies. At this stage in history, parrhesia becomes a central part of the relationship between the monarch and his court (Foucault, 2001). A good king in this era, argues Foucault, is one who has the ability to play the parrhesiastic game with his advisors. A good king is capable of accepting what is told to him by a genuine parrhesiastes: ‘The portrayal of a sovereign by most Greek historians takes into account the way he behaves towards his advisors—as if such a behaviour were an index of his ability to hear the parrhesiastes’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 23).

The third area on which Foucault focusses his attention is the evolution of parrhesia through its connection with the field of philosophy; Philosophy in the sense of being
regarded as ‘an art of life (techne tou biou)’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 23, emphasis in original). This is an area of central concern for Foucault and one that he focusses a great deal of his discussion on. This relationship is clear in the writings of Plato that discuss the role of Socrates as parrhesiastes. The specific quality of Socrates as parrhesiastes is one of confrontation. Socrates is noted as constantly confronting people in the street where he ‘points out the truth to them, bidding them to care for wisdom, truth, and the perfection of their souls’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 23). This is an aspect of parrhesia that is of particular interest to Foucault because philosophical parrhesia is concerned with the matter of the care of oneself. The affinity of parrhesia with the care of the self-progressed until ultimately being regarded by the Epicureans as ‘a techne of spiritual guidance for the “education of the soul”’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 24).

Foucault (Foucault & Pearson, 2001) characterises this new type of Socratic parrhesia as inherently philosophical and a large part of the philosophical tradition in general during the Greco–Roman era. Philosophy of this time required the playing of parrhesiastic games. This philosophical role engaged in three specific yet related types of parrhesiastic activity. The philosopher by definition was tasked with discovering truths, whether they are about the world or nature or any such thing; therefore the philosopher is adopting an epistemic role. Further, the philosopher also generally takes a stand towards the city (‘city’ refers here to political institutions and laws among other things), and this requires, along with a philosophical role, a political role. Last, parrhesiastic activity also attempts to explain in detail the relationship between truth and an ethics and aesthetics of the self: ‘More precisely, I think that the decisive criterion which identifies the parrhesiastes is not to be found in his birth, nor in his citizenship nor in his intellectual competence, but in the harmony which exists between his logos and his bios’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 106, emphasis in original).

A second characteristic of this philosophical parrhesia is the fact that the parrhesiastic act is no longer aimed at convincing “the Assembly” but at convincing the individual that they must ‘take care of themselves and others; and this requirement means that he must change his life’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 106, emphasis in original). This expansion into changing one’s life goes beyond earlier versions of parrhesiastic activity that was more focussed on changing beliefs (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).
Another characteristic of philosophical parrhesia is that its practices are indicative of an intricate relationship or ‘set of connections between the self and truth’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 107). Practices of parrhesia that are philosophical are designed to present the individual with self-knowledge. Hence, there is a relationship between parrhesia of this type and the more general argument that knowing the truth about yourself also allows access to further truth and, of course, further knowledge. This, as pointed out by Foucault, ‘has been one of the problematic enigmas of Western Thought—e.g. as in Descartes or Kant’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 107). Finally, philosophical parrhesia is one that can be practiced and used in numerous places and relationships.

In his series of lectures at UC Berkeley, Foucault devoted nearly the entirety of his fourth and fifth sessions to a discussion of practices and techniques of parrhesia, specifically Socratic parrhesia. The examination of practices of parrhesia was carried out through an in-depth analysis of several classical Greek and Greco–Roman texts that tracked the practice of philosophical, or Socratic, parrhesia through three philosophical approaches, all of which present different views of the parrhesiastic game. It is not my intention to give a detailed account of Foucault’s analysis of these texts. For the purposes of this work, a brief summary will suffice.

Specifically, the practice of parrhesia to which Foucault refers means two things. The first of these is the ‘use of parrhesia in specific types of human relationships’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 107). The second meaning refers to the techniques utilised within these relationships. There were three types of relationships discussed by Foucault, though he was quick to point out that these were only given as ‘guiding examples’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 109). The first of these is parrhesia in community life; which can be found most extensively in the work of the Epicurean Philosophers. The second relationship was that of parrhesia in public life, such as that most commonly found in the philosophical approach of the cynics. The third is that of parrhesia in personal relationships, most often found in the philosophical writings of the Stoics. For his analysis

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8 Foucault goes into some depth when discussing the approach of the cynics including a lengthy discussion of the Fourth discourse on kingship by Dio Chrysostom (c. 40–110AD), which talks extensively about a meeting between Diogenes and Alexander the Great and the parrhesiastic game that ensued between the two.
of this relationship, Foucault draws on the work of Plutarch and Galen (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).

Within these types of relationships there are various techniques of Socratic parrhesia. These techniques make clear a discernible change from the type of truth game discussed earlier. This change was a move away from the earliest classical Greek definition of parrhesia that was reliant on someone being ‘courageous enough to tell the truth to other people’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 143). The parrhesiastic game has now moved from that understanding of parrhesia to a ‘truth game which now consists in being courageous enough to disclose the truth about oneself’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 143, emphasis in original).

Another aspect of this new type of truth game is a requirement for what the Greeks termed askesis. As Foucault points out, while the word asceticism derives from this earlier Greek term, the meanings do differ. To the Greeks, askesis refers to any type of practical training. For them, ‘it was commonplace to say that any kind of art or technique had to be learned by mathesis and askesis—by theoretical knowledge and practical training’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 143). This Greek use of the word differs from the Christian meaning of asceticism in that Christian asceticism has as its goal a ‘renunciation of the self’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 143) where the Greco–Roman understanding was one of the creation of a certain relationship of self-sovereignty; a self-sovereignty that would allow the individual to ‘fully confront the world in an ethical and rational manner’ (Foucault, 2001, p. 144).

Three types of ‘truth games’ are discussed by Foucault, although he points out that there are many more than just these. These truth games were exercises where an individual was both looking at the truth about themselves and, importantly, discussing it with someone else. These practices or truth games are often labelled ‘examinations of conscience’ but Foucault (2001) argues that this label tends to oversimplify these exercises and their aims. Once again I will not detail the textual examples used by Foucault in his lectures; rather

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9 Foucault states that he wishes to discuss two more types of truth games (for a total of five) from the works of Marcus Aurelius, but seems to have run out of time during the lecture; see Foucault (2001, p. 164).
I will summarily discuss the types of truth games or self-examinations he presented within his analysis.

The first of these is solitary self-examination. The example Foucault gives relates to someone who judges their own activities and actions in an almost administrative way rather than a judicial way. One does not confess to “sins”; rather, they are concerned with practical errors and not transgressions against the law. These confessions express when an ‘attempt to coordinate rules of behaviour (rules he already accepts, recognises, and knows) with his own behaviour in a specific situation has proven to be unsuccessful or inefficient’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 149). Someone who partakes in this type of parrhesia is reactivating particular rules and in doing so is making them more permanent and more effective as rules for behaviour in the future (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).

The second technique is that of self-diagnosis. Similar to the act of self-examination above, this technique refers to someone who desires what has been termed tranquillity of the mind,¹⁰ which is related to the principles of self-sovereignty or, as Foucault more specifically called it, ‘self-possession of the self’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 150). Tranquillity of the mind, in this sense, is something an individual would pursue and achieve through self-examination of what it is they need to do to achieve this tranquillity.

The third type of self-examination is that of self-testing, which was evident in the work of Epictetus. This form of self-examination demands we constantly ‘put on trial’ all of our representations (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). Briefly, this style of self-examination ‘wants us to constitute a world of representations where nothing can intrude which is not subject to the sovereignty of our will … self-sovereignty is the organising principle of this form of self-examination’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 164).

When comparing among these types of self-examination as differing types of Socratic parrhesia, it is apparent why Foucault wishes to discuss them. The notion of “care of the self” is absolutely pre-eminent in these practices. The practice of parrhesia has shifted from practices that occurred as a form of spiritual guidance where parrhesia could be used by the master, to reveal the truth to the disciple to make him aware of the truths he cannot

¹⁰ This is a term Foucault borrows from the title of the text he analysed for its discussion of his parrhesiastic technique—*De tranquillitate animi* (On the tranquillity of mind), also written by Seneca.
see. Ultimately, there has been a shift where the use of parrhesia ‘is put increasingly upon the disciple as his own duty towards himself’ (Foucault, 2001, p. 164). Further, a point of all these different ‘exercises’ is not the aim of revealing some sort of secret about oneself; the aim is more associated with the relation of the self to truth (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).

The above constitutes the bulk of Foucault’s UC Berkeley lectures in 1983. As mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, Foucault’s aim in these lectures was to develop a genealogy of the “critical” tradition in Western philosophy. Foucault says ‘it was not a question of analysing the internal or external criteria that would enable the Greeks or Romans, or anyone else, to recognise whether a statement is true or not. At issue for me was rather the attempt to consider truth-telling as a specific activity or as a role’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 169).

The distinction between the two positions of an ‘analytics of truth’ concerned with epistemology and truth telling as an activity is an important one for Foucault. He highlights this difference in his discussion of these two concurrent philosophical areas of inquiry. The first analytic of truth asks the question, what are the criteria for knowing a particular statement is true; does this statement contain sound reasoning? This question is what Foucault calls the ‘great tradition of Western philosophy’ and more specifically the ‘analytics of truth’ (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 170).

The second aspect of the philosophy of truth, separate from the first analytic above, Foucault sees as “the roots” of what he called the “critical” tradition in Western philosophy. Hence, the stated aim of Foucault’s lectures at UC Berkeley was ‘to construct a genealogy of the critical attitude in the Western philosophy’11 (Foucault & Pearson. 2001, pp. 170–171). Further, he says:

Who is able to tell the truth? What are the moral, the ethical, and the spiritual conditions, which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered as, a truth-teller? About what topics is it important to tell the truth? (About the world? About Nature? About the city? About behaviour? About man?) What are the consequences of telling the truth? What are the anticipated positive effects for the city, for the city’s rulers, for the individual etc.? And finally: what is the relationship between the activity of truth-telling and the exercise of power, or should these activities be completely

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11 Thomas Flynn (1994) points out that at the time of his death, ‘Foucault was said to be working on a multi-volume history of the “production” of truth’ (p. 117). Flynn argues that this lecture and those during the following semester at the Collège De France were part of this project.
independent and kept separate? Are they separable, or do they require one another?” (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, pp. 169–170).

Foucault sees this ‘problematisation of truth’ as the thing that marks the rise of Socratic philosophy, which endures within Western philosophy even today. The term problematisation was also explained in his concluding lecture. It is at this point that Foucault links his methodology, employed for the study of parrhesia, to his other body of work. He points out that this process of problematisation is what he has attempted to analyse in all of his work. By this he means:

How and why certain things (behaviour, phenomena, processes) became a problem. Why, for example, certain forms of behaviour were classified as ‘madness’ while other similar forms were completely neglected at a given historical moment; the same thing for crime and delinquency, the same question of problematization for sexuality (Foucault & Pearson, 2001, p. 171).

Studying the problematisation of things such as madness or sexuality, Foucault argues, does not mean that such phenomena are not real. He posits this claim as a defence to criticisms of historic idealism that have been levelled at his previous work, or previous problematisations.

With his discussion of parrhesia, Foucault provides a genealogy of truth-telling. The following section considers how current examinations of risk that draw on Foucault’s articulation of governmentality can be examined with consideration of Foucault’s genealogy of truth telling and parrhesia discussed above. This examination is important, as these other areas of Foucault’s work can all be informed, albeit as subtext, by an analysis of parrhesia and truth games. The aim of the following discussion is not to ignore or dismiss these theoretical areas but rather to bring the problematisation of parrhesia to the forefront of such theoretical endeavours in an effort to examine contemporary risk communication.

6.2 The Self-constituting Subject

Perhaps the most used analytical tool to arise out of Foucault’s work is that of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1993, 2000, 2001) or, as it is
sometimes referred to, ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Dean, 1999, p. 10). “Government” in the Foucauldian sense is a broad term meant to define:

any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite and shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes (Dean, 1999, p. 11).

As Dean (1999, p. 11) himself says, this is ‘an extremely wide, if not precise, definition’. The human behaviour that government attempts to shape is “rationally” human action. Rationality, however, is not a clear and precise term when considered from a Foucauldian point of view; rather, it is representative of a multiplicity of ways of thinking about things, albeit in a systematic and calculative way through the employment of knowledge (Dean, 1999). This rationality implies yet another feature of government. According to Dean (1999), government links to morality and, more specifically, the individual making themselves responsible for their own actions: individuals ‘take their own conduct to be subject to self-regulation’ (Dean, 1999), which makes government of this type an inherently moral activity.

With the notion of self-regulation inherent to Foucault’s view of government, this self-regulation also becomes a locus of both action and freedom. Government then works through the freedom of the governed: ‘Liberal ways of governing thus often conceive the freedom of the governed as a technical means of securing the ends of government’ (Dean, 1999). Humans have no doubt always thought about their own conduct and the conduct of others. Such reflection becomes governmental because it attempts to become technical and insert itself into the world and lives of individuals as a practice (Rose, 1993).

Further, liberal government, a focus of Foucault’s analysis, propagates a particular distinction between government and knowledge. Knowledge becomes inherently linked to truth, with truth being conceived as a ‘technical matter’ (Rose, 1993) that provides the know-how that could potentially make government possible. Liberal government also, and importantly, relies on the power of experts. Experts can replace ‘the state’ as a form of authority thus allowing the state to govern from a distance (Rose, 1993). This era of liberal government is most often linked to the rise of the welfare state. What is a more compelling aspect of this argument is that, in light of the notion of parrhesia, the expert
must assume the role of parrhesiastes. The expert is judged as someone who holds the ability to tell the truth. The individual receiving the information is not an expert; they do not have the ability to judge the epistemological validity of the information provided by the expert, even though this information provides the individual with a calculated and rational picture of normality upon which they can base their decisions and behaviour. Rather, there must be a degree of trust held by the receiver (the individual) in the information provided by the speaker (the expert in this case). The position of expert as parrhesiastes—they who tell the truth—is socially and historically contingent. In this case it is based on a post-enlightenment, modernist world view. This contingent nature of parrhesia is central to this thesis and something Foucault himself focused on in some of his later work.

In an interview that took place on 20 January 1984, Foucault was asked about the current direction of his thought, the apparent change in focus his later works provided and the shift to a focus on subjectivity and truth. Foucault said:

In fact, that has always been my problem, even if I have expressed in different terms the framework of this thought. I have tried to discover how the human subject entered into games of truth, whether they be games of truth which take on the form of science or which refer to a scientific model, or games of truth like those found in institutions or practices of control (cited in Bernauer & Rasmussen, 1988, p. 1).

Foucault does not see this new focus as a leap or a change in direction from his previous work. Rather, it is the schema underlying those things he has studied. The relationship that existed between the subject and games of truth had been examined within a framework of, for example, coercive practices such as medical sciences including psychiatry, or the penitentiary system as forms of theoretical or scientific truth games (Bernauer & Rasmussen, 1988). The shift in focus towards the “practices of the self” as highlighted in his lectures on parrhesia, as well as the third volume of his History of sexuality, the care of the self, was always central to Foucault. It was one that was also important to classical Greek and Roman society, as in ‘the care of the self” (Fornet-Betancourt, Becker, Gomez-Muller, & Gauthier, 1987). It was exactly these practices of the self that was ‘laid siege to, up to a certain point, by institutions: religious, pedagogical, or the medical and psychiatric kind’ (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987, p. 113). There has been a shift where these games of truth are no longer coercive practices but are concerned
more with the self-formation of the subject, or what Foucault calls an ascetical practice where one is attempting to ‘attain a certain mode of being’.

This subject is similar to the type of subject posed in Foucauldian theories on neoliberal governance. However, the focus in this paradigm is one based on the dichotomy of knowledge–power. Even though the individual is governed through a process of self-formation, the guidelines for this formation are still only considered from a knowledge/power, and therefore a ‘coercive practice enacted through the self’, point of view. In the interview with Foucault presented in Fornet-Betancourt et al., (1987), Foucault argues that a subject, for example the “mad” subject, has been placed in a game of truth, and the truth game is defined in this instance by knowledge—specifically a medical model. This knowledge becomes the ‘condition for the insertion of the mad subject in this game of truth’ (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987, p. 120-121). This conclusion led Foucault to pose the problem of knowledge–power, which, according to Foucault, is not the fundamental problem but merely an “instrument”, and the most fitting instrument for this particular analysis that allowed an examination of the problem of the relationship between the subject and games of truth. It is a game of truth, occurring at a point in history, where scientific or expert knowledge held parrhesiastic power.

In this sense, Foucault is not changing his focus to include or re-centre the “subject”. The subject has been present in his analysis all along, albeit often in the background. Foucault argues that he has avoided or refused starting from a theory of the subject, a subject that is imbued with the power to answer the question of how ‘such and such a form of knowledge was possible’ (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987). Rather, Foucault’s work was attempting to understand how the subject came to constitute themselves through any number of games of truth, which may or may not take the form of coercive power. Therefore Foucault’s analysis is one where he:

Reject[s] a certain a priori theory of the subject in order to make this analysis of the relationships, which can exist between the constitution of the subject or different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power and so forth (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987, p. 121).

Therefore, this reformulation of Foucault’s position is, on one level, a semantic one. This change of focus is not really a change in a practical sense, nor is it a change that further requires a change of the sites of analysis. Rather it as an unveiling of the thinking that
underlies much of Foucault’s work, but is not often given prominence in discussions of it. To some extent it is clear in examples of his work that the problematisations he traces and reveals are linked to a self-constituting subject, which is why this repositioning reflects a semantic change or clarification only. However, this self-constituting subject can be easily relegated to the background, and dwarfed by considerations of the coercive power of knowledge and the role of the state. Once the analytical ascendency is granted to these factors, rather than the subject, Foucault’s original version of the self-constituting subject becomes somewhat misplaced. We can reconsider governmentality and the power/knowledge paradigm, so often seen as central to an analysis of governance, in light of Foucault’s insistence that this dichotomy was instrumental and designed to analyse the relationship between the self-constituting subject and a particular game of truth at a particular moment in history. This change shifts the focus away from the coercive practices that delimit the freedom or “activeness” of the subject and instead considers how the subject constitutes themselves based on the parrhesiastic evaluations of truth available to them.

There is a presumption that analysis of an issue from a governmentality theoretical perspective often assumes the position that the coercive power of the state, albeit at a distance and knowledge, whether expert or not, somehow plays a decisive role in leading to a self-constituting subject, who can then be governed through their own freedom. What Foucault’s later work hints at is that a subject that is self-constituting is not only a result of that subject’s relation to power or knowledge, as is sometimes assumed, but rather self-constitution is related to entering into certain truth games as part of the quest for self-care, and the seeking of harmony between logos and bios. Similarly, self-construction in light of parrhesia is seen by some as offering a form of ethical self-governance that ‘equips individuals with a “disposition to steadiness” that orients individuals in the face of uncertainty’ (Luxon, 2008, p. 377).

From this particular interpretation of Foucault’s position, a model that allows an understanding of how contemporary information sources such as the media exist in a relationship with the self-constituting subject can be proposed, keeping in mind that the focus is on this relationship as it exists today. To build such a model requires not just an account of governance through delimited freedom as a power/knowledge approach.
suggests, but an analysis of how information sources sit in relation to the self-constituting subject to be judged as truth-teller and how, specifically, information sources such as the media may present information that assumes the role of truth-teller or parrhesiastes.

