

The Trouble with the Fourth Estate

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Hello. We're here tonight to discuss the potential for bloggers to become the new fourth estate – which immediately raises two questions: 1) which bloggers? and 2) what do we mean by fourth estate?

Let me start with the first. I think we need to be careful not to overclaim on what the role of bloggers in political discourse is, or can be – and I've done my research in this field for the best part of the past decade, and am probably as guilty of overestimating the impact of blogging as the next person. When we're speaking of bloggers as a potential fourth estate, we're really mainly speaking of the minority of news and political bloggers, and much less so of the majority of bloggers who cover all manner of other themes, from providing updates on their or their company's professional activities all the way through individuals blogging on themes like sports, crafts, food, or highly personal matters.

From the research that we've done in the past few years, in Australia there are probably some 200 bloggers who can be said to deal with news and politics on a regular basis – and that's already starting to include the so-called 'bloggers' on the opinion pages of many newspaper Websites, and the commentary feeds of sites like *Crikey* and *On Line Opinion*, which are really far more than simple blogs. Compare that to at least ten to twenty times as many bloggers whose core focus is on other themes, and you get a sense of why I'm suggesting that to speak of 'blogs' overall as a potential new fourth estate is an overstatement.

That's not to say that those other blogs don't count, of course – many of them will also have something political to say at least occasionally, from 'oh, I don't like the way that Julia replaced that poor Mr Rudd' to 'I'm an IT professional, and I think the Coalition's lack of basic policy knowledge on broadband is offensive'. All of those blogs form part of our extended public sphere, or of whatever much more complex network of publics has today replaced the nicely ordered, but ultimately overly simplistic public sphere as envisaged by Habermas. But to consider them to be part of 'the fourth estate', whatever we mean by that term, probably goes a little too far.

So, in the discussion that follows, let's agree that when we're saying 'bloggers', we really mean 'news and political bloggers'. Are they the new fourth estate? Do they have the potential to be? That brings me to my second question: what we actually mean by that term 'the fourth estate'.

To be perfectly frank with you – I find the concept rather confusing in its lack of clarity. Traditionally, I guess, the idea of the three estates dates back to the three sectors of society which were represented in the British parliament: the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners. Adding journalism to that list strikes me as a category error, and how bloggers fit in over the top of all that is anyone's guess. We've moved on from the three estates as defined in those terms, anyway.

A second, more promising model in which journalism can play the fourth role, then, takes us away from the medieval estates altogether. In a true democracy, all power originates from the people, and is bestowed on the three pillars of the democratic system, who check and balance each other: the legislative (the elected parliament, representing the people); the executive (the government, elected on the basis of its ability to form a stable majority in parliament); and the judicative (the courts, selected on merit but with some degree of political supervision). This separation of power between the three branches is a fundamental tenet of democratic rule – although I might mention in passing that the English term 'separation' has never sounded

quite right to me: in the German *Gewaltenteilung*, for example, *Teilung* implies both a *partitioning* and a *sharing* of power, or in other words, constructive cooperation rather than mere separation.

Anyway, you know all this, hopefully – which means you’re one up on a former premier of Queensland, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, who, when asked about his understanding of the separation of powers in the Westminster system, famously waffled ‘well, I think, the system of election; the system; the area of Government itself; responsibility to the people...’, as Evan Whitton reports (231).

My point in discussing all of this is the following: if we move away from the concept of the medieval estates, and towards the even more ancient idea of the three separate but cooperative powers in a democratic state, then the concept of mainstream journalism – and perhaps, news and political bloggers – as a fourth component in the system is starting to make some sense. That journalism begins to be seen as a fourth component, and even as a *necessary*, crucial fourth component at that, is a result of the formation of modern nation states and the introduction of universal suffrage, of course: a democratic state in which all citizens are encouraged to participate in general elections – or are even compelled to do so, as is the case in Australia – depends crucially on the ability of those citizens to make an informed, intelligent choice from the options presented to them by the various parties vying for their vote. In addition to the legislative, executive, and judicative, journalism takes on a democratic role as the informative.

Mind you – by the same token, we could position civic and political education as just as crucial a fourth component of the democratic system: however well the press might fulfil its informative obligations, if – like Joh – the wider citizenry were to lack the basic knowledge of how democracy works (or is supposed to work), that information would be wasted on barren soil. This is not the place for summary judgments on the quality of the Australian populace’s democratic knowledge, but I think we may safely say that there’s always room for improvement in overall democratic education, and that we certainly cannot afford to go backwards on that front.

But back to journalism’s role as a fourth pillar of democracy, as the ‘informative’ branch of the democratic system – and to the potential for news and political bloggers to replace or complement the mainstream news media in that role. If we are contemplating such a shift – in Australia and elsewhere –, then it is at least in part because the mainstream news media have been found wanting in their execution of their informative role. For a variety of reasons, news media users (citizens, the people) have discovered that there’s more to news and current events than is covered in the news media. Partly, those shortcomings are simply the inevitable consequence of limited time and resources: no journalistic organisation, however well-meaning, can cover all events that may be relevant to its audience all the time, from all possible perspectives; partly, the turn away from mainstream media is also simply a result of the fact that – especially online – so many more channels of information are now readily available: those who wish to do so can now directly access government reports and corporate press releases and no longer need to rely on journalists reporting them.

So far, so good – if journalism’s role as the informative branch is slipping, and if its audiences are declining, then in part that’s simply due to the greater potential for direct agency on part of those audiences: they are now more than ‘just’ audiences; they can become active news seekers and news users themselves; they may even begin to be interested in curating their own collections of news stories on areas which are of interest to them, and in adding their own comments on those stories. News blogging, and even that *bête noire* of industrial journalists, the citizen journalist, is born. When these forms first emerged, some ten years ago now, I summed up their core practices by saying that rather than acting as journalistic gatekeepers, controlling the flow of information to their audiences, these news bloggers and citizen journalists act as *gatewatchers*: they follow what passes through the gates of