In earlier epochs of capitalist society, expert opinion was integral in forming an individual’s sense of the world. However, as discussed above, at different moments in history, the relationship between the self-constituting subject and games of truth telling as an activity has shifted, as evident in Foucault’s example of the earliest mentioned parrhesiastic act in classical Greek literature, which became problematised at the moment of history marked by the rise of Athenian democracy. This change led to a shift in truth telling as an activity that had its basis in Socratic philosophy, which had the self-constituting subject as central through truth telling activities that focussed on the care of the self. Similarly, prior to modernity, spiritual explanations of the world served to govern the self-constituting subject, and this relationship would have also hinged on parrhesiastic evaluations on the part of the individual. As can be seen, the self-constituting subject, so central to the workings of governmentality, certainly pre-dated the governmental and liberal revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries. As mentioned earlier, it was this self-constituting subject that was laid siege to by expert discourse or knowledge throughout modernity (Foucault, 1987).

Has this modernist relationship between the expert or expert knowledge as truth-teller/parrhesiastes and the self-constituting subject remained intact or has it too become problematised? Some recent trends in social theory seem to suggest that it has changed. As discussed, the theoretical position of those such as Beck and Giddens, who discuss a late modern self-constituting subject, remain somewhat blind to the problem of truth telling from a Foucauldian point of view.

While there is confusion as to the role of experts in late modern discourse in the work of Beck (Mythen, 2004), these theorists generally agree that the late modern subject is a reflexive one who is assumed free to build their own life biography by choosing from a variety of information sources. This freedom is seen as due to the evolution of late-capitalist societies and a resulting loss of trust in expert or scientific discourse. This expert discourse, if we look to the earlier work of Foucault, was previously instrumental in
guiding our view of the world and provided a paradigm for the self-constituting subject to ‘care for the self’. When considering this change and risk, O’Malley argues:

Governmental studies and analyses overwhelmingly have been concerned with risk and its encroachment into contemporary governance, and have rarely examined ‘uncertainty’ in detail. In part, this aversion to analysing uncertainty as a way of governing is based on the general hostility to the grand theoretical character of the risk society theorists for whom uncertainty is a central concept. This takes its most specific form in a rejection of the idea of a rigid binary between calculable (risk) and ‘incalculable’ (uncertain) technologies of governance (O’Malley, 2012, p. 14).

This leaves the question of truth claims “hanging” in what can be called late modernity. Contemporary risk theorists such as Beck and Giddens identify what they considered disenchantment with expert knowledge, due in part to its unintended consequences. The above extends this analysis if we consider this not as disenchantment but more precisely a problematisation of a particular parrhesiastic truth game.

To conclude this narrative analysis, and accordingly this first stage of the thesis, I return to the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter, and consider them in light of the theoretical position discussed so far in this thesis. This analysis suggests that individuals enter into a contemporary and late modern truth game to care for the self. Therefore, another type of knowledge, other than expert, has assumed the role of parrhesiastes. This position is in contrast to the portrait of the late modern individual as “set adrift” or even as freely able to pick and choose from a variety of information sources.

Returning to the news media and the narrative devices it employs, positioning the characters as experiential proxies creates instant relevance for the viewer. When the viewer can relate to the victim there may be heightened relevance—it is going to be seen as important to the viewer for reasons that go beyond simple heuristics. It is important to their everyday lives because it is relevant to their navigation and management of risks. Through a positioning of the characters of these stories as both victim and disruption or obstacle, there is clearly a discourse of self-responsibility being drawn on. The issue of self-responsibility is often a central, albeit somewhat veiled, aspect of these stories.

Ultimately, the creation of relevance is commensurate with acceptance on the behalf of the viewer that they too are at risk of becoming victims or being drawn into a similar position. Thus, the viewer is compelled to accept the subject position of the narrative as
a type of self-regulation. It would be deviant and irresponsible to ignore such information. Therefore, this type of information, provided through experiential proxies, can be defined as having governmental authority.

The three preceding chapters have focussed on media content and have examined the narrative structure of risk communication. The following chapter turns to the audience and examines how they view risk communication that is presented through narrative and experiential proxies.
Chapter 7: Media Use and the Demands of Late Modernity

The nature of the media landscape available to the Australian news audience has a significant effect on the viewing choices of the news audience. As discussed in section 3.1, there has been significant changes to available news sources in Australia over recent decades. The news sources that have served as the focus in earlier chapters have been television based. Television is a news source that faces competition from a growing number of contemporary news sources widely available to audiences. Beyond instrumental considerations of news delivery, the ways in which individuals relate to these sources when considering requirements such as trust also arise as an important question that will be the focus of the latter parts of this chapter.

The earlier chapters of this thesis have developed a theoretical lens that deploys risk and reflexivity as an explanation for the reported popularity of narrative-based news as a type of reflexive discourse. The conclusions of the theoretical section of this thesis, chapters four, five, and six suggest that the popularity of this form of information is due to reflexive demands of the audience.

To examine these conclusions further, the following chapter presents the results of original data gathered by questionnaire in the current research. These questionnaires collected data on various demographics, news media choices and satisfaction. Finally, original data are presented from a series of in-depth interviews with respondents recruited with the aid the questionnaires mentioned above. The aim of the following analysis is to examine the news consumption habits and preferences of respondents. There is also a consideration of approval and trust in the media sources chosen for examination.

7.1 Media Use Results: Questionnaires

This section presents selected results from the questionnaire stage of this research. As discussed in section 3.4.1, the questionnaire was designed to gather demographic data and an indication of how the respondent would rate the newsmagazine television programs
discussed in chapter four. A further aim of the questionnaire was to recruit participants for the interviews discussed in later sections. Answers provided in the questionnaire were also used to inform questions during the interviews. A full copy of the questionnaire can be found at Appendix A.

The demographic categories examined in this section relate directly to the categorisation of ‘everyday risk’ as defined in section 2.2. of this thesis. No comparison is made here to demographic characteristics of the wider population as the representativeness of this sample is not a claimed feature of this thesis. Rather, this data informs some of the questioning found in the semi-structured interviews detailed in section 3.4.

As can be seen in Table 7.3, questionnaire respondents were mostly female (60.7%), just over half (56.4%) reported having children and most earned under $75,000 per annum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variable</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per annum household income ($)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;25,000</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,000–50,000</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000–75,000</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75,000–100,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;100,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>95.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7.4 examines which of the newsmagazine programs questionnaire respondents reported watching. Of the programs with a 30-minute length (*The 7.30 Report, A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*), the two commercial network programs, *A current Affair* and *Today Tonight*, were the most popular, with *The 7.30 Report* only watched by 38.6% of respondents. Of the one-hour programs, the commercial network *60 Minutes* was the most popular with 60.0% of respondents indicating they watched this program, compared to 46.4% reporting they watched *Four corners*.

**Table 7.4: Newsmagazine television program use**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The 7.30 report</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A current affair</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Today tonight</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
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<td>50.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Four corners</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>99.3</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>60 Minutes</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>40.7</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>99.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7.5 shows how different demographic groups rated each program as a source of information.

**Table 7.5: Average rating (1–10) of each program by respondents with and without children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>The 7.30 report</th>
<th>A current affair</th>
<th>Today tonight</th>
<th>Four corners</th>
<th>60 Minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Mean 7.09</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>7.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 35</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>Mean 7.26</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>7.81</td>
<td>6.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mean 7.15</td>
<td>6.08</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>6.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 54</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.5 shows the average ratings for each program given by those with children and those without. The highest rated programs for each are in bold. As can be seen, for those with children, the two long-format programs, *Four Corners* and *60 Minutes* were rated the highest. For those without children, the three programs that aired on commercial networks rated lower than those aired on a non-commercial network. Interestingly, the two highly rated non-commercial programs, *Four Corners* and *60 Minutes*, were those watched by the fewest respondents (see Table 7.4).

Table 7.6 compares the mean rating given to each program; this time across the category of household income. The numbers in bold show that respondents rate the longer-format programs (*Four corners and 60 Minutes*) highly across all income categories, with *60 Minutes* trending upwards as income increases. For all other programs, the mean remains relatively constant across income categories. Interestingly, nearly all of the programs were rated very poorly in the middle income category: $50,000–75,000.
These data provide a background that informs the interview results below, as well as the discussion that follows. An aim of this chapter is to examine if narrative and therefore experiential-based news is viewed by respondents as useful in relation to their current needs. Needs in this sense are related to life course and the management of “everyday” risks. While the above data are not extensive, they indicate that most respondents do watch these programs. Also, while the shorter format, commercially produced programs (A Current Affair and Today Tonight) were rated poorly in comparison to the longer-format flagship current affairs programs (Four Corners and 60 Minutes), respondents were more likely to watch the shorter format programs. The relationship between media use and utility will now be examined further using interviews.
7.2 Media Use Results: Interviews

The following sections present the results of eleven in-depth interviews carried out with respondents who had answered the questionnaire detailed above. The main goal of these interviews was to expand on the responses gathered from the interview and gather more in-depth explanations. These were semi-structured interviews that gathered the following broad data from participants:

- which of the programs of interest to this study they watched and then, perhaps most importantly, why they choose these programs
- what they like or dislike about these programs
- what types of stories they prefer in regard to topic matter
- what type of story they prefer in regard to structure (narrative).

Several other areas were also examined in these interviews, the results of which will be discussed later in this thesis.

7.2.1 Interview Results—Viewing Choices

The initial focus of the interview examined which of the programs of interest the interviewees watched, as well as their individual patterns of consumption; specifically, how often and what factors affected their viewing choices as far as available time and access to the television. The following also serves as an introduction to the respondents.

The following interview results begin with respondents who were part of an older demographic. Younger respondents will be considered in turn. The first two participants are a married couple: Jane is 56 years old and Larry is 61. Both are retired from full-time employment, although they still receive some income from part-time work. They report their income as in the $25,000–50,000 range. They are residents of Sydney’s southwestern suburbs and own their own home, where Larry indulges in his hobby of breeding finches.

At the questionnaire stage of the research both Jane and Larry indicated that they watch all the shows listed and rated them all highly. This preference is reflected in the interview as well, as Jane points out:
we even tape … we watch one like *A Current Affair* and tape the other one [*Today Tonight*] and then through the night when there’s nothing on we’ll go back and watch the other one, cause we’re not really interested in anything else. We don’t um, that’s all we’re interested in really. We always watch *60 Minutes* and we always watch both the current affairs and *The 7.30 report*, we quite often watch that, don’t we.

So Jane and Larry can be considered heavy viewers of television current affairs programs. In Sydney, two of the shows taken into account, *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*, air at the same time of the evening and are in direct competition with one another. Jane and Larry are so committed to viewing these shows that they watch one and record the other and then watch the recorded program later that same day.

Jane and Larry did not restrict their news sources to current affair type programs. They also watched the nightly news, usually at least twice in the one night:

> yep … and the news. We usually watch 7 [Channel 7] then we turn it over to watch the game show at … no, we watch 10 [Channel 10 news] at 5 o’clock and then we switch at 5.30 and watch that game show and then we watch the 6 o’clock news again. Then we watch the two current affairs and then if there’s anything on that we quite like we’ll watch it, then we’ll go back to watching the other current affair – Jane.

Therefore, drawing a picture of the average evening in Jane and Larry’s home, watching the news is a procedure that begins at five in the evening and would take up a minimum of two and a half hours on most nights; more on those nights where other shows like *60 Minutes* or *Four corners* are aired.

When the question was posed about why they like to watch both *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*, the answer was simple and direct:

> I just think they keep you up to date with what’s going on – Larry.

When asked if there were any particular stories that they remember from these shows, or any that ‘stick in their mind’, neither Larry nor Jane could immediately give any examples; this inability was possibly due to the large number of stories their viewing habits would expose them to on a daily basis.

When Jane and Larry were asked more specific questions about the types of stories they prefer in these programs, they were able to give some initial indication of their preferences. Asked if they liked stories that were “consumer based”—that is, stories that
tested certain products or presented a story on a product—their initial response suggested they did not particularly invest in these stories:

Oh, I think those consumer-based ones; I don’t really take a lot of notice of them. I think it’s more the ones um, the true stories about things that’s happened to people. How the public have rallied around and helped them and things like that I think – Jane.

So at first it would seem that Jane and Larry are not interested in consumer-based stories and presumably don’t view this type of information as relatable to their own risk biographies. However, further along in the interview, they were asked if there were any stories that ‘had changed their behaviour’ in any way. The question was not specific as to type of story but interestingly it was a product-based story that Jane and Larry brought up, despite previously suggesting they had no real interest in these types of stories:

Oh, we probably have, though I can’t think of any at the moment but yeah, I think one particular one was on washing powder, on which was the best to buy and it wasn’t necessarily the dearest one, it was ‘Surf’, which is quite a reasonable price and I think I’ve always tried to go for that brand. That’s one I can think of – Jane.

While Jane uses this story as an example, it is not really an admittance of changed behaviour as Jane explains that the recommended washing powder was the one she already uses. It is, however, a story that has obviously had some type of effect on Jane. Even though it does not represent a story that changed behaviour, it is a story that has ‘influenced’ Jane.

After offering this example, Jane was asked if she could recall how the story was presented. The hope was that Jane and Larry would begin to discuss a preference for stories that relied on either an expert opinion or a character/narrative-driven opinion. Their answer at this stage was unclear:

yeah, they washed clothes and tested it and showed the top brands and all those real expensive ones and they weren’t as good as what the ah, ‘Surf’ and the cheaper ones um, ‘Surf’ and I forget what the other one was now, but um, they were better-quality washing powder than what the real expensive ones, I remember – Larry

The answer was slightly unclear in regard to the structure of the information presented. A discussion of this topic would have to wait until later in the interview in the case of Jane and Larry.
The next interview respondents are also a retired couple and therefore part of the same demographic as Jane and Larry above, Margaret and Roger. Margaret is 60 and admits to spending most of her time either looking after her husband or her grandchildren, of which she has four ranging in age from 7 to 15. Margaret’s husband Roger is 68 years old and a retired tradesman. They own their own home, also in south-western Sydney. It is the same house they have lived in for the last 39 years and where they raised their two children, neither of whom are living at home. Neither Margaret nor Roger are currently employed and report their income as being <$25,000.

Both Margaret and Roger indicated at the questionnaire stage that they watched *A Current Affair, Today Tonight* and *60 Minutes* regularly; both rated *60 Minutes* slightly higher than the other two programs, even though they rated the latter relatively highly. Interestingly, Margaret and Roger were subscribers to pay television, which, in Australia, carries several 24-hour news channels as reflected in their interview results:

> If I get a chance to I’ll watch Channel 10 news of a night, when [Roger’s] not watching the other shows. Then I’ll watch seven or nine cause I’ll usually get up and start with tea. Um, I don’t watch much of the, I do a little bit of sky news, but I’m not home that often now so… – Margaret.

Focussing on what attracts them to these programs, Margaret, on further questioning, revealed that she watches both *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*, though her viewing regularity varies. Margaret, as can be seen, was unclear about which particular program she watches at 6.30 pm (remembering that *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight* air at the same time in Sydney). Rather than watching one and recording the other like our previous respondents, Margaret switched between the two during the program:

> I switch it from one to the other cause if it’s something that’s not interesting on one side I’ll switch it to the other. Usually they have same flaming thing – Margaret.

> So you see the same stories on both? – Interviewer.

> Yes – Margaret.

Similar to the earlier respondents in this same demographic (Jane and Larry), Margaret invests a fair bit of her time in viewing these two shows. Her husband Roger does not show the same level of interest. When asked about the same programs Roger responded:
Not too often … I don’t watch it … I’ll watch it when [Margaret] watches it … not real interested in it … Mainly because the channels have got ads on em, seven and nine have both got ads on em … I don’t like ads – Roger.

Roger, it would seem, does watch these shows but reportedly it is mainly due to the fact that his wife is watching them and they are a one-television household. This, however, does not mean that Roger ignores the stories they present nor does it mean that he is immune to the same influences as other respondents, as we will see later. Margaret, however, is quite aware of what attracts her to these programs:

Well, things that can happen to people, we wouldn’t know about, but they ask people to ring up with the stories to say, well, this has happened to me etc. and then they find out it’s … whatever it is, may have happened to a lot of other people so there must be a flaw in something. You know … a certain subject of ummm … I think it’s just that it’s a variety. I know a time there they showed a real estate agent in umm … Tasmania. They were buying blocks of land or houses and that for next to nothing up the top part of Tassie [Tasmania] and a lot of people went over there because it was so much cheaper and just changed their whole lifestyle, of selling up here and moving down there because it’s a lot cheaper, easier to buy and it’s more like a umm, a rural area. That suits some, you know. Probably a lot of people wouldn’t have read things like that in the paper. If they seen it there on the TV, if it interests them they can go and look into it and do it.

Not only is Margaret aware of what it is about these programs that appeals to her, she also makes a connection between the stories these shows present and their appeal to other people. As we can see from the above, this appeal is linked to the utility of the information. The other important point that the above example reveals is that this interest begins to shed some light on the effects of information structure as this type of story could well be one that is narrative based; that is, told through characters who are experiencing the events. This topic will be explored further shortly, and we will return to Margaret and this story to examine their story in more depth.

Other respondents in this older demographic report similarly. Martha, who is also a married retiree who watches both Today Tonight and A Current Affair (watches one live and records the other) was asked if she had made any decisions based on what she had seen on these programs. Martha also indicated that she had changed the washing powder she used due to a story she had seen:

Aah … Soap powder. I used to stick to one soap powder but then I tried different ones.
Martha indicated that since she and her husband had retired she was always looking for ways to save money and she felt these programs were very useful in this regard. Once again there is a strong link between needs and information preference.

The result presentation now moves to a different demographic. The five respondents introduced above were all retirees from a similar age group and location. The next respondent is quite different: Susan is a 38-year-old married mother of one. She has a six-year-old daughter who has recently begun primary school. Both Susan and her husband work full time and are paying off a mortgage; they have a household income in the $25,000–50,000 range. They live in the west of Sydney in a quiet suburban street. They are friends with many of their neighbours and reportedly enjoy the suburban lifestyle.

At the questionnaire stage, Susan indicated that she only watched one of the programs listed, that being A Current Affair, which she rated as an excellent source of information. This preference was something she elaborated on while during interview:

Well basically the only thing I watch is A Current Affair and a bit of news, that’s about it … yeah, it’s probably just time really. It’s just time issues from having a child and for me it’s come home, cook, the news is on in the background and by the time I have finished cooking A Current Affair is on, and I would rather watch that than The Simpsons – Susan.

And you get a chance to sit down while you’re eating? – Interviewer.

Yeah, so that’s just perfect timing, it’s my eating time and after that it’s really homework time, bath time, so that’s the only reason I don’t get to watch anything else really – Susan.

When asked what she liked about A Current Affair Susan also talked about the functions that she considers the program to carry out:

I just like the way they bring out topics of what’s happening. I think a lot of corruption would go unnoticed if it wasn’t for A Current Affair … and they also find medical breakthroughs that people are trying and no-one will listen to, whether it be that Doctor Holt in Perth or there’s that guy in Adelaide where they won’t fund his research for skin cancer and that’s just by injecting a glucose or something into the skin—and it works, yeah – Susan.

This statement illustrates Susan’s view of the utility of this type of program. Once again, the program and the type of stories it presents have a particular function. As with Margaret, there is a sense that the respondent is indicating that it is a role that other
sections of the media are failing to fulfil. This was not the only role filled by *A Current Affair* according to Susan. When asked about stories about products Susan said:

Oh yeah, the websites for sales … cause there’s a few of us that are like, I’m not renovating but a couple of the girls at work are like ‘oh, did you see that’ and you sort of pass it around. Like if you know someone who’s doing something and you see a website like, cause I know we’ve got a couple of girls in the office who like their designer clothes and I saw that website, they’re advertising the websites to go and find them on and I’m like ‘oh, did you see that last night, that website that was on there?’ I think we all keep an eye out for each other and if there’s something on that relates to kids or … we’ll pass it around the office and we’ll say ‘did you see that?’—get that information or… – Susan.

And would you say that those people who are sharing that information in your office um, are at similar stages of their life … they’ve all got kids or… – Interviewer.

Yeah. Cause the younger ones in the office wouldn’t watch it. It’s all the mums and all the grandparents in our office that are all… – Susan.

Once again the respondent focusses on the “use” of this program; more specifically the use of this type of story. What is perhaps more interesting is that the perceived utility of these programs is increasingly related to the consumer stories, as reflected in the responses of other interviewees in this same demographic. Mitchell, who is 29 and married with two children, both under the age of eight, said:

[My wife] watches those shows a fair bit … especially ah … *A Current Affair* and yeah … I watch it too. It’s not too bad, you know. At least the stuff they put on is pretty useful.

When asked about any decisions based on information from these shows, Mitchell said:

Aah, not me … but I think [my wife] watches for the um … to watch for stuff she has to buy like groceries and stuff … I can’t think of anything off the top of my head but … yeah.

A third interviewee in this group was Rhonda, a 31-year-old mother of one, who also indicated that she started watching more of these programs after getting married and having children. What is a clear pattern is that different people are watching these shows for different reasons and are also finding different types of stories personally important based on their own particular biography.

Turning to another demographic segment, young and single people, there is a different set of responses evident. One interviewee is Mario, who at the time of interview was a
21-year-old university student. Mario is single, has no children and lives in the family home with his parents. As a student, Mario reports his income as zero.

In answering the questionnaire, Mario reported that he does not regularly watch any of the news media in question. Later in the questionnaire, he did indicate that he watched all the programs mentioned except for Today Tonight, though for all these programs the frequency of watching them was ‘hardly ever’.

During the interview, when discussing these programs, Mario’s stance was cynical or pessimistic about not only the content and utility of these programs, but also of those that watched them as well:

It’s scary. Well I think as long as people keep the bible, you know. What happens is so appealing, you know. I don’t mind if it’s on but just too many people take it seriously – Mario.

But why do you think that they take it seriously though? – Interviewer.

Because it appeals to them. They know how to appeal to that … to the people that watch it … You know, they’re giving them you know, what they want to hear—how to save money, how to avoid these people and what these people are like … dry cleaners and the little small fish—everyday stuff – Mario.

When pushed further on the subject of his own viewing habits, Mario did offer some more in-depth explanation of his own use of the programs he watched:

Well, Four corners that we’ve seen at uni, we sometimes watch the Four corners programs. But, um 60 Minutes I sometimes, not the whole show, I can’t watch it from beginning to end, but some um, segments are interesting to watch – Mario.

Okay, so what sort of segments do you think, what sort of segments appeal to you, what sort of segments on a show like that is what you want to see? Any? What are the sorts of ones that you go, yeah I better watch that – Interviewer.

Yeah, um, well for example, they sometimes have the criminal, to do with … to compare it. Or they have something psychological, though it’s usually something social. Um, in general, there was the one on police corruption, but that was Four Corners – Mario.

Do you think you’d be more likely, if you saw something like that on Four Corners okay, but it was obviously due to the different formats of the show, presented in a different way, do you think you would be more likely to take that as valid information compared to these other shows? – Interviewer.

I actually would give it more credibility, I wouldn’t say valid but, give it more credibility. For one, I don’t think Four Corners would have a show on how to make
money like *Today Tonight*, though I can understand why *Today Tonight* does it. I’m sure there’s probably a lot of working class people that would watch it, having problems, maybe in debt, yeah. Luckily I’m not in debt … to me, the reason I don’t like the news is that I know that it’s never clearly objective, cause it’s a business, and they have aims to promote certain products and certain ways they don’t want to incriminate people that give them money and this absolutely biases the information. Unfortunately people don’t see that, which is a shame – Mario.

What this, albeit lengthy, exchange demonstrates is first that Mario, while cynical of some newsmagazine programs such as *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*, still makes viewing choices for a specific use, in this case related to his identity and needs as a university student. Other respondents have shown a similar belief in the utility and, importantly, the validity of the news programs they use, and Mario is no different. This trend continues with our next respondent who shares more than a few demographic characteristics with Mario, though not all.

Mark is slightly older than Mario at 35; he is single, has no children and lives in the family home with his mother and younger brother. Mark works as a cabinet maker and lists his income as in the $25,000–50,000 range. The programs Mark watches with the most regularity are, once again, *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*, which in both the questionnaire and the interview he indicated watching most nights. What is interesting is the fact that in the questionnaire he rated both these shows as reasonably poor as a source of information while rating the other shows mentioned much higher, even though he watches them much less regularly. As you will see from Mark’s interview, he, like Mario before him, holds a cynical view of these programs; however, his motivation to watch them may come as a surprise because Mark articulates a response that other participant’s answers have only hinted at. While remaining cynical, when asked which programs he watches, Mark points out that he watches these shows for what he considers to be their entertainment value:

Um, *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*, I surf between the two – Mark.

Is that cause of your mum? – Interviewer.

No, it’s the remote and it’s mine – Mark.

Do you reckon you would watch both if your mum wasn’t there? – Interviewer.

Um, yeah, cause if like, I like to know what crap story is on the other one. If the other one is more tabloidish [sic], I’ll stop and watch that. ‘Casanova rips off everyone in
Queensland”—‘Zimbabwean money laundering’ and shit, yeah, it just depends on the story – Mark.

The favouring of what Mark considers to be the tabloid nature of the programs relates to the nature of the story and its entertainment value, which is a position he reiterates throughout the interview:

Yeah, more entertaining than informative. It’s been a long time since the programs were informative. When they first came out they were informative, like you’d get expanded information on the news, now you get all the puff stories that the news won’t handle, like irate parents calling for the ban of any dog over 12 inches, um, school children carrying guns, um … yeah the more inflammatory the more likely I am to stop and check it out. I take it all with a grain of salt though – Mark.

The above comment suggests that the use Mark has for this type of news is, at this stage, one of entertainment. This position allows Mark to preserve a cynical view of the information contained in these stories while justifying his persistent viewing habits. It is interesting that at this early stage of the journey through the stories of these respondents, Mark is the first to overtly comment on the fact that, as no doubt intended by the producers, these programs are also designed to be entertaining.

The above discussion serves as an introduction to the media audience members who provide a voice for this part of the research and whose story of media use is going to provide us with the colours of our picture, as the introductions above have already begun to do. We now turn our attention to more specific questions relating to information structure.

7.2.2 Short Story Length versus In-depth Coverage

This section discusses form or story structure and audience preferences. As discussed in section 3.2, all of these programs present longer stories than regular nightly news programs. Three of these programs, *A Current Affair, Today Tonight, The 7:30 Report*, present two to three stories across a program length of 30 minutes. The other two, *60 Minutes and Four Corners*, present longer format stories. *60 Minutes* generally presents three stories across a one hour program, and *Four Corners* presents one story approximately 40 minutes in length.
To examine how respondents view the above structural differences, this section continues to build the individual media use biography of the respondents outlined above, introducing more as required as will be the trend throughout this entire chapter. Returning to Jane and Larry, you will remember they were quite heavy news media users. They watch both the shorter and longer-format programs, and indicated if they have a preference for either arrangement, and whether they feel they gain more from one or the other:

Well, *60 Minutes* is a little bit different to the other ones I think, they’re sort of more um, there’s more of a story. The other ones is basically something that’s happened on that day – Larry.

Yeah, that’s right, so really it’s two different things aren’t they – Jane.

We probably get the most out of *A Current Affair* if you wanted to know what we got the most out of. Probably cause we watch both current affairs at night – Larry.

But when you say you get more out of that what do you mean? – Interviewer.

More variety than what you do out of *60 Minutes* – Jane.

Well, *60 Minutes* might even do a story on overseas or something like that, where the other stuff is just what’s happening basically in Australia – Larry.

So do you think the *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight* stuff is more relevant? – Interviewer.

I think so – Jane.

Yeah, I think so – Larry.

For Jane and Larry, the importance of structure in as much as it relates to the length of the story, can only be measured in terms of how relevant they perceive the information to be. Relevance for them is measured in terms of geography and immediacy. The stories that are more relevant are those about events happening most recently and closest to them.

Margaret and Roger were also asked about their preference for short or in-depth stories, indicating that they preferred longer stories, but that this preference had limits:

I think a more in-depth story after, like, you can get too much of it early in the piece when you getting hit from all channels, all the same thing again – Margaret.

It’s a change, yeah … it’s a change because I think in certain things you do need more information about things – Roger.
umm, some others not like … yes quick news on the thing, what’s happening and all the rest but, medical research, medical um, drugs and drugs they’re bringing out ahh … how it’s going to affect people, the new cancer, ahh chemotherapy they’re injecting into the skin which is, and that was informative … I don’t know what I seen that on now – Margaret.

While Roger and Margaret give some weight to longer-format stories as being more informative, they recognise limits to this. To them, stories are not as useful when they offer too much information, similar to how Jane and Larry indicate that relevance of the information is quite subjective.

Moving on to the group discussed who were younger and had children, a similar trend was evident in their replies to the same questioning. When asked if she preferred short or long-format stories, Susan said:

For me I think A Current Affair has got an even mix, it’s not all heartache whereas 60 Minutes, you tend to find really, really bad, sad stories and I tend to find that it’s just too much for me to take so … yeah, I would always avoid watching 60 Minutes unless there’s something I’ve seen specifically advertised and I wanted to hear about it. But I tend to find that it gets too much into the, you know, they want to get right in depth in a war story or they want to get … there doesn’t seem to be much positive stories, it’s always going into the nitty-gritty … so for me that’s the only reason probably why I don’t watch 60 Minutes – Susan.

Susan is quite specific about how important relevance is in her program choices. Where earlier she had stated that available time was probably the most decisive factor, relevance of the story plays an important part in her decisions as well:

What about other ones like Four Corners? – Interviewer.

Yeah see, I don’t ever watch the ABC … See, I’d rather watch a documentary on something that’s interesting than watch Four Corners or watch 60 Minutes – Susan.

Have you ever watched The 7.30 report on the ABC, where they do a lot more, um, interview type stuff? They might interview politicians and that sort of stuff – Interviewer.

No, not really. Not being into politics, I’m not really into reading the Australian or anything like that. It doesn’t really interest me – Susan.

Mitchell reported similarly, stating that he generally preferred programs that he considered to have a higher entertainment factor over the longer-format programs. He indicated that he was a fan of sports, for example, so sports would take preference. He did indicate, however, that his wife had watched some specific stories on these longer-
format programs that she had seen advertised and were of specific interest to her, though
he could not remember at the time what these stories were about specifically.

Mario, from the single/childless demographic had a slightly different view of the formats
available. When asked about the longer-format programs he watched, namely *Four Corners*, Mario focussed on the credibility of the program as a whole:

> I actually would give it more credibility, I wouldn’t say valid but, give it more
credibility. For one I don’t think *Four Corners* would have a show on how to make
money like *Today Tonight*, though I can understand why *Today Tonight* does it. I’m
sure there’s probably a lot of working class people that would watch it, having
problems, maybe in debt, yeah. Luckily I’m not in debt – Mario.

Obviously, Mario holds some strong views about the nature of these programs. The
different format of the show was of less concern to Mario than was the type of story.
Clearly, relevance was once again an important issue as well.

Another respondent from both the single and childless groups is Veronica, a 20-year-old
university student, who indicated that she did not trust these programs as reliable sources
of information. Mark, on the other hand, had an entirely different view on these programs.
When asked if he ever watched any of the longer-format programs, Mark said:

> No I can’t say that I do. I was never a fan, it was all ummm, too highbrow – Mark.

Too highbrow? – Interviewer.

Yeah, I hate to say it. Too highbrow – Mark.


It’s just the way it was, I mean, like you sit there and the stories are dumb enough for
everybody but it was just that, they took themselves … it was like so over the top
serious and that, and the stories just didn’t, like at times just didn’t… – Mark.

The programs are seen by Mark as too ‘serious’ or ‘highbrow’, which is not a reflection
of a lack of understanding; rather, it relates to the particular use Mark has so far claimed
to make of these programs—entertainment.
7.3 Discussion

Summarising the results of this chapter, several points are clear from the data presented. The responses, both to the questionnaires and the interviews, show a pattern that relates media use to utility. There were clear patterns shown in the questionnaire data that linked certain demographic variables such as age, children and education to consistent choices about which programs rated highly and were watched more often. Young, single respondents without children were less likely to rate these narrative-based programs as a good source of information. Older respondents raising children were much more likely to rate shows like Today Tonight and A Current Affair highly, as were the oldest demographic—those that were retired. The longer-format programs received variable support among all groups, with those who had an interest in coverage of stories they felt were more “serious”, such as students and professionals, rating these shows somewhat higher than other groups. The interview data presented a detailed investigation of this relationship between need and demand. The results of the interviews showed a similar pattern with most respondents indicating strongly that their viewing choices were determined by their current needs. A need could be as simple as entertainment, as was the case with one of the respondents from the young and single demographic. This need is nonetheless based on the respondent’s age/life stage.

Other respondents highlighted different needs that were related to life-course quite clearly, especially in the case of consumer-based information. Retirees were quick to point out information they had used based on healthcare or saving money on products. Middle-aged respondents identified slightly different needs, focussing more on issues they viewed as important to their family as well as issues whose utility was social. For example, some respondents acknowledged that information from these shows was required to take part in social interactions and conversations. The above suggests these may be the actions of a reflexive audience who are utilising information which allows them to navigate or avoid potential “everyday” risks without recourse to expert knowledge when gaining information from narrative based news sources. It is a type of information consumption shaped by reflexivity where ‘individuals must produce, stage, and cobble together their biographies themselves’ (Beck et al., 1994, p. 13).
These findings support the theoretical position outlined earlier in this thesis. They raise the possibility that the popularity of these shows is due to the reflexive or particularly late modern information demands of the audience. The findings show a practical approach taken by viewers who choose the information sources most suited to their needs, often informed in a general way by life stage. Respondents were quick to indicate that they prefer current affairs programs that present information allowing them to navigate their everyday lives, including choices they make to avoid negative outcomes. This finding suggests a risk-averse audience utilising information about potential risks where there is little chance for them to rely on traditional structural patterns for guidance.

There is an important distinction to make between relevance of media information driven by reflexive modernity and a more general or external relevance attributable to general interest. News audiences may be expected to favour news information that affects them directly; however in this research this interest has been linked to the narrative structure and subsequent experiential nature of the information. Therefore, the experiential presentation of risk information is a driver of relevance in reflexive modernity for risk-averse individuals.

This chapter has demonstrated the relationship between the narrative news information and the subject position of the late modern viewer. The findings thus far have focussed on narrative, experience and relevance. Discussions of late modernity and reflexivity have failed to answer the related question of authority and claims to truth, assuming the above relevance of non-expert knowledge without examining the relationship further. Drawing on further interview results, the next chapter challenges the usefulness of this assumption and examines the notion of authority in detail.
Chapter 8: Risk, Audiences, and Parrhesiastic Truth Games

Further to the examination of narrative and audience members presented in chapter seven, the conclusions of the theoretical section of this thesis, chapter four, five, and six suggested that the audience must evaluate the truth claims of narrative-based information based on criteria other than scientific and rational legitimacy. This evaluation was considered to be an evaluation of the speaker, rather than an analysis of the information—or as Foucault saw it, an evaluation of the status of the speaker rather than the rational validity of the information (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).

The theoretical position developed through chapters four, five, and six, argues that the late modern audience is one that does not necessarily invest authority in the truth as presented by expert discourse but rather requires authority to be invested in another type of discourse, namely experiential or narrative-based information.

The risk society position suggests unproblematically that in many instances, disenchantment with expert knowledge and a reflexive audience both result in individuals who are left to navigate the world through a constant process of evaluating competing knowledge (Beck, 1992, 2006, 2009a). This relationship between reflexivity and truth is one that has not received a great deal of attention. However, a reflexive media audience would still subject information to an evaluation of its truth claims. In modernity, the expert assumed a position as truth-teller that was presumably difficult for the audience to bring into question. What is required to answer this question is an understanding of this relationship between the audience and the media in relation to truth telling as an activity. The discussion of the work of Michel Foucault in chapter six was an attempt at addressing this question.

This chapter examines how experiential knowledge may attain authority. It does so by examining truth-telling in risk communication in detail, and by returning to the interview data introduced in chapter seven. The focus of the following analysis is the notion of authority or truth telling as well as the role of vicarious experience and experiential proxies.
8.1 Expert Voice versus Character Voice—Initial Explorations

To summarise, the interview data presented to this point show that audience members engage information they find to be of a specific use. This use is best explained as related to life stage and personal biography. The fact that audiences selectively choose information that relates to their particular needs and circumstances is undoubtedly not a contemporary phenomenon. While this finding hints at a reflexive use of the media, in itself such a relationship reveals little about the reflexive nature of this consumption.

Thus, the interview analysis presented in this chapter focusses on the relationship between characteristics of media use or consumption and authority. The dichotomy of authority that will be discussed below is one of “expert” versus “lay”. The term authority deserves its place because in this thesis it refers to a type of power the audience views as legitimate. Perceived legitimacy on behalf of media users is central to this analysis.

The programs focussed upon in this research have several available ways in which they could present information, especially when it comes to who they rely on to convey said information. When narrative structure of the like discussed in chapter four is the method employed, it is often the characters of the story who are the authority—those who relay the facts. In contrast, rather than letting characters whose authority rests in their actual experiencing of the events convey the facts, these programs could and sometimes do rely on someone who would be more readily recognised as an expert. For example, a scientist or laboratory worker might be employed in a story when a product is being tested; an academic, often identified by an office full of books used as a backdrop to the interview, might give comment on a social issue. The question is whether audiences see one or both of these as legitimate dimensions of authority.

The older demographic will again serve as a starting point. I asked Jane and Larry fairly specifically whether they thought that a story that had opinion from a recognised expert somehow seemed more valid. The question did not specifically mention what type of story this applied to, but both Jane and Larry focussed on consumer product testing:

Oh, I reckon the way that they test it. When they test them it shows out better – Larry.

 Probably the experts that are testing them have special, more proper technology on how to test it I suppose, than just taking people’s word for it – Jane.
Cause there’s quite a lot of stories on there where they come on and test all the stuff. They show you that the dearer product is not always the best – Larry.

Jane and Larry both have a preference for an expert testing of products. When pushed further, their reasons for this preference became clearer:

Do you think um, you don’t need specific examples but do you think, in general, you would watch a story that didn’t have experts like that? Like, using for example that story on washing powder, and they were testing it but instead of having experts testing it they had families testing it? A family did their washing for a week with different ones but they didn’t have an expert telling you ‘this is our scientific test and the results’, do you think it would still carry weight? – Interviewer.

Well, it probably would carry weight, but ah … I suppose when you look at it, if people were washing it may not be quite as effective as the other way. I don’t know… – Larry.

Sometimes you wonder whether they’re getting paid, the families to do the thing, whether they’re getting paid to say, you know, this product’s better – Jane.

And what do you think, what would you rather see … how would you rather see them do it? – Interviewer.

I think probably have experts do the testing than just anybody – Jane.

They’re ah, I don’t know … they’re not gonna [sic] try to push a product that they don’t … unless they really have to, you know what I mean. But they would more probably get up and tell the truth about it – Larry.

Jane and Larry both have a preference for an expert opinion because they consider an expert to be more objective than a layperson. They seem to hold a view of the expert that sees them as impartial. Beyond this Jane and Larry acknowledge—particularly when it comes to the idea of “testing”—that experts hold privileged knowledge and expertise. They are capable of performing the task in a much more reliable way and are, according to Jane and Larry, not as prone to giving inaccurate or biased results.

Margaret and Roger were also asked about their preference. When asked the same question as Jane and Larry, both were unsure at first:

If I thought the expert was on my side, I’d prefer to hear it from the expert. Then again, if it was buying real estate and I thought he was on the side of the real estate agent, I’d sooner have the people who bought land there who told me what it was like. So many people buy land or buy things and after they buy them it turns out that they are no good. – Roger.

Like Jane and Larry, Margaret and Roger do place value in the opinion of experts; however, unlike Jane and Larry, they are less optimistic about an expert’s ability to
remain objective. It is important to note the expressed view of experts being on the audience member’s side. Margaret and Roger are not showing a preference specifically for expert opinion or lay opinion; rather their preference is for the opinion that will serve them best as users of the information. The information that serves them best is privileged knowledge regardless of who possesses it. In this way, expert and character voices are interchangeable; their authority comes from how well they serve the audience. This pattern was also evident in the responses from others in this demographic. Peter, a 67-year-old retiree said of experts:

I think it depends, you know. I’ve seen some experts on there … well, they seem to know their stuff like … but how do I know they’re telling the truth?

Susan was also asked about expert and lay opinion. Once again her views differed slightly from those above. First, she stated that programs such as A Current Affair serve an important role in general. She also attributed some of the usefulness and validity of these programs to celebrity figureheads such as the host:

And what about the, what sort of stories do you like as far as the way they tell them, you know, do you like say … if they are trying to tell you something about a crooked salesman or something how do you think is the best way for them to tell you about that?

– Interviewer.

I prefer Ray Martin, Ray Martin’s way of doing it rather than um, who’s the guy with the beard … um… – Susan.


Yeah, yeah … he was way too aggressive, you’ve got to … like you can tell that Ray Martin mightn’t terribly agree with someone but at least he holds back that emotion. I think the news is a lot to blame for the riots that are happening at the moment, there’s too much anger and I think you’ve got someone who’s powerful like that who’s going out voicing their opinion, like Deryn Hinch, that would just inflame it even worse – Susan.

Susan obviously invests in the authority of the show in general but when asked further, she had this to say about her preference for expert or lay opinion:

both … both… – Susan.

You think you would need both? – Interviewer.

Yeah – Susan.
Do you know why? Can you put a finger on why you’d need both in that sense? – Interviewer.

Um … I think for me the doctor just backs it up. It’s great to have parents but … you know, like, you can speak to one parent and they’ll swear to God that, like, miracle water works, speak to the other parent and no it doesn’t – Susan.

See, I’m more into alternative therapies but then as you say for someone … for a doctor to say you know, well yes at the end of the day, literally there is this much sugar, you know what I mean. It’s just nice to have an expert, whether it be a doctor or whether it be someone else but it just gives you that option to go … you know … yeah – Susan.

And do you think that if they did the same story but they just had a doctor … just had an expert saying you should do this and you should do that, would you still listen to it? – Interviewer.

No, I like to have both. I like to have both cause it’s kind of like that Doctor Holt you know, coming back to that, you’ve got him saying yes this works and people it works and then you’ve got the experts saying no it doesn’t, so still at the end of the day you still need both I think because it gives you that option of going who do you believe more. Cause at the end of the day you can watch those cellulite treatments when they did that program that time, and they put those five different people trying it and at the end of the day neither one of them did any better. And it was the same with that diet program that they did. So I think yeah … I think you’ve got to have a mix of both to give people yeah … a better choice whether they want to believe or not rather than just putting one [expert or non-expert perspective] on – Susan.

Susan, like Margaret and Roger, sees neither an expert or a character as completely objective, nor their authority as completely legitimate. Rather, there is an evaluation of how well their opinion serves her interests. Also important is the question of how the program chooses to use the expert or lay voice. As seen in Susan’s response, again like Margaret and Roger, certain types of stories seem to lend themselves to audiences preferring more expert opinion than others.

From the younger demographic, Mario was less able to formulate a view of this dichotomy. As mentioned earlier, Mario has a disparaging view of the validity of the information presented by these programs and this is also the case when considering how Mario perceives the legitimacy of differing types of authority:

Okay what about um … I’m always interested to hear what people think about this idea that in shows, and it can be Four Corners … you were saying there was those re-enactments, do you think that is more useful to you as a viewer, to see a story presented in that way were they’re using re-enactments or they’re using characters that are involved rather than a story that would just be presenting the facts in a very straightforward way without sort of giving you the story or the back story … it might be some sort of expert telling you – Interviewer.
Me personally, I would say yeah it does, because they do keep you, your attention … um … they do but I very rarely see shows where as you said the other format, without you know, some sort of graphics or swapping one scene from another … I very rarely see that … I can’t remember the last time I did – Mario.

And do you think, hypothetically, if you were watching a show like *Four Corners* or *Today Tonight* whatever it might be, that it might be using experts to validate the information … do you think that would make it more meaningful to you? – Interviewer.

No, because for one I don’t see them as experts. I mean if I was in a position I would most certainly deny having an interview with *Today Tonight*, I mean what they do with information so I really doubt that they are professional or why they are doing it. They aren’t professionals – Mario.

Here Mario in the first instance highlights that the use of the character voice serves to at least hold his attention because he has a potential use for the information. Second, Mario is totally dismissive of any expert who would give their voice to these programs. He does not see them as a legitimate authority at all; in fact it is quite the opposite.

Mark was asked about experts and expert knowledge and gave a somewhat different opinion. Mark had recounted at some length a story he had seen on *A Current Affair* that had evaluated various men’s razors. This story provided, in part, the basis for Mark’s evaluation of expert and lay authority:

Let’s say you were going to buy new razors based on that show, what do you think is more likely to convince you, the scientific results or the man on the street’s opinion, what do you think is going to be more influential to you? – Interviewer.

Oh, price. The program did tell you the price and at the end of it they’ve gone ‘oh this is the one that rated highest’ and then they’ve showed you the price. It could have been a commercial for it except that they put the price in … to the other end of the extreme you’ve got the guy who had to use disposable Bic yellow razors, right, and at the end of the week the guy’s gone, ‘well usually I’d use the max pro with the pivoting head and stuff, but these were alright’. The guy didn’t have a bad word to say about the 99c for 15 razors … he might have said they were a bit rough but he said once you get used to them you’re alright. They sort of ask them loaded questions, they don’t ask them ‘well, what was your personal opinion?’ they sort of go ‘well, how was the shave?’ – did you get a clean shave?’ and I mean well, if I decided to use a broken bottle and the end of it I’d have a good shave, I’d be a mess, but I’d have a good shave, you know what I mean. You can get a good shave out of a crap razor; you’ve just got to use it twice. Yeah, personally I don’t think that would have interested me either way – Mark.

Where Mario was cynical about the expert voice, Mark is just as cynical about the objectivity of character voices as well. Mario’s lack of trust in experts is motivated by a disbelief in their objectivity, Marks lack of trust in the authority of characters is driven not by a lack of their personal objectivity but a disbelief in how objective they could be
within the structural confines of the story itself. Therefore, for Mark, like the previous respondents, the key moment was a personal judgement and evaluation of the authority of the opinions presented. Such a moment should be considered as a reflexive moment in information consumption that is independent of the information being based on expert or lay opinion. This area requires further discussion, so the next section examines additional interview results that also discuss the expert–lay authority dichotomy in more depth.

8.2 Expert Voice versus Character Voice—Further Exploration

In the previous section it was clear that Jane and Larry saw expert opinion as the most valid type. They indicated strongly that part of the reason for this preference was that, in their view, experts held privileged knowledge. Part of the reason for this view can be gleaned from the following:

Yeah … I think that shows like that make you wary – Jane.

I can’t believe how gullible some people are – Larry.

Yeah that’s right. I think you’ve got to be a bit with yourself and take care yourself with what you get involved in – Jane.

Of course you do – Larry.

Cause there’s so many people out there that want to rip you off – Jane.

But some people are terribly gullible – Larry.

Jane and Larry start out the above exchange saying that the types of programs discussed in this research instil the desire to be careful or wary. Their recounting quickly changes to a commentary, based on their viewing of these programs, that some people, presumably those whose story has been told, are gullible. This recognition indicates, at least in the case of Jane and Larry, that these programs have a reflexive utility and a responsibilising effect.

Rhonda holds a similar view about the people represented in as far as they were seen as responsible; however she is more likely to also see them as victims. Margaret and Roger indicate that more relevant information can be garnered from the use of character opinion:
And watching that, do you think you learnt more because it was told through the people themselves? – Interviewer.

The people themselves told the story … yeah, yes – Margaret.

Why do you think you learnt more like that? – Interviewer.

For me personally because you see them there and you can see the expression and you can see their way of saying it and whether it’s the questions being asked I don’t know, but it was a lot to do with the drought, how it’s affected the umm … the people. How it affected them how a lot of the farms now have got to give up um because they haven’t um, they can’t keep coping with debt – Margaret.

Margaret specifically mentions that she learns more because she can ‘see their expression’ and ‘their way of saying it’ as reasons why she values this type of story (character driven).

Margaret and Roger were also asked why they thought that these types of programs were popular in general and said:

A variety of um … everyday occurrence I suppose … or things that happen – Margaret.

So, what do you mean by everyday? – Interviewer.

Well, things that can happen to people, we wouldn’t know about, but they ask people to ring up with the stories to say, well, this has happened to me etcetera and then they find out it’s … whatever it is, may have happened to a lot of other people so there must be a flaw in something. You know … a certain subject of ummm … I think it’s just that it’s a variety. I know a time there they showed a real estate agent in umm Tasmania. They were buying blocks of land or houses and that for next to nothing up the top part of Tassie [Tasmania] and a lot of people went over there because it was so much cheaper and just changed the whole lifestyle, of selling up here and moving down there because a lot cheaper, easier to buy and it’s more like a umm, rural area. That suits some, you know. Probably a lot of people wouldn’t have read things like that in the paper. If they seen it there on the TV if it interests them they can go and look into it and do it – Margaret.

And why do you think it would interest them? Not so much the topic of the story, why do you think the story like that, telling the story of what other people have done, why do you think that would interest people? Do you think that would interest people more than just a factual recounting of “there is land available in Tasmania”? – Interviewer.

Yeah, I think when you see it and see people move and going there well, you know it’s a true story. People are doing it or are planning to do it or have done it. When you buy a home and that, a few hundred dollars or whatever it was, it’s going to be in the pockets for easy access to a lot of people than, you know … You know it’s true – Margaret.

What if they were telling the same story without that and just having an expert telling you the story, like a real estate agent? – Interviewer.

Well you don’t know whether it’s true or not – Margaret.
As seen in earlier examples, character opinion is seen as legitimate due to the nature of the stories. The interview data reveal that those judged as “everyday people” are those seen as presenting information that is more likely to be true. Margaret too is indicating that this type of media has a reflexive use—people can, and according to Margaret should, “hypothesis test” through these media stories to evaluate the world around them. There is also a sense that Margaret sees these stories as having a responsibilising effect, commenting that people should learn through these stories. Importantly, there is also evidence of evaluations of truth claims based on the teller evident above.

Mitchell also has further beliefs about when an expert opinion is not particularly useful. When asked specifically if there are times when character voice is more reliable, Mitchell said the following:

Probably more like your um … your hard luck stories more so, cause they don’t tend to bring in any experts or anything like that, yeah … those types of stories where someone may be hard done by or someone decided to take a chance on something or can be just something simple like some guy wanted to sell his fruit, um … I think … was he selling his fruit? – Mitchell.

I think he was. He’s got fruit in the back of his house and he thought well rather than let them rot put them out the front and the council want to sting him for selling them on the front yard. You know, that sort of thing you don’t need to have an expert, you know what I mean … yeah. But I think you’ve always got to have, where possible, two sides of the coin. I think that’s … you can’t be too one sided I think. That’s just being responsible for their own show I think. It covers them by showing both sides of the coin – Mitchell.

Do you think if they have stories like that, say the guy with the fruit, and they don’t have um … they’re letting him tell his story and they don’t have that counter-balance, do you think it still carries weight though? – Interviewer.

Well see for them, I guess it puts too much, like if they hadn’t shown the council guy coming in … cause they showed him saying his point of view and that. Like they always do that person and their gripe and they’ll also go and try and get the other. You know how often they’ll say—sorry, the council have declined the interview. So I think it just puts more credibility on them that they haven’t just taken it one sided … otherwise it would be like a nitpicking – Mitchell.

These comments by Mitchell highlight again the reflexive utility of the information in these programs. Earlier, Susan from the same demographic as Mitchell had noted that she felt that you needed both expert and lay opinion. In this example Mitchell is arguing that when that isn’t possible, there needs to be some balance in the story; different points of view need to be considered when looking at an issue. This consumption is reflexive.
because when the viewer is vicariously “hypothesis testing” through the story provided, there is a need to be able to evaluate the information, which is done through whatever means is available to the viewer based on an evaluation of the truth claims of those telling the story based on who they are.

As a closing comment on perceived authority, Mario offered the following, albeit second-hand, anecdote:

My girlfriend’s mum watches it and she is one of those people that, I think, that are influenced by *Today Tonight*, and um, like for example the saving money and that, I remember once [my girlfriend] said that she apparently threw out her frying pans because she saw a segment on *Today Tonight* that frying pans… – Mario.

Did she say anything about it, like what they said or how they said it? – Interviewer.

I wasn’t watching it, she told me that she threw out her frying pans because of the segment on *Today Tonight* – Mario.

### 8.3 Audience Connection to Characters and Vicarious Experience

This section examines how respondents relate to the characters presented in these programs. The focus is on those stories that mainly rely on character voice and therefore contain a largely narrative structure. The aim of this approach is two-fold: first, to examine how this structure relates to the respondents’ perceived authority of the characters; and second assess the reflexive use outlined above and determine if, for these respondents, this reflexivity hinges upon narrative and its identifiable characters acting as a form of vicarious experience for individuals.

Jane and Larry have continuously shown a tendency to favour an expert voice and this preference is reflected in their answers to the question of relating to the characters presented in these stories:

And do you think um, if you saw a story where you could relate to the people, where they were people you could relate to, do you think that would carry more weight for you? Do you think it would be more likely to stick in your mind, that story than if it didn’t have that? – Interviewer.
It’s funny but some stories stick in your mind for some reason, and some don’t, I don’t know why. But um, if it’s that you relate to the person or not, I really don’t know – Larry.

Jane and Larry could not identify a clear connection between themselves and characters presented in the stories they had seen. This result is not surprising given their strong preference for expert opinion. The cause and effect in this relationship are not clear: is it that reliance on the authority of experts precludes identification with characters, or is it the other way around? I would argue that this is a dynamic relationship; however, hearing from other respondents demonstrates this relationship further.

As described earlier, Margaret and Roger made it clear that they could often relate to characters and that they saw this accessibility and proximity as an important aspect of these programs, not just for themselves but for all those watching these programs. They had little difficulty identifying stories that further highlight this:

There was another story about cancer—a doctor in Perth and… – Roger.

Well the actual channel [program] reckoned he had a cure because they had people there who said they’d been cured. But nobody listened to him. Now they’re gonna look into it I think. From the people who said they’d been cured and what they had … they had medical records to say they had cancer in a bad way and that he cured them. So evidently it’s not all bull, it is fact – Roger.

So he has a machine that’s honing in on a cancer. Same with there’s one on tonight. They had a poor old bloke that wanted to put a flag up and he’s been fined 50 thousand cause ahh, by the council regulations he can’t put an Australian flag up – Margaret.

Yeah? – Interviewer.

And he wants to leave it up. So tonight I think, I don’t know if it was on last night … I think it’s on tonight on Channel 7. Umm, the whole streets got flags and stuck them up now – Margaret.

You can’t put a flag up unless you’ve got permission to – Roger.

I think he’s a proud Australian and he wants to go so he probably didn’t realise he had to ask for permission to put a flag up, or it has to be on such a high pole. He just stuck it on, in the front of his place … I don’t know. A proud Australian and he wants to show people that – Margaret.

Margaret and Roger have not yet been particularly clear about why they can relate to these stories so readily.

What is it about that that makes you want to watch it? – Interviewer.
Well I think that a big body that’s having a go at a little person who wants to do something because he’s so proud of being Australian – Margaret.

A fine of 50 thousand seems a bit excessive – Roger.

What about if you saw the same story on the news but they just said, on the normal news, and they just said a new law is being introduced or they just said you have to have council permission to put up a flag, would you still be interested in the story? – Interviewer.

I think it would be outrageous but not as interesting – Margaret.

Would you still be interested in the story? – Interviewer.

Umm, well you’d have to have something there to see. When a person just speaks about it, it doesn’t seem to bring it umm directly to you as being, ummm … how can I put it … a visual effect is better – Margaret.

Margaret and Roger make the point that this type of story, a story in narrative form, has more of an impact. The story is ‘brought directly to you’. It is an interesting use of language, this ‘brought directly to you’—it could be read as creating a link, an emotive link, thus allowing the events to be experienced by the audience vicariously, facilitating the reflexive consumption discussed above. Margaret and Roger were not the only respondents to see it this way.

Susan conveyed something similar when asked if stories that contained identifiable characters had an impact on her:

Do you think um, just using that example again, that story, what about if they did it exactly the same way but instead of having the person whose house it was, whose fruit it was, they just told you about that … if they didn’t really show you a character or show you his story … do you think it would still stick in your mind as much? – Interviewer.

Well that would be like listening to the radio really. But I think more and more people … I am probably more visually stimulated … I think if you heard a sad story about a child you’d go yeah, that’s sad but then when you saw that … like that little girl who got hit through the day care centre … to see her brings more emotion than just to hear about it – Susan.

If you had of heard about it you’d go yeah, ok, but when you see her you go ‘oh my God’ like her life really is … you know … to see how much damage has been done. I think visually … visual stimulation to me is stronger than just listening or … yeah – Susan.
As can be seen here, in the same way as with Margaret and Roger, Susan is talking about the power of a visual stimulus such as that provided by these stories. Susan extended this further when asked about stories that show identifiable characters specifically:

Yeah, that’s far more powerful than listening – Susan.

Can you think, in your own words, why it would be more powerful—in your opinion? – Interviewer.

I think just seeing people’s literal emotions is stronger. Like seeing people … it’s just like seeing like … If you heard about what happened in Asia [tsunami], yeah ok. But when you actually see you go ‘holy shit’ you know. Like, that’s massive, you can’t imagine it until you see it. And I think it’s a lot of people’s heartache, you see the pain in their eyes. It makes you feel it. You don’t just go ‘oh gee that’s sad’, when you actually see the pain, you see the devastation, I think it … I think visual is far more powerful … it brought out emotion – Susan.

Emotion is important for viewers. When a story can elicit an emotional response from the viewer, a stronger link is made between the message of the story and the viewer. Susan said ‘you see the pain in their eyes, it makes you feel it. You don’t just go “oh gee, that’s sad”’. This is a telling remark: narrative structure is providing an emotive link between those portrayed and those consuming the information.

Mark expressed a view of the identifiable characters that was, at least on the surface, somewhat different from those above:

What sort of stories do you like on A Current Affair and Today Tonight? What sort of stories do you see and go I should watch that … it catches your interest do you think? – Interviewer.

Oh, the tabloid sort of stuff, the toothless people complaining about the neighbourhood they’ve burnt down, um, screaming mothers and any driveway disputes, that sort of … the tabloid shit … the thing that makes me feel better about my own neighbours – Mark.

Mark does not overtly state that he can directly relate to the characters he sees as being portrayed on these programs. There is still, however, an emotive link. Mark reportedly does not feel the same empathy for those portrayed, nor does he feel he can relate to them. The emotive link is instead one of disdain, but it is an emotive link none the less. An emotional relevance is still an indicator of reflexive consumption because Mark is still evaluating the world around him through these stories and these characters. Mark does not see them as representative:
Um, I don’t know, I suppose they’re looking for the common man, but they don’t seem to hit the mark as far as … in my opinion. Like, most of the people I see aren’t exactly the common man – Mark.

In what ways? – Interviewer.

Oh, I suppose it depends more on the story, like there, it’s retirees that someone … somebody’s taken something away from them, this week it was lollies in a local RSL [Returned and Services League] – Mark.


Um … some central coast or something I can’t remember where it was, has stopped, like, tried to stop ladies bringing lollies to the bingo call. They got in and did their story and contacted the club and the club reneged on their original statement saying that the ladies were more than welcome to bring lollies. There was a miscommunication— they’re not allowed to bring cake. Um, and if they do bring lollies, they’re not allowed to share the lollies due to liability problems. They can’t have one of the old girls choking. Yeah, like the minute … it could have been Today Tonight or the other one, I couldn’t tell you. The minute they got involved the club was like no, no it’s alright. It was like they had knocked up a puff story on a Friday afternoon. Like if the RSL, if they had of done it on a Wednesday they would have dropped it because the RSL would have reneged and the ladies would have got drink vouchers – Mark.

And how did they do the story, that one? How did they present it? – Interviewer.

Um, I don’t know. It was pretty close to a shameless puff piece, yeah sitting around looking all cute with the old girls, with a big bowl of jelly beans, um and having a giggle trying to pinch one of the black ones off the old girls and stuff. It was, yeah it was a big fluffy puff piece – Mark.

8.4 Discussion—Risk, Governance and Experiential Knowledge

Through an examination of interview results, this chapter has examined how respondents have come to place trust in media information when presented through television current affairs programs. To further consider the questions posed by the research, this section discusses these results in conjunction with the interview results presented in chapter seven regarding media narrative and experiential representations of risk. The aim of this discussion is to demonstrate that media narrative as a form of experiential knowledge is a particular category of knowledge where labelling it as simply lay knowledge does little to address the elements of this type of information that grant it some authority in late modernity.
A loss of trust in expert or scientific knowledge is symptomatic of late modernity. This loss is an outcome of the unintended consequences of modernity and the “bads” it produces (see Beck, 1992, 2002, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Beck et al., 2003). This loss of trust is amplified through a move to reflexive modernity (see Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1990, 1991). According to Beck (1994), reflexive modernisation is indicated by a disenchantment with and ultimately a rejection of the taken-for-granted foundations of the modernist ideal. Similarly, Giddens (1990) argues that knowledge in the modernist sense is reliant on the principle of radical doubt. Knowledge is always open to revision and accordingly, individuals in late modernity construct both their self-biographies and their view of the world through a constant process of hypothesis testing through the knowledge and discourses available to them. This research suggests that in the reflexive and individualised era of late modernity, meaning construction rejects both simple lay, non-expert knowledge and scientific knowledge, favouring mediated experience instead. Narrative-based news media information examined through the lens of parrhesia positions experiential knowledge as attaining authoritative status.

Late modern individuals remain, as the risk society position suggests, disenchanted with the scientific and progressive discourses of modernity (Beck, 1992, 2009a). However, as the interview responses reveal, information is required for reflexive individuals to construct meaning about managing their lives in a risk-averse way. These results further support the idea that individuals in late modernity are concerned with everyday risks and their distribution (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994). The respondents in this research use information provided by the media to avoid bad outcomes and this in itself is not dependent on this information being presented as experiential knowledge. Rather, through parrhesia, experiential knowledge comes to be trusted. It creates certainty were certainty is lost due to the erosion of traditional structures that once shaped our lives. Experiential knowledge goes beyond lay knowledge as it provides individuals with a structure, though not a traditional one, allowing individuals to manage the risk of uncertainty (Denney, 2005).

While it has not been a specific focus of this research, it is possible that these results show that experiential information as presented in the television news media can explain the construction of meaning, and accordingly the construction of those things that become
accepted as risks. Beyond the rhetorical influence of parrhesia and status, experiential knowledge draws on an individual’s values and beliefs, as well as their emotions (Mythen, 2004). Narrative structures experiential knowledge for easy consumption, which creates emotional and moral constructs directly related to the variable needs of viewers. It convinces viewers about the importance of particular risks, and of the need to avoid them.

The television media case studies discussed in the earlier sections of this thesis showed it was story characters and their experience that moved the narrative forward. When a voice other than that of a character was present, it was most often a voice narrating the story. This voice was often that of a reporter and not of an expert on the content of the story. Experts, people who hold specific and specialised knowledge about the subject matter, rarely appeared and never as a direct character in the story. Accordingly, a preference for this reliance on experiential knowledge over expert knowledge was indeed born out in both the media content and interview results outlined above.

The possible relationship between expert knowledge and experiential knowledge is present in these results but may be difficult to identify outside of specific contexts. That is, there are examples where respondents have signified a preference for expert knowledge, though often this preference was in the context of the personal experience of an experiential proxy. They presented the information that was expert produced, but delivered through an experiential proxy rather than directly.

This is an encouraging finding when considering the possible authoritative role parrhesia plays as a rhetorical device in such presentations of risk information as it indicates that there is an important interplay between expert and experiential knowledge where labelling such knowledge as lay knowledge strips it of important qualities. The “lay” in lay knowledge suggests an information source that comes from simply a non-expert, which, in these specific examples is not the case. Further enquiry into this result may find that for the audience there is a conflation of the quality of the information when considered as a metric between expert and lay. In other words, as a specific quality of the knowledge itself, expert versus lay is not of interest to the audience in considerations of authority. Experience, however, is not only an element but the key definer of worthwhile risk information.
The importance of experiential knowledge and the distinction between it and “lay” knowledge is a significant finding as it suggests that the formative boundaries of narrative are influential due to the connections the audience are able to make with the experiential knowledge, but as active audiences of media information may reject the information or construct an altered meaning. This is not a new process and the ability or willingness of audiences to accept or reject risk information in this format rather than via expert knowledge may be no greater or lesser in the modernist–industrial era. The presence or lack of experts in the narrative becomes an important area of investigation. Does the presence of experts as deliverers of knowledge lead to a higher chance of rejection if it is not filtered through experiential proxies? The results of the current research suggest that it does.

The respondents in this research indicated a preference for information enabling them to relate to the characters of the stories. While there was some indication that expert knowledge had some utility, experiential knowledge presented through narrative creates relevance based on the desire of individuals to construct their own biographies not based on traditional “expert” information. Narrative as an information source allows the late modern subject to “hypothesis test” their beliefs through experiential proxies, adding further relevance and authority to this type of information.

The combination of findings above raises some important questions for analytical models of active and passive audiences of risk information. The television media source examined in this research reflects the conditions of late modernity that attracts a reflexive, individual and responsible viewer. This attraction is occurring alongside ongoing social meaning construction that is influenced by factors outside the story. Cultural studies theorists like Hall (2001) and Morley (1992, 1993), as outlined in chapter four, were interested in the acceptance or rejection of preferred meaning based on the viewers’ cultural milieu. A fuller description of this process is now one where reflexive modernity first positions experiential knowledge as the preferred form of risk information in the media. This information is then consumed in a cultural environment where meaning construction may vary but will always be shaped by the need to manage and avoid risk.

This study has been unable to demonstrate that media audiences choose from competing sources of information without an active process of source evaluation as earlier versions
of Beck’s work implies. This is an evaluation as played out in the interview results presented earlier, where the status of information providers as victims or potential victims provides a level of authority for audiences. A possible explanation for this result lies in the nexus between reflexive modernisation in the risk society sense, and the self-disciplining subject who strives to achieve a version of normalcy. As mentioned in the risk literature review in chapter two, the governmentality view of risk communication has been criticised for not engaging with a long history of literature and research that details an “active” media audience (Tulloch, 2009). The governmental approach to risk is one that also assumes a passive subject or on this case, passive audience (Denney, 2005; Lupton, 2013a; Tulloch, 2009).

This research demonstrates some important similarities between the risk society and governmentality positions on risk and reflexivity. The individual of reflexive modernity is one who has to “cobble together” a biography, or navigate competing discourses (Beck, 1992, 2006; Beck et al., 1994, 2003). When considering the sweep of his work, Foucault does not see this process as the contemporary phenomenon theories of reflexive modernity suggest. Rather the self-constituting subject has been required, throughout history, to enter into truth games as part of the techniques of knowing oneself or caring for oneself (Foucault, 1988; Foucault et al., 1991; Foucault & Pearson, 2001). There are, therefore, two separate yet intrinsically linked aspects of an individual judging risk information to be true. The first is the epistemological validity of information. A statement is judged on its empirical or rational validity. Second, and equally as important, is judging this information as being presented by someone able to tell the truth, someone granted the position of a truth-teller (Foucault & Pearson, 2001).

Foucault (2001) argues that a constant that underlies the relationship between knowledge and power is the self-constituting subject entering into a historically contingent game of truth. Prior to the enlightenment, those who possessed the power to speak the truth represented the Church. In post-enlightenment modernity, scientific discourse assumed this mantle. It was this self-constituting subject that was “laid siege” to by government through expert discourse and rationality in modern times (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). This research demonstrates the potential for reflexive discourse as holding power as truth
as expert knowledge becomes increasingly disputed in reflexive modernity. Returning to Foucault’s genealogy of parrhesia in light of these results provides an explanation for this.

Foucault’s (2001) discussion of parrhesia focusses on parrhesia in the classical Greek sense—that is, the rhetorical power of a speech act where the speaker must be telling the truth due to the risk to the speaker. Rather than consider if parrhesia could be directly applicable to contemporary truth telling, which it may be, it is also important to consider what form contemporary parrhesia might take, especially in risk communication. The conditions of reflexive modernity provide an explanation. The key is the conceptualisation of risk society as inherently risk averse, where ‘the value system of the unequal society is taken by the value of the unsafe society’ (Beck, 1992, p. 42) and we are all managing our lives with the primary aim of preventing negative outcomes. In this unsafe, uncertain society, experiential knowledge about risk is a contemporary form of rhetorical parrhesia. Those who would share their experiences of risk, who would speak to us of their experiences with risk, must surely do so as a way of mitigating risk for all, and this is the motivation to speak, and the willingness to speak is their claim to truth.

Foucault’s (2001) truth games would consider expert knowledge as previously holding status as an authority. Applications of a similar governmental analysis argue that in both modernist–industrial and neoliberal eras, expert knowledge has authoritative status. However, neoliberalism drives greater self-responsibility as a conduit for governmental power (O’Malley, 2012). This research suggests that parrhesia and related judgements about who holds the truth have changed in late modernity. Increased self-responsibility remains, but reflexive modernity lends authority to reflexive discourse. This is discourse that gains perceived authority by a shift from ‘experts can tell us the truth’ to one of ‘others like me can tell me the truth’. It is those who have experienced negative outcomes who possess the knowledge that allows other reflexive, risk-averse individuals to self-govern.

8.5 Conclusion

Earlier chapters of this thesis have shown that traditional news sources have often presented news in narrative form, drawing on a growing authority of experiential
knowledge. The media analysis and audience interview results in this thesis have demonstrated a preference, from both media producers and audiences, for information presented in this way.

Summarising the findings in the preceding two chapters, the first pattern that emerges is that the respondents not only pick and choose what information is relevant to them; they also carry out an ongoing evaluation of those who are conveying the information. Respondents showed that this evaluation is also one that is based in part on the utility of the information and more importantly the position of the speaker in relation to this utility.

The findings suggest a trend towards a preference for experiential knowledge over expert knowledge rather than a complete disregard for expert voices. In these results there was a clear continuum of trust placed in experts, with those in the older demographic more willing to accept the testimony of experts than were the youngest, who vested little authority in experts when their opinion is presented in the media. The governmentality literature assumes that discourse presents through the media as a type of authority due to a broad range of political and historical processes that elevates to authority particular forms of knowledge (see Dean, 1998, 1999; Foucault et al., 1991; O’Malley, 2009, 2010, 2012). This authority derives from the status of those who possess this knowledge. The commonly cited version of this status is the privileged nature of expert knowledge driven by the common ideals of modernity and neoliberalism.

The finding that experiential knowledge is valued and trusted suggests that judgements about truth in risk communication operate in a different sphere to epistemological evaluations of information and knowledge. The results suggest that experiential information presented has not necessarily usurped knowledge completely but parrhesia, as discussed in chapter six, demonstrates that experiential knowledge becomes a reflexive discourse. In reflexive modernity, it is a type of power and authority that directs the self-constituting, self-responsible individual who is compelled to both manage their risk while rejecting traditional types of authority such as expert risk knowledge. This conclusion is particularly significant as it provides a synthesis between the risk society and governmentality theoretical positions. Further, in chapter two I argued that the inability of the risk society position to provide an adequate theoretical explanation for how individuals manage risk information represents a significant gap in the theory. Another
related gap identified earlier was the inability for the governmentality position on risk to account for the potential loss of authority of expert discourse. The reflexive discourse theoretical position developed above provides an explanation of contemporary risk communication that fills both of these gaps.

The analysis presented in this thesis has focussed on television news as a traditional and long-standing avenue of risk communication. Hoskins and Tulloch (2016) present an analysis of more contemporary media forms, and to some extent audiences, which examines new risk theory as well as the shift from old to new media. Hoskins and Tulloch (2016) adopt a position that this thesis adopts as well. There is no old media audience separate from a new media audience. While media technology and therefore the mechanisms of risk communication has undergone significant shifts, the relationship between risk and the audience retains familiar elements (Hoskins & Tulloch, 2016). I would add to this position by applying the findings of this research as discussed so far. It is the presence of experiential proxies and narratives of risk that link old and new media audiences. Contemporary media technologies such as online news and social media carry with them, as identified above, an assumption that they represent a new or significantly different audience. The findings above demonstrate that a preference for experiential and non-expert knowledge in risk communication pre-dated the shift to online and social media formats that lend themselves readily to risk communication through experiential knowledge and reflexive discourse. Experiential knowledge and online media are discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 9: Risk, Governance and Experiential Knowledge Online

This chapter moves forward the discussion of contemporary news sources such as online news and social media. The discussion takes the crucial step of applying the findings covered in previous chapters to these formats with a focus on risk communication. The aim is to discover similar patterns and consistencies with the reflexive discourse model developed throughout the earlier sections of this thesis. To achieve this the following will first develop a theoretical understanding of the active role allowed users in content curation. Where the content curation carried out in the television mode examined earlier in this thesis is curation by creators, online news allows both this form of curation and a new form of user-driven curation. Another important area to examine is online filtering of content that is unseen by the user. Finally, the effect of social media on news sharing arises as another key area of analysis. The findings of this research will be used as a critical lens to discuss possible future research into online risk communication given the above features.

As touched on in preceding chapters, there has been a large increase in the use of online news sources. These online news sources range from traditional news media moving into the online space to new media start-ups that have only ever existed online, through to citizen journalists and news producers (see Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2015; Perrin, 2015; Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). All of these are important elements driving the transformation of knowledge online.

The shift online has led to a significant increase in the availability of news information. This change is not just a technological one. It is a change that also affects the relationship between audiences and information in the connected contexts of temporality and location. The first of these effects—changes in temporality—is an outcome of the “always on” or “always connected” nature of contemporary devices such as computers, tablets and smartphones. The latter two are of particular interest as they are always connected and online. Further, devices such as smartphones are nearly always with their owner and turned on, which represents a significant change in the timing of news delivery. News
information is now always accessible. This accessibility is in stark contrast to traditional media sources so often defined by their relationship to time—the morning paper, the nightly news, the monthly magazine. As shall be seen, news becomes separated from time in a traditional sense (Purcell et al., 2010).

The second effect is on location, which is also related to changes in technology. In much the same way as temporality is changed, location changes due to the same innovations. For many, just like contemporary news information can be accessed almost anytime, it can also be accessed almost anywhere utilising the same technologies. Where previous news was provided by, for example, the television, it was provided in a set and predictable place. Newspaper information might be most likely consumed after the reader physically went to a store (unless they had their paper delivered). This link to place is no longer required. News becomes separated from place (Perrin, 2015; Purcell et al., 2010). These separations and their potential effects are discussed below.

The main areas covered in this chapter are the shift from broadcast and print media to contemporary online media. The chapter develops the research results discussed in the preceding sections of this thesis; namely the identified preference for experiential knowledge discussed in chapters seven and eight. A further focus of this chapter is risk communication in the digital and social media environment. To align with the risk communication analysis of traditional news media sources carried out in this thesis, this discussion focusses on digital and social media news delivery. In summary, this discussion chapter examines the current online news environment in light of the results of this research.

This chapter has two aims. The first is to examine the structure of online news, strictly in the context of risk communication and experiential knowledge, which represents a gap in this emerging field of research. While the results of this research do not directly refer to online media use as an emerging media technology, there is a gap in our understanding of how risk communication may occur in this context. Just like narrative presented via experience, the audience see online experiential knowledge as an authoritative source.

The popularity of social networks raises the question of whether a similar preference for experiential proxies is driving demand for curated or filtered online information. As
discussed in chapter four, there is an ongoing shift in media use patterns with online sources becoming increasingly popular. It is a contention of this research that aspects of the audience including their preference for experiential knowledge as suggested by the results of this thesis may have “carried over” to the online environment. This chapter examines specific online elements of news consumption to understand potential links between this emerging media and the relationship between experiential knowledge and authority as developed in preceding chapters.

The preference for experiential knowledge as suggested by the findings of previous sections of this thesis presents as a lens to examine digital and online sources of news, including social media, as the popularity of these sources may suggest a reorganisation of the media–audience relationship. There are questions to be asked about the analytical tools used to scrutinise the media previously, such as views of the audience as passive versus active. This is an important set of questions to ask about risk communication in an online mode. New and expanded forms of interaction that were impossible before the advent of online and social media blur the lines and propose an act of media consumption that goes beyond thinking of the audience as “viewers” or “readers”. They are still those things, but now they are also curators, commenters, posters and sharers. These terms had no place in the media–audience relationship vernacular prior to the advent of the internet, as the acts themselves were not possible. In fact, some of these words, at least contextually, are also new.

9.1 Content Curation

In this section I discuss proactive news environment curation carried out by users. News content curation in the online media environment is the main focus of this discussion. However, it is potentially overly restrictive to discuss the flow of information from producers to users in this environment without considering information outside of traditionally defined news. This restriction is particularly relevant when news is defined based on the nature of the producer of said information; that is, news defined as having been produced by institutional media, including traditional media outlets who have an online presence. Contemporary discussions of news that include online sources must
include new and emerging sources of information that may be considered as news, such as ‘citizen journalism’ (Mythen, 2010).

Further, where discussions of curation in the pre-internet media were limited to curation carried out by journalists, online and digital news sources present variable points of curation. This variability is reflected in current research into online news and information consumption. There are three main sources of content curation that dictate which news information makes it to online news audiences. The first of these is journalistic curation or gatekeeping, which is a similar procedure to traditional journalistic story selection, which takes on new procedures when traditional media sources move into the online environment (see Cui & Liu, 2016; Hong, 2012; Schröder, 2015). While this type of curation remains an important element of understanding news and risk communication in the shift to online media, it is not the focus of this discussion.

There is also a hidden type of curation where news information is potentially filtered before reaching users, which is discussed in more detail in later sections of this chapter. The fourth point, and the focus of this section, is proactive “user-led curation”. This is an area that has not received a great deal of attention to date in considerations of online news and risk communication. User-led curation is defined as the act of curation that is carried out purposefully by the news audience. A preference for curated news content likely predates the advent of the internet, as Rosenbaum, (2011, p. para 1) points out:

> Thinking back, I’ve always considered news as a dialogue rather than a monologue. I’ve preferred conversations to speeches. That said, I don’t often hang out on street corners or in neighborhood bars partaking in random conversations about the weather or the Mets. I like my conversations curated.

This type of curation is an outcome of technological changes related to both the online medium and the contemporary technology used to access online news information.

For online news audiences there has been an ongoing proliferation of devices able to access news information. The online news audience can access online news through desktop and laptop computers, easily transportable tablets and their mobile phone, a device potentially always connected online and able to be carried in your pocket. All of these devices not only allow access almost anywhere and anytime, they can also, if
desired, actively notify the user when there is a news story (or other non-news stories as well) in which they have flagged an interest (see Perrin, 2015; Purcell et al., 2010).

The process of user curation can occur through selection of news sources and increasingly through news aggregators. A news aggregator is a service that collects and collates news from various sources and then provides these stories to end users. Chowdhury and Landoni (2006) define a content aggregator as ‘an individual or organisation that gathers web content and/or applications from different online sources for reuse or resale’ (p. 101). Lee & Chyi (2015) add to this definition, defining news aggregation as “…the practice of redistributing news content from different established news outlets on a single website, is often based on machine-based algorithms, human judgments, or a mix of both.” (P. 101). Lee & Chyi (2015) also note that news aggregators are increasingly popular with news consumers and are a major driver of users to other online news sources. Data suggests that the number of users of aggregators such as ‘Google News’ was over fourteen million in 2013, while more popular aggregators such as ‘Yahoo News’ were well over fifty-eight million users (Lee & Chyi, 2013). As an avenue for reaching news sources, aggregator use varies greatly (Newman, Fletcher, Levy & Nielson, 2016). Data concerning Australian audiences showed that nine percent of online news consumers used aggregators as their main starting point for finding news. In some countries this was much higher with, for example, forty-three percent of Japanese users indicating news aggregators as a main starting point (Newman et al. 2016).

Here there have already been several steps in the curation process. The media sources have applied their story selection procedures and have decided which particular stories to publish online and in what form. The news aggregation site then makes an initial decision about what sources it will include in its news feed, though this decision occurs prior to the generation of a news story. This in some ways appears beneficial for users, as the aggregator is doing the work of thinning down what is potentially a vast and unmanageable amount of content (Chowdhury & Landoni, 2006).
Finally, there is curation by the audience member. It is this stage of the curation process that is of most interest to this research. The user can choose between various news sources or news aggregators as an initial curation step. Users can set up their news feed with their own preferences based on story and news genre type (Thurman, 2011; Thurman &
Schifferes, 2012). There are several ways this curation can occur. One example of the user curation process, from a popular news aggregator and feed provided by ‘Google’ at news.google.com, is shown in Figure 9.1.

As can be seen in Figure 9.1, the user is presented with, in this case, a graphical representation in the form of “sliders”, coupled with general story topics. The user can easily move the sliders to tailor their news feed. Below the sliders there is a text box that allows the user to then pick further topics of interest, outside those listed above. Below this is another set of sliders that allow the user to select the sources from which they would prefer to receive news. In this example, the selection is based on location—in this case Australia. As with story type, there is also a text box that allows the user to choose the frequency with which they receive stories from any source.

In the above example there is a focus on traditional news sources. As discussed in earlier chapters, traditional news institutions remain popular as sources of stories in the online news environment. Also of note is the first slider under ‘Personalise Google News’ titled ‘Suggested for you’, which indicates an element of unseen filtering is an inherent part of the news feed curation process, which will be discussed in subsequent sections.

Other popular news aggregator services include Feedly and News360. There are some differences among these services in terms of the way they market their service and the features they highlight as available to users (‘News360 Home Page 2017’; ‘Welcome to Feedly 2017’). For example, Feedly focusses on following topics or fields that might be of professional interest. The content includes institutional news feeds as well as a variety of blogs and special interest topics, representing a broader range of story types than the ‘news’-focussed Google News, as seen in Figure 9.2.

As can be seen in Figure 9.2, Feedly includes mention of traditional news outlets but also of “industry journals” and “private business content”. Once a user has an account they are given the option to personalise their news feed, as shown in Figures 9.3 and Figure 9.4.
The personalisation procedure in Feedly is a markedly different process from that found in the Google News feed personalisation program (Figure 9.1). As seen in figures 9.3 and 9.4, the focus is less on particular sources. Google provided a set list of potential news sources consisting of mainly institutional media that could be selected; however, Feedly did not present choices structured in this way. Thus, Feedly provides a much less structured approach to personalisation.

This lack of structure carries over to the second way in which users can personalise their news in Feedly. As seen in Figure 9.4, Feedly users can also search and add by topic or keyword. The examples provided by Feedly (see Figure 9.4) have a focus on issues outside traditional news topics. There is also a focus on products, brands and other consumer-focused topics. Personalisation in Feedly and other news aggregators aims to go beyond news in the traditional sense via the inclusion of sources such as blogs and RSS (rich site summary) feeds covering a wide variety of sources.
Enter the publication, blog, news site, or RSS feed you’d like to follow

**Figure 9.3: Feed personalisation in ‘Feedly’**

**Figure 9.4: Feed personalisation in ‘Feedly’—topic/keyword**
The news aggregation service News360 represents a middle ground between the more focussed news aggregation of Google and the broader news aggregation of Feedly. The inclusion of the word ‘news’ in the title ‘News360’ suggests a traditional news focus. However, the personalisation procedure used when setting up this aggregation service includes some of the broader features found in Feedly.

Figure 9.5: Home page of news360.com

Figure 9.5 shows part of the news360.com homepage where potential users are told they can ‘personalize’, and ‘stay on top of information’. The personalisation procedure reflects the idea that a possible driver of news aggregation is the demand placed on online news audiences to manage a growing and increasingly overwhelming amount of information available through online sources, as discussed earlier.

When moving to the personalisation process, News360 employs a third method involving provision of a set of popular topics to new users, as shown in Figure 9.6.
News360 uses broad categories with visual representations, a system not seen in Google or Feedly. However, News360 does allow for users to search for and choose custom categories and keywords. With respect to how structured the process is—that is, how much the aggregator shapes or limits the choices of users—Google News presents as the most structured, Feedly as the least structured and News360 as moderately structured.

Another pertinent feature of the News360 personalisation procedure is the inclusion of the option for users to link other apps and accounts to their News360 account (see Figure 9.7). The accounts available to link, in this example, are mostly social media accounts, namely Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and the information management app Evernote. News360 hints that information gathered from these accounts will be used to further customise user news feeds.
All of these news aggregation services allow, and actively promote, cross-platform access; that is, a personalised news feed can be accessed across a variety of devices such as computers or through an app on a tablet or phone. This is the most important factor considering how this type of news consumption dislocates traditional restrictions of time and space, as discussed earlier. These feeds are potentially “always on” and always accessible, contingent only on internet access and battery life. Time and space of news consumption changes through the use of this technology as it can be accessed and consumed anywhere and anytime. This change indicates a shift in news consumption from fixed places and fixed times to a mobile form of news that can be consumed at times selected by the user (see Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Purcell et al., 2010)

As discussed above, this dislocation occurs through news aggregators, but can also occur in a similarly proactive, user-driven way through an act as simple as searching for information about a particular topic. When someone needs information or comes across something of interest, they can search for further information, including news and information about risks.

In summary, user curation of online news is a process whereby news audiences are able to utilise news aggregation services to construct their own personal news and information environment. In a personal news environment, those stories that fall within a topic area favoured by the user are more likely to be part of that user’s news consumption. Topics that the user has rejected are less likely to be part of their news consumption (Chowdhury

**Figure 9.7: Account linking options during personalisation in news360.com**
Some familiar elements of traditional media consumption can be related to curation. Traditional sources of news, such as television, newspapers and radio allow a form of curation that may also be best conceived of as proactive. Traditional media content curation could occur through source selection rather than topic or content selection. Evidence demonstrating how this selection might work was presented in earlier chapters of this thesis. Traditional news media users based some of their decisions about which programs they viewed on the type of story and the format employed. One of the elements identified as a deciding factor was the presenter in their role of media identity. Other respondents indicated that there were stories that they found important to them, or topics covered about which they wanted more information, suggesting that media consumption patterns have been influenced and structured by proactive decisions made by audience members prior to the growth of online news delivery, and at least partly influenced by story topics. However, there has been a significant shift in when this process can occur, and how easy it is to complete.

Rather than a requirement for the type of news most likely to be covered by a particular source to become known to the audience member through repetition, online curation only requires decisions to be made about what is important to the individual prior to consumption. This method undermines some of the assumptions made by examinations of risk communication through the media regarding a formative role of media information in constructing risk positions. That is, a position that assumes that exposure to repeated representations of risk leads to certain risk positions being internalised or adopted by the audience must account for this new type of curation.

In later sections of this chapter I discuss the ramifications of curation in light of the findings of the research so far. However, proactive news curation by users represents only one of the factors that influences the constitution of our personal news and information environment. A second factor is content filtering that occurs unseen by users. This technique is examined in the following section.
9.2 Content Filtering—The Digital Self

There has been a significant shift in news consumption habits as an outcome of the growth of online news consumption. User curation and the resulting personal news environment, as discussed above, presents as a significant factor in deciding what news stories make it to the news audience. It is important to note that all of this curation and filtering has a significant effect on news delivery but often remains unseen and perhaps forgotten, in the case of user curation.

In this section, I discuss the effect of another contemporary contributing factor that influences our personal news environment—‘content filtering’. The term filtering distinguishes this process from the more user-driven curation discussed in the preceding section. There are several intertwined forms of filtering that, along with curation, together contribute to what Pariser (2011) terms the ‘filter bubble’, which is discussed in detail later in this chapter. A key difference between this filtering and the user curation described above is that this is a type of filtering that occurs unseen and, to differing extents, uncontrolled by the online news audience; it is outside the control and knowledge of the audience and individuals, because if it is working correctly it goes unnoticed.

Filtering is also a process that occurs alongside story selection and availability. Just as it did prior to the shift to digital formats, journalism’s gatekeeping mechanism goes beyond simple story selection when in the digital domain. Online news sources reflect the same content elements and content frameworks of information as traditional news media outlets and as such they stand as a filter of sorts. The curating of online resources by journalists is carried out through the practices of sourcing, contextualising and interpreting (Cui & Liu, 2016). In the online news media environment the sourcing of news information remains ‘the dominant way of journalistic storytelling’ (Cui & Liu, 2016, p. 13). Many of the stories shared on platforms such as social media come from journalists within media institutions (Cui & Liu, 2016). Therefore, journalistic gatekeeping and story selection remains a contributing factor when considering news story filtering and consumption. It is not, however, the main focus of this discussion.

The result of filtering is different to collections of news that that are part of a collection curated by direct user input; rather, stories that do not fit the user profile are filtered out—
they never reach the audience. There are various types of filters that can be applied in the process of online news information reaching a potential audience. Filtering could occur at the search stage were large search providers such as Google tailor searches based on a user’s interests and internet history. Other factors such as purchase history can also be involved.

The first type of filtering is sometimes called algorithm (see Borgesius et al., 2016) or implicit filtering (see Thurman, 2011), which is a type of “unseen” filtering out of stories where the online means for accessing online information operates in a way that decides which content to deliver to the user. This filtering is an implicit personalisation of news content, rather than the explicit personalisation of user-driven curation (Thurman, 2011). There are, according to Thurman (2011), several ways this filtering can occur, and they tend to be provider or technologically dependent. “Collaborative filtering” relies on story selection based on popularity of stories or topics, which can be further refined by place and timeframe. “Contextual recommendations” refers to links placed that lead users to further content. These can be generated by software rather than as part of authoring the story. Geo- or location-targeted delivery is filtering in which location of the user drives story selection. The final, and perhaps broadest category, is “profile-based” filtering where data about the user and their profile are utilised to recommend content. These data could come from a variety of sources including web browsing history, behaviour on other news sites and social media behaviour (Thurman, 2011, p. 398).

Profile-based filtering is applied to various news sources, including news aggregation services. For example, Google News delivers content that is partly based on user-supplied information (user curation) as well as their past behaviours both in Google News and more broadly (Liu, Dolan, & Pedersen, 2010). Using this example, we can see a personalised news environment where there have been at least three points of curation and filtering. The first is through journalistic story selection, and accompanied decisions about which stories to provide through online channels. The second is through user curation as discussed earlier, and the last is through user “profile building”, which filters content based on user behaviour (Liu et al., 2010).

Filtering decisions influenced by user behaviour and profile building are also influential outside news aggregation websites. When someone goes online to search for news or
information on a particular topic through a search provider such as Google, Bing or Yahoo, filtering occurs, which is significant because Google’s own statistics report that well over one trillion searches are carried out via their service per year (Google Trends 2015, 2015).

The number of searches for specific news events is also substantial. Terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 led to over 897 million related Google searches in the days and weeks following the attack, with the most common search being the generic ‘What happened in Paris?’ (Google Trends 2015, 2015). This pattern suggests that when exposed to information about exigent risks, including significant or large-scale risks, searching the internet for information is a common strategy. Directly searching for news stories via search engines is also one of the most common ways for users to find stories hosted by news organisations (see Mitchell, Jurkowitz, & Olmstead, 2014; Ørmen, 2016). Therefore, personalisation of search results is a potentially significant factor in the personalised news environment, with search engines mediating and gatekeeping access to news (Ørmen, 2016).

Search providers such as Google personalise search results based on a number of criteria; accordingly, the information provided may differ across users, even when they have searched for the same information or even carried out an identical search. The main factors influencing search results delivered by Google, for example, are geo-location—the physical location of the user; search terms and keywords; web history including sites visited and search terms previously used; click behaviour—choices made within sites by the user and other users; and the popularity of sites used (Liu et al., 2010; Ørmen, 2016).

A relatively long-standing filtering method used by both news aggregators and search engines is to draw on a “user profile” to personalise search results. In both of these contexts, previous search information is utilised to inform the user profile (Bai et al., 2017). Explicitly asking a user what their interests are, as with user curation, presents a static profile that captures the user’s interests at one particular moment in time. However, interests and demands for type of information change, and this change is not captured unless the user curation procedure is repeated often. User profiles are therefore often also built with endogenous data—‘endogenous to the actual act of searching’ (Ørmen, 2016, p. 110). In terms of news story selection, endogenous information is internal information.
In the case of news aggregators these data are drawn from, for example, the behaviour of the user during previous uses of the service, based on the idea that ‘a news article read by a user represents a clear evidence of her interests’ (Bai et al., 2017). Further benefits of this type of user profile are that it is ongoing, thereby overcoming the static nature of user curation as discussed above. This filtering can capture the ongoing interests of the user without effort from the user beyond continued online news consumption.

The ongoing creation of user profiles is not inherent only to news aggregation sites, but to search engines as well (Bai et al., 2017; Ørmen, 2016). Thus, just as with news aggregation sites, when a user searches for information via a search engine such as Google, the same or similar algorithms are in place, which again may be a filter that draws on endogenous information. This filtering would be an internal process where data such as previous searches using the same search engine are drawn on. Ørmen (2016) argues for an expanded definition of this where an endogenous filtering process occurring as an internal process of the search also draws on broader data such as browsing behaviour and web history, and what online accounts a user is logged into.

To summarise, this first type of filtering is one where processes inherent to the delivery of news stories actively filter out stories deemed to be unwanted by the user, with the goal of creating a relevant personalised news environment. This filtering is often based on the ongoing creation and re-creation of a user profile—a machine-determined ideal version of the user, which then becomes a fully digital homunculus, moulded by the current demands for information of the user of whom it is a reflection. This digital self is one of the filters that participates in determining what information we use to navigate our everyday risks.

The second significant type of filtering is social filtering. Social filtering is not hidden from the user in the same way as algorithmic filtering. It is an important contributing factor to the formation of the personal news environment and one that is rapidly growing in impact. This type of filtering is carried out through social media and refers to the social filtering that occurs as “friends” and “liked” pages—if taking the Facebook paradigm as an example—share and comment on news and other information that then places it into the user’s information environment. The social network of the user filters out information that is not of interest to its members. In this section I argue that this type of filtering, like
the proactive audience-driven curation discussed above, is of particular importance when examining news information and risk communication in the online news environment.

There are several relevant aspects of news consumption by social media users. As shall be seen, the flow of news through social networks can be nebulous and variable. Of most interest is the networked flow of information through these social networks. However, there are other ways that a social media user may arrive at a news story through social media.

The first area of interest represents perhaps the clearest change to news production and consumption. New technologies, such as smart phones, grant users the ability to quickly and easily produce their own content as citizen journalists, separate from traditional media organisations and producers. This ability is coupled with the contemporary and unique ability of social networks to serve as an easily accessible and rapid distribution platform for user produced content (see Bruns, 2008; Mythen, 2010; Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014).

The role of the citizen journalist is less clear when comparing this type of news production to traditional journalism as there are different functions that this type of news production inserts into the traditional news cycle (Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). It is possible for citizen journalists to actively seek out news without the training or attachment to a news organisation usually associated with professional journalism (see Bruns, 2015b; Kim & Lowrey, 2015; Mythen, 2010). It is also possible that rather than actively seeking news stories, a citizen journalist is someone caught up in an event they feel needs to be seen or shared, which they can achieve utilising contemporary technology without needing preparation (Bruns, 2008). Finally, citizen journalists may not do either of the above and instead distribute news through blogs or social media in an organised way. They may focus on a particular news topic or genre, or a particular audience. They may often comment or critique the news and information it provides (Bruns, 2015b). In comparison to the gatekeeping function of journalists, this practise has been seen as a type of “gatewatching” where citizen journalists could observe and collate stories from a variety of sources, even carrying out evaluative work as part of this process (Bruns, 2012). This is in itself an experiential construction of news in a new mode and in the online space.
Concerning the effects that citizen journalism can have on risk communication, Mythen (2010) points out that the ability of news, and accordingly risk information, to spread rapidly and to impart a sense of immediacy is not in itself an advance. Rather, it can move at such a pace and in such a way as to inhibit the quality of the information and the ability of audience members to reflect. Mythen makes the point that ‘[t]he rapidity of response that affluent Western media users are blessed with can at times be a burden in that it can inhibit our proclivity to think, reflect and analyse. The drive to mediate risk incidents with haste does not ultimately mean we are able to understand them better’ (Mythen, 2010, pp. 55–56). I would argue that this same caveat, while referring to the speed at which citizen produced material can reach the audience, also applies to other socially mediated news consumption, as discussed below.

The second way a news story may come to the attention of users is through the increasing use of social media as a direct distribution channel for media institutions and journalists, which is in contrast to the audience-led story production detailed above. The methods used by media organisation do, however, rely centrally on the involvement of users. Media organisations over time can enlist social media users through “likes” and “follows”. The media institution can then publish stories directly that will be seen by those that have liked or followed them, depending on the social media used (Hong, 2012). A common practice for journalists using Twitter is to maintain a professional profile to quickly release comment as a form of “micro-blogging”. Quick release of stories is coupled with a broader practice of tweeting the headline of a story with a link to the online version hosted by a traditional media institution (see Bruns, 2012; Hermida, 2010; Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012).

A related way in which traditional media institutions can distribute news through social media channels is by including a like or share button as part of their stories when published online. Embedded like or share buttons allow a user who reads or views the story to easily share it via Facebook or Twitter (or others social networks) instantly (Hermida et al., 2012). It also allows them to comment on the story as it is sent via their network of friends. The end result of this is for the news story to then be shared and potentially viewed by all the members of the sharer’s network.
The popularity of this type of social media use by traditional media organisations is growing rapidly (Hermida et al., 2012). For the media organisation, the benefits of attracting and growing an online user base is very much linked to the growth of online news consumption linked to an ongoing decline in consumption of news through traditional media, especially newspapers (see Bruns, 2012; Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2014; Hermida et al., 2012; Hong, 2012). Currently, however, user traffic directed to traditional news sites is predominantly generated through search engines and news aggregation sites (Hong, 2012). While this type of delivery is focussed on media institutions, the fundamental elements of the social network are at play as a stage of both curation and filtering. News stories will come to the attention of a user because they have actively liked or followed a particular journalist or media organisation; thus news stories arrive in their “feed” of information. However, this is not necessarily the end of the process for such stories, as they may be shared through the social network of users, from one user to another as discussed below.

The final type of filtering is the filtering carried out through the act of sharing content, which is inherent to social media use. News stories, for example, may come from media organisations and move through the channels mentioned above. After this we can, if using the example of Facebook, choose to share them with or without our own commentary. If someone else has shared them we can “like” them. We can also comment on stories, and reply to other comments. There are any number of ways that a news story, or a piece of information in general, can enter our social media feed and therefore come to our attention. These linkages are nebulous.

It is these linkages that constitute the key element that differentiates social media from traditional media. Traditional media is, like all media as Bruns (2015a) points out, by definition social. All media ‘are after all media, in between, intermediating between producers and audiences of content, information, conversation, or between the (usually elite or newsworthy) actors who are in the media and the audiences who read, listen and watch’ (p. 1). Despite this, there are new factors at play in social media where the social is defined by its structural qualities. Social media is not networked in the same way as traditional media. There is content distributed “many-to-many” rather than “one-to-
many” and, depending on the source of the news, they have the potential to be less
censored and less a reflection of elite interests (Bruns, 2015a).

Of interest to this thesis is the possible effects of sharing within a social network acting
as a type of filter. Social media networks are widespread and utilised extensively in many
Western countries. Estimates from 2015 put the percentage of social media users in the
United States at 65% of all adults—a substantial increase from five years previously when
only 46% of American adults were social media users (Perrin, 2015). When further
examining general social media use it is found that young adults are most likely to be
social media users; men and woman use social media at similar rates; and people from
higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be social media users (Perrin,
2015).

Social media is also growing as a source of news. In 2015, around 63% of Facebook and
Twitter users reported using them as a source of news, which represents an increase of
over 10% from 2013 for both platforms (Barthel et al., 2015). Of these two increasingly
popular social media platforms, users are more likely to follow stories they first discover
on Twitter than through other sources, suggesting that Twitter provides more as-it-
happens news (Barthel et al., 2015).

Some of the types of filtering mentioned earlier in this discussion involve the use of social
media and sharing, such as the act of users sharing stories from traditional media
organisations. This type of sharing is also relevant, but of more interest is the way a social
network filters content through the machinations of the network itself, which should be
considered a type of filtering that works in conjunction with those discussed so far.

The filtering of news by social networks is perhaps the least understood type of internet
content filter with most research into news and social media focussing on the input and
activities of traditional media organisations as they adapt to the shift to online news
delivery and the use of social media (Hermida et al., 2012). Emerging is research that is
interested in the participatory nature of social media news dissemination (see Costera
Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Hermida et al., 2012; Hermida, 2016; Nielsen &
Schroder, 2014). Other research into news and social media has examined what motivates
social media users to share news stories. Some findings indicate that while users use social
media to source news they are not likely to share it (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015); whereas other research has found that sharing practices are governed by gratifications as shaped by status and socialising (Lee & Ma, 2012).

The distribution and diffusion of information such as news stories tends to follow particular patterns via social networks. Users are more likely to share a story they come across on their social media feed if their friends have shared or liked the story as well (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012). The amount of sharing increases as the number of friends sharing increases (see Bakshy, Karrer, & Adamic, 2009; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Bakshy et al., 2012).

The qualities of the social network of a user are also a predictor of sharing behaviour. Social media users who have many network connections or many “ties” tend to be less likely to share as the high number of “ties” are difficult to maintain and are therefore weakened (Bakshy et al., 2009, 2012). Ultimately, the way information is able to move around an online social network is determined by first, the number of friends a user has, how their friends and connections share or interact with information, and the gratification and status sharing might earn the user. This procedure is further influenced by how often the user visits the social media site and their feed, and how often they have shared or liked particular stories in the past (Bakshy et al., 2015).

To summarise this last filter, it is one that is most influenced by the actions and behaviour of the people who constitute a user’s social network. The day-to-day behaviours of the social network are a series of decisions about what content to share, what content to like and what post or tweet to comment on. As discussed further below, this behaviour has the potential to influence the cross-section of stories and information that may come to be consumed by a social media user. Decisions to share are based in part on gratification derived through social judgements related to status, which by definition relies on a judgement about what peers will find relevant or informative at any given time (Lee & Ma, 2012). When this filter is considered alongside those discussed throughout this chapter, a picture emerges of a wide-reaching set of actions that influence the availability of risk information. They are user generated in the case of content curation, shaped by a digital extension of the self in the case of algorithm or user profile filtering, and socially
formed through social network interactions. The place of experiential discourse in this personalised news environment is discussed in the following section.

9.2.1 The ‘Filter Bubble’

‘Filter bubble’ is a term first coined by Eli Pariser, a co-founder of the website upworthy.com (Pariser, 2011).

The basic code at the heart of the new Internet is pretty simple. The new generation of Internet filters looks at things you seem to like—actual things you’ve done, or the things people like you like—and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you’ll do and want next. Together these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us—what I’ve come to call a filter bubble—which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information (Pariser, 2011, p. 8).

As the quotation above suggests, the filter bubble is wide-reaching, with the potential to play a significant role in attempts to understand how people who utilise digital information sources come to view the real world and the social world, in particular ways. In an outcome often assumed as problematic, a filter bubble can ‘inadvertently amplify ideological segregation by automatically recommending content an individual is likely to agree with’ (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016, p. 299). In this discussion, the filter bubble is an outcome of the user curation and other forms of filtering discussed above. Figure 9.8 highlights these various elements of the filter bubble.

Much of the recent attention on the filtered nature of online content, particularly news content, has revolved around the effect of the filter bubble on politics. When considered in the political realm, in both the narrow and broad meaning of the term, the effect of filtering on democratisation and knowledge is often the focus (Borgesius et al., 2016).
Figure 9.8: The personalised news environment

2016 has seen a great deal of media coverage that has discussed the influence of the filter bubble on the democratic process. The impetus for much of this coverage has been the unexpected outcomes of the British referendum that saw the United Kingdom vote to leave the European Union (commonly referred to as “Brexit”; see Bell, 2016; Holone, 2016; MacManus, 2016; Waddington, 2016), and the republican nomination and eventual
victory of Donald Trump in the United States presidential election (see Baer, 2016; El-Bermawy, 2016; Jackson, 2017; Wilson, 2016; Wong, Levin, & Solon, 2016).

A key contention of this media coverage is that the age of the filter bubble has arrived and that its influence on political outcomes is now part of the democratic process. This conclusion has spurred on the development of new terms, chief among them “post-truth”, which was named the Oxford Dictionaries’ ‘Word of the Year’ for 2016. Such discussions are focused on ideological influences of content filtering. The filter bubble is argued to select content based on past interests and behaviour. The related idea of an “echo chamber”—which relates mostly to social filtering but also past interests and behaviour—argues that we are potentially only exposed to information from like-minded people. The presumed outcome of both of these is an information environment that is ‘devoid of attitude challenging content’ (Bakshy et al., 2015, p. 1130). News and therefore risk information that is found through social media leads to higher ideological segregation (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016).

Interestingly, Hermida et al. (2012) also found that those who consumed news via social networks were of the belief that ‘their social circles provide them with a broader range of news and information than if they relied solely on traditional media’ (p. 820). It was found that 59% of respondents were of this belief, and this percentage grew to 69% among younger news consumers (Hermida et al., 2012). This finding is in stark contrast to the presumed effect of the filter bubble where audience members are thought to be receiving a narrowed range of news information, though not necessarily a smaller number of stories overall. A possible explanation for this presumption can be found in the paradigm of homophily, where individuals are more likely to connect with others who share the same core values and sets of beliefs as themselves (Bakshy et al., 2015). However, Hermida et al. (2012) report that online news audience members in their study said they felt the range of news provided through social recommendation was broader. This finding suggests that simple homophily is not a good explanation for this when “broadness” is considered as a wider range of stories and topics.

The ideological alignment of those presumed to be affected by the outcomes of the filter bubble, while contested, is the most examined and demonstrated outcome. In terms of the effects on democratic processes, there have been several attempts in the mainstream
media to highlight and to some extent test these. For example, the *Guardian* has produced several articles recently asking readers to “get out of” or “burst” their bubble by exposing themselves to alternative political and ideological views (see Wilson, 2016; Wong et al., 2016).

Increased ideological segregation as a result of filter bubbles or echo chambers has its most overt manifestation in politics. However, while often political, the ideologies used to provide context for responses to risk, for example, could nonetheless influence risk managing behaviour; that is, both the identification of exigent and unintended risks as well as the management of everyday risk—the way of living that avoids negative outcomes—‘is no longer concerned with attaining something good but rather preventing the worst’ (Beck, 1992, p. 49).

**9.3 The Personalised News Environment and Experiential Discourse**

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the links between the results of the current research detailed in the previous chapters and the personalised news environment as outlined above. My aim in this discussion is not to make conclusive claims about the precise nature of risk communication and online/social media as this is beyond the scope of this research. My aim, rather, is to provide a framework for understanding how future discussions of this may be able to incorporate the ongoing and rapid changes in media environments with considerations of discourse and authority.

This research found that news audiences invest authority in news information and knowledge that is experiential, in preference to information presented via experts. It is also important to remember that in the context of traditional media sources (these represent one-to-many communication) the information is conveyed through experiences of others and therefore the often used nomenclature of “lay” information as a counterpoint to “expert” information does not fit well. It was concluded in the previous chapter that experiential knowledge should be understood as discourse, which gains authority through the demands of a reflexive and simultaneously self-disciplining information consumer.
In terms of the traditional media content and audience, experiential knowledge presents through narrative, through familiar characters and presentation of information that is readily understood due to its structure. When we move to consider the changes to the media environment discussed above, it would be understandable to assume that the social and online mediation of curation and filtering is both a new technology and simultaneously a new format. If considered through the lens of experiential knowledge as discourse, online and social media—while a new delivery technology—is tailored to the demands of the reflexive individual as conceived of in this thesis.

The determinants of the personalised news environment strongly suggest that the online audience is more likely to receive information that aligns with their interests. A more accurate definition for interests draws on the risk society–reflexivity position of interests. In the risk society, for the reflexive individual, interests would be better considered as risks to be managed. These are the everyday risks of reflective modernity, getting a job, finding a partner (see Beck, 1992, 2002, 2009a; Zinn, 2009a). The management of these risks, or potential risks, is carried out in an increasingly uncertain world where restrictive structures such as class have been lifted. In the personalised news environment, the information that reaches the individual will be tailored to these interests due to curation and filtering.

Here we have a first budding link with experiential knowledge as authority in this online medium. There is potential for increased perceptions of legitimacy and authority as audiences themselves influence both the topic and type of information most likely to reach them. There is the possibility for an amplification of the need to manage particular risks through a feedback loop. The online audience member directly influences the likelihood of certain topics and news stories reaching them based on their curation preferences in the first instance, and then based on less visible determinants such as the “user profile” created through search and browsing history, as discussed above. This influence creates a personalised information environment that, through attempting to adapt to the interests of the user, reinforces or amplifies the user’s perception of a need to consider a particular issue or risk as urgent or increasingly in need of management. The feedback loop increases interest and generates immediacy and urgency, and convinces the user of the legitimacy of their concerns and attempts to deal with them using information obtained.
from a variety of sources. This loop is best defined as a form of reflexive self-surveillance and subsequent self-discipline with the individual increasingly convinced to act according to their moral obligations, in particular the moral obligation to avoid risk (Denney, 2005).

Another key consideration is the nebulous link between social sharing of news and experiential knowledge. The link is the unspoken authority that comes from the act of sharing. Hermida et al. (2012) demonstrated that many social media users who report viewing news information via social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter did not turn to social media versions of media sources such as journalists for their news information. They instead found that ‘a significant number of social media users tend to rely on the people around them to tell them what they need to know rather than relying on institutional media sources’ (Hermida et al., 2012, p. 819). This is experiential discourse operating in a straightforward and explicit way; comparisons can be drawn with the findings of this research, which demonstrates a central claim of this thesis, that this preference did not emerge out of the shift to online and social media personalised information environments. Rather, it demonstrably preceded this change.

Social sharing as outlined above becomes a type of experiential proxy as well. It is one that prioritises and triages risk information, including that from expert sources. For much of this information, veracity is judged by the act of sharing and commenting or “liking”, and as discussed above, a social media user is more likely to engage with information, and share stories with others, if it has been shared by members of their social network (see Bakshy et al., 2009, 2012). This preference is a form of online or digital parrhesia where judgements are made by the information consumer about the validity of information that is based on who they receive it from rather than the rational validity of the information itself. The key difference is that the parrhesiatic truth game is based first on the source of the information in an environment where risk information flows from many-to-many rather than the traditional one-to-many (Bruns, 2015a). This is a strong comparison as one-to-many traditional media presentations incorporated elements now found in many-to-many social sharing—experiential proxies—into the information structure. The function of experiential proxies has simply shifted to the sharing process prior to information consumption, as well as possibly remaining in the risk information structure, depending on the information structure of the source.
Risk information that is accepted and therefore taken to be part of a broad range of news may have been rejected if presented differently or coming to the news audience through a different channel. If various news were to be rejected for this reason, a news consumer may be unlikely to view themselves as exposed to a broader range of news. A more accurate understanding may not be that social media users are not exposed to a broader range of news but are more likely to trust and accept a broader range of news presented through social recommendation.

The above processes are also a surveillance of the body in the governmentality sense, though with some clear departures. The filter bubble and related personalised information environment becomes a reflexive regime of surveillance that is driven by the user’s demand for risk-negotiating information granted authority through experiential knowledge and parrhesia. As a departure, it is a type of surveillance that is enacted through the reflexive activity of the user, both through all stages of the formation of the filter bubble: social profiles, social filtering and curation. Curation and user profiles strongly influence the reflection of life course risk, as well as general, exigent risk. Social filtering becomes a reflection, as a reflective (rather than reflexive) arbiter of life course in the immediate social milieu of the user.

The digital self, the user profile as a projection of an individual’s risk management interests, becomes a form of identity. It is a projected form of the self. When discussing bodies and technology in a visceral sense, Aas (2006) argues that contemporary technology does not see the body as something to be disciplined. It is instead, a source of precision and accuracy. A similar explanation can be levelled at the filter bubble and the user profile that drives it from within. There is a race going on for precision, for up-to-date and accurate data about the self that both the user profile and the filter bubble represents. It is a ‘translation of human identity into information’ (Aas, 2006, p. 144). It then goes on to provide not only increased information but new understandings of identity as well (Aas, 2006).

As discussed earlier, status has been identified as a driver of news and information sharing among social media groups (see Bakshy et al., 2009, 2012). Sharing then becomes a technique of surveillance, albeit a socially driven one, which is reinforced by the idea of
risk as defined by Dean (1998) as a type of rationality and as a way of thinking about and representing events.

From this and drawing from Castel (1991, p. 295) we can position the projected self and the resultant filter bubble as administrator:

more the projection of an order than an imposition of an order on the given, this way of thinking is no longer obsessed with efficiency. Its chief artisan is no longer the practitioner on the ground, who intervenes in order to fill a gap or prevent one from appearing, but the administrator who plans out trajectories and sees to it that human profiles match up to them.

The positioning of the projected self as a form of surveillance fits the administrator model as there is no watcher and watched. Castel (1991) argues that this relationship of watcher and watched is no longer possible as there is no longer a subject. As mentioned in earlier in this thesis, techniques aimed at prevention ‘deconstruct the concrete subject of intervention and reconstruct a combination of factors liable to produce risk’ (Castel, 1991, p. 288). The projected self and resulting filter bubble administrates. At best the reflexive individual becomes the instrument of their own administration. This change does not represent a new type of risk communication but is an extension of an earlier shift of ‘subject position’.

9.4 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to explore the contemporary online news and information environment in light of the main findings of this research. This main finding posits experiential knowledge as discourse given authority by reflexive, risk-conscious individuals. This is a reflection of the relationship between narrative sources and consumers as detailed earlier in this thesis. In this chapter, however, this analysis is extended to new forms of online media content. Applying these findings suggests that the relationship between the user and contemporary information sources that are curated/filtered remains one where experiential knowledge carries significant authority as discourse.
The concept of experiential proxies and parhesia is suggested through various elements of online news consumption. That is to say content is filtered through the risk managing actions of the online news user. There is a clear relationship here with the findings of this thesis regarding how consumers place trust in experiential knowledge, as reflected in the growing preference for news found through social media. There is also a potentially significant reorganisation of this relationship. A desire for information that allows the management of ‘everyday’ risks, coupled with the nature of online information aggregation, leads to a news environment that potentially becomes a reflection of the user’s risk management concerns. That is, the personalised news environment as discussed in this chapter is shaped by the user’s risk managing behaviour prior to consumption, and this may occur in a way that remains invisible to the user.

This is an area that deserves further consideration and the theoretical position developed in this thesis may provide a new and powerful lens for future investigations into online and social media and risk communication. In particular, considerations of projected self, a form of identity that is then acted upon in acts of risk communication provides a potentially theoretical lens.
Chapter 10: Conclusion

This study set out to investigate risk communication between the news media and their audience. An aim of this research was to examine how the news media communicates information about risk, positioning the narrative structure in the news media as a form of experiential knowledge. Answering the question of how this non-expert knowledge can attain authority was also a central aim of this thesis. The theoretical model developed out of this analysis was then applied to contemporary media sources such as online news and the digital/social media. This final chapter reviews and draws together the major themes discussed throughout this thesis; and identifies some of the limitations of this research and implications for future examinations of risk, especially those examining the transmission of risk information through new digital news environments. Finally, I discuss some possible areas of future research.

10.1 News Media Narratives and Experiential Knowledge

The risk society thesis of Ulrich Beck (1992, 2006, 2009a) remains a contested theoretical position. In light of other approaches to risk, such as governmentality, there are disputed claims about how risk is communicated and how it is understood by individuals. This research has examined the claims made by proponents of the reflexive modernity thesis, such as Beck and Giddens, which positions the late modern individual as “cast adrift” amid competing risk discourses and bodies of knowledge. Further, in reflexive modernity everything, including everyday decisions, is understood and treated as a risk. The results of this research have lent support to the idea that the late modern individual does tend to be normatively risk averse.

A gap that arises when considering this theoretical position is precisely this image of the constantly uncertain risk communication audience member who is left no real avenue to certainty in Beck’s risk society. The risk society views late modernity and reflexivity as dislocating, diminishing the ability for individuals to manage their lives through traditional social structures (Beck, 1992, 2001). Alternatively, the governmentality approach suggests that expert knowledge retains authority as a source of information used
for managing risks. This position has, however, been criticised for focussing on a passive recipient of expert knowledge about risk (see Hoskins & Tulloch, 2016; Tulloch, 2009). This thesis finds that selected content of pre-internet television news demonstrates a lack of experts and a lack of knowledge presented by experts directly when information about risks is communicated.

Through an analysis of Australian television current affairs programs, this study has found that these programs generally construct a story format that draws on traditional narrative as a form of information structure (Lacey, 2000). The results of this research have shown that there was identifiable narrative structure present within the news stories examined, although the narrative structure was not completely consistent across the differing stories.

Through a critical analysis of this narrative structure, this research found an often-marked signification of what can be considered as a starting equilibrium, and a subsequent disruption to this equilibrium, when information is presented in narrative form. Most often this state of equilibrium is presented not explicitly, but as experienced by the characters of the narrative. When this equilibrium is disrupted, by the villain so to speak, it is shown to audiences as an effect on the original character. This original character, or characters in some cases, then becomes the victim of the narrative. The use of narrative in this way may seem a necessity in any news story but the relationship the viewer has with the characters of the narrative arises as central in this analysis. A significant finding is that this process of meaning construction was taking place within stories that were risk focussed, however, often the risk was an everyday risk, rather than a large-scale or exigent risk such as a disaster or manufactured catastrophe. Many of the stories had a consumer focus, so the risk that was discussed was about how to make sure you select the best washing powder—the risk being that you will waste your money on a washing powder that will produce inferior results.

Another significant finding to emerge from this thesis is that the narrative structure employed by these current affairs programs is presented in a way that ensures the characters shown are understood by audiences as experiential proxies of the viewer. For example, the victim was situated within the narrative as a hindrance or obstacle to a successful return to the original equilibrium, indicating that inherent to the narrative
structure employed was a discourse of self-responsibilisation that was passed on to the viewer through the experiential proxies. It was also clear from this analysis that there was rarely characters within the narrative that could be considered “experts” in a traditional sense. The majority of the risk information presented within these narratives was done so by characters other than those who could be considered experts.

When presented as narrative, risk communication provided to the news audience is presented in a way that assumes a risk-averse audience. The use of experiential knowledge in place of expert knowledge supports the contention that the late modern audience does mistrust experts and expert knowledge. Further, it suggests that risk information conveyed through the experience of others is utilised by late modern individuals to create their own risk biographies and approaches to managing risk. This is a significant finding and suggests a need to question the claim of the governmentality position that in the realm of everyday risks, particularly those covered by the news media, expert knowledge retains a privileged position.

10.2 Media Utility

A further major finding of this research is that experiential proxies were related very directly to the perceived utility of this information type to viewers. In this research most respondents reported a basic utility of these programs, which was seen as a function whereby these programs provided information that respondents felt they would not be able to get elsewhere and that it was information they needed to know in order to manage their lives in a risk-averse way. This pattern was particularly prevalent in older, less technologically savvy respondents who may, due to their age, possess smaller social networks than other respondents or be less able to utilise technology. Other age groups and demographics were more likely to couple their viewing with other activities such as discussing the information provided by these programs with other viewers such as family and workmates.

This study has found that audiences do act on information provided by these programs and therefore through experiential proxies. Often the act was some sort of purchase made based on a story about a consumer product. Several respondents indicated that they would
be more likely to act on such information if it was presented through experiential proxies rather than through expert testimony. This outcome was evident across all age groups and demographics, although the reason for this did vary. Taken together, these results indicate that risk-averse audiences utilise this type of risk communication in very direct ways, and this utilisation is often related to their life stages and personal biographies. The finding that an individual’s preference for knowledge gained through experiential proxies is directly related to their needs and personal biographies, suggests a reflexive information consumer that makes judgements about the truth or validity of risk information based on who is telling them.

10.3 Parrhesia, Authority and Reflexive Discourse

This research has offered a framework for understanding the mechanism that allows experiential knowledge to achieve authority, drawing on parrhesia (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). While this study did confirm the preference for experiential knowledge, this preference was not always at the expense of expert knowledge. There were clear indications that respondents did, when constructing meaning, evaluate the speaker when deciding if they were a trustworthy or reliable source, in line with the theoretical position developed through the earlier stages of this thesis.

There is potentially a point where subjectivity and experience need to be unpacked if making claims about experiential knowledge carrying discursive power. Knowledge gained through the experience of others is knowledge expressed through the subjective experience of another. Therefore, to be meaningful, the knowledge has to carry a framework that allows the audience to see it beyond just subjective experience. Contrary to this finding is a view that would position subjectivity as empowering rather than limiting—empowering in the sense that the receiver of experiential knowledge as discourse may be more willing to accept the information and adapt to it as a normative force because it is representative of subjective experience.

Parrhesia suggests that it is the experience of knowing and then imparting knowledge that gives the knowledge credibility. Having experience of risk and choosing to then share this experience is itself a claim to truth. They are experiencing risk and also making sense
of the information and then choosing to pass it on. The audience is aware of this requirement and takes it into consideration. It is not essential that the experiential proxy offers some concrete solution to the risk. Rather, this risk communication is a particular type of truth game where the truth and acceptability of the information provided is judged not only on its rational validity but also on the position of the speaker.

These findings also support the governmentality view of risk, with limitations. In reflexive modernity, the status of someone who has experienced the outcomes of a risk is one of authority. The self-disciplining, late modern subject views this knowledge as legitimate and acts on it, therefore it has discursive power. This is not dissimilar to the governmentality model of the modern or neoliberal relationship between expert knowledge and audiences. However, in late modern risk communication, this is discursive power based on the reflexive nature of the audience who are disenchanted by expert knowledge, as this research has demonstrated. They are in need of knowledge they anoint as legitimate in order to manage their risk-averse lives. It is a significant finding and claim of this research that experiential knowledge is reflexive discourse and late modern, self-disciplining individuals act on it accordingly. This is the first study that has proposed a model of risk communication that potentially explains how audiences invest authority in experiential, non-expert knowledge. This study therefore offers a unique amalgamation of the risk society and governmentality positions concerning risk and risk communication which positions experiential knowledge as reflexive and simultaneously as a type of knowledge through which subjects can be governed.

The central position of experiential knowledge pre-dates current shifts in media environments, and this preference pre-dates the rise in popularity of online news and news that is delivered through online social networks. These findings demonstrate that it would therefore be a mistake to conflate the popularity of the online and social media environment and the emergence of a preference for experiential knowledge. The findings of this research demonstrate that online news information is curated and filtered based on the interests and life stage of the audience. This should be understood as an extension of the above preference for reflexive discourse, rather than a source of this demand. The same can be said of news and information that is filtered and shared through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. While it is impossible to separate the social
aspects from the processes that bring risk communication and audiences together through these mediums, the experiential basis of this information is not an outcome of these technologies. The ability for the user to project their preferences for information through user profiles, or the inherent echo chambers or filter bubbles constructed through the social nature of social networks, creates news sites for reflexive discourse to act on the user, rather than simply limiting the types of information available to them.

This research has gone some way towards explaining the initial observation that expert knowledge is lacking in discussions of risk in both traditional and emerging news media environments. This study also lends support to the risk society position that the authority of expert knowledge is undermined in late modernity and that this is extending into the online risk information environment. These findings provide significant insight into ways the governmentality view of risk can be applied to information environments such as online and social media.

10.4 Limitations and Future Directions

The scope of this study was limited by examining one particular traditional media information source—current affairs television news programs. The findings detailed in this thesis may be specific to this one particular source of information. However, there is evidence that the use of narrative was also increasingly popular in other media formats prior to the shift to online news formats (see Bird & Dardenne, 1990; Bragg, 2000; French, 2000). These findings may not be generalisable across other forms of risk communication through the media that are not as easily able to draw on experiential proxies, such as print media. There are some signs, however, that emerging media formats such as podcasts are embracing the use of experiential proxies.

Another significant limitation of this study is a lack of consideration of risk-averse audiences. As discussed in chapter two, the edgework theoretical position questions that assumption that all risk is viewed negatively and therefore all individuals naturally avoid risk and uncertainty (see Lyng, 2008). This research did not investigate this proposition.
A further limitation of this research is a lack of historical comparisons of media use where proxies, as defined in this research, may be found. To expand our understanding of this, future research could examine this concept of experiential proxies across other timeframes and media sources.

A principal limitation of this research is a small sample size. While the information gathered from the respondents in this research has been useful in drawing the above conclusions, an expanded investigation would strengthen future research. The broadness of the concept of risk used in this research is a related limitation. To overcome this, future reflexive discourse research may find that more nuanced results are possible when examining specific risks, or specific types of risks.

The above limitations, however, leads to some important possible future directions for reflexive discourse research; research that still has as its focus, contemporary forms of authority and risk communication. This research has examined the personalised online risk information environment. A useful avenue for future research would be to examine further ways reflexive discourse may influence online news audiences. The popularity of user-driven information sources such as Wikipedia or user forums is also worth examining as a new authority and information source informed by the reflexive discourse position formulated in this thesis. As mentioned, while it is easy to see these new media and information forms as just that—new—these findings show that the relationship between this type of information and its users is not the fluid pastiche some have suggested but rather a simple reformulation of a discursive truth game whose basis can be found in traditional media formats as well. This presents a significant application of the findings of this thesis. That is, the concept of experiential proxies and authority through Parrhesia can be used as a theoretical lens for research concerned with the impact of user-driven media content – content that is, as discussed is chapter nine, expanding exponentially in online and digital formats.

Central to this research is an attempt to discuss the nature of truth and authority in late modernity and the media–audience relationship. Though discussed at length in this thesis, truth and authority are utilised as instruments of investigation. Therefore, this thesis is limited as a media study. It is due to this limitation that the theoretical discussion within
this thesis and the theoretical conclusions it makes are based on a purposely limited analysis of the media–audience relationship. This research was only able to examine a limited set of risk communication interactions. While I would argue that the theoretical position developed here is one that synthesises the risk society and governmentality positions concerning risk, there would be much to be gained by testing these assumptions against a wider range of risk communication formats. Similarly, research that examined large-scale and exigent risks through the lens of reflexive discourse would add much to our understanding of risk communication more generally.

10.5 Conclusions

To close, the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of this work, including the ideas of the risk theorists like Beck, have been criticised for failing to pay due attention to the cultural milieu in which meaning construction about risk takes place. The theoretical position developed in this thesis provides a discussion that may help to develop a fuller understanding of contemporary developments in the relationship between risk-averse individuals, and social and cultural sources of information, old and new. This relationship exists in a rapidly changing media environment where the validity of facts is based on their utility to help us avoid risks coupled with their claim to authority as experiential knowledge.

The central conclusion of this research is that late modernity arises as a period that can be seen as problematising the late modern subject’s relationship with traditional forms of risk communication. It does not erase the self-constituting subject’s desire for knowledge that can be trusted and relied on—quite the opposite. The self-constituting subject still exists in a particular truth game were they make judgements about who can tell them the truth. This is a truth game that has been ongoing and the results presented here suggest that it is not the subject that changes; rather, it is their relationship with acceptable forms of knowledge. The findings of this thesis therefore can find utility in examinations of authority and knowledge where contemporary forms of Governmentality may be present and cannot be successfully explained through considerations of expert driven discourse as a source of discursive power.
As an increasing number of political and policy issues are discussed in terms of their inherent risks, the role of experts and expert knowledge is increasingly a source of open debate and even hostility. “Truth games”, that are central to reflexive discourse as developed in this thesis, finds new prescience in an era of “alternative facts” where an open distrust of expert discourse is utilised as political ideology. This emancipation from expert knowledge is perhaps not the liberating turn some would argue it to be. Just as expert discourse has been conceived of previously, reflexive discourse is a way of governing populations that depends on our disenchantment with expert knowledge, just as expert discourse once implored a rejection of previous ways of coming to understand the world.
References

Please note – this thesis employs the APA 6th referencing style.


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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Please tick the appropriate box(s) for, or answer in the space provided, the following questions:

1. Male   □
          Female □

2. Age    ____________________________

3. Marital Status
          Single □
          Married/defacto Partner □

4. Do you have any children?
          Yes □
          No □

4a If yes, how many? ____________________________

5. What is your occupation? ____________________________

6. What is your approximate household income?

   • $0 - $25,000pa □
   • $25,000 - $50,000pa □
   • $50,000 - $75,000pa □
7. What suburb/town do you live in? __________________________

8. What is your residential status?

- Own your own residence
- Rent
- Live in the home of your family
- Other

If other, please specify
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________

9. Do you have access to the internet?

Yes  ☐

No  ☐

9a. If yes, where is this access located?

- At home  ☐
- At work  ☐
- Other  ☐

If other please specify: _________________________________________
10. Do you regularly watch/listen to the daily news on

- Television
- Radio
- Neither

11. Do you regularly read any of the following newspapers?

- The Daily Telegraph
- The Sydney Morning Herald
- The Australian
- Other

If other please specify

12. Please indicate which, if any, of the following television shows you watch

- **The 7:30 report** (Mon – Thur, 7:30pm, ABC)

  Yes  No

  If yes, how regularly do you watch it?

  - Every night
  - Most nights
  - Some nights
  - Hardly ever
As a source of information, how would you rate this program? (Please circle the appropriate number)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Poor Average Excellent

- **A Current Affair** (Mon – Fri, 6:30pm, Ch 9)

Yes [ ] No [ ]

If yes, how regularly do you watch it?

- Every night [ ]
- Most nights [ ]
- Some nights [ ]
- Hardly ever [ ]

As a source of information, how would you rate this program? (Please circle the appropriate number)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Poor Average Excellent

- **Today Tonight** (Mon – Thur, 6:30pm, Ch 7)

Yes [ ] No [ ]

If yes, how regularly do you watch it?
• Every night  
• Most nights  
• Some nights  
• Hardly ever  

As a source of information, how would you rate this program? (Please circle the appropriate number)

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
Poor  Average  Excellent

• **Four Corners** (Mon 8:30pm, ABC)

  Yes  [ ]  No  [ ]

  If yes, how regularly do you watch it?

  • Every night  
  • Most nights  
  • Some nights  
  • Hardly ever  

As a source of information, how would you rate this program? (please circle the appropriate number)
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- **60 Minutes** (Sun, 7:30pm, Ch 9)
  
  Yes ☐  No ☐

  If yes, how regularly do you watch it?
  
  - Every night ☐
  - Most nights ☐
  - Some nights ☐
  - Hardly ever ☐

As a source of information, how would you rate this program? (please circle the appropriate number)

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- **Other News Programs** (Please Specify)

  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
If yes, how regularly do you watch it?

- Every night □
- Most nights □
- Some nights □
- Hardly ever □

As a source of information, how would you rate this program? (please circle the appropriate number)

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13. Can you think of a time when information from any of the five programs listed in question 12 have been of practical use to you? (If so please specify which program and how the information was used in the space provided below)
This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for participating. Please place the completed questionnaire in the envelope provided and put it in the mail.

We are also looking for people who have filled out this questionnaire and would be willing to take part in an interview to discuss further the topics mentioned above. The interview will only take up a small amount of your time and can be scheduled for a time and place suitable to you.

If you would be interested in talking further to us, please provide your name and contact details below.

Please Note – Only fill out this part if you are willing to take part in an interview.

Name

Contact Number

And/Or

Contact email
Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Section 1

Questions related to questionnaire results

NIGHTLY SHOWS

- You mentioned in the questionnaire that you watch ______ hardly ever/sometimes/regularly—How many nights a week do you watch it?

- How many people are there in your household?

- How many people in your household watch it with you? (If more than one).

- Would you say that the shows generate a lot of discussion in your household?

- In what way?

- Expand on answers

As above for weekly shows.

Questions related to relationship to content

Key words to ask respondents to expand on if present—trust, belief, experience.

- Of the shows you watch, you indicated that you thought _______ was a poor/average/excellent source of information—In what ways?

- (Of shows rated as a good source of information) Why is it a good source?

- In general, what types of stories do you think are the most important (topics etc.)?

- (Of shows rated as a poor source of information, but still watched regularly)—Why is it a poor source?
- You indicated that you do not, or very rarely, watch ________, is there a reason for this?

- (if above response indicates an inability due to time constraints or similar)—would you watch it otherwise?

- (If response indicates a dislike of content)—what is it about the show that you don’t like?

- What could be done to improve it?

Section 2

Identification of topics considered important by respondent

- Can you think of any topics/issues/stories you have seen in any of these shows recently?

- Can you tell me what was in the story?

Respondents’ understanding of the issue identified

- Do you think this is an important issue?

- (If Yes)What makes it an important issue?

- What are the main factors of this issue that make it important?
- (If No) What makes it an unimportant issue?

- Who are the main players in this issue?

- Are you or anyone you know likely to be affected by this issue?

- In what ways?

- Have you discussed this issue with anyone—perhaps family/friends/workmates?

- Can you remember what sort of things you discussed (in relation to the identified topic)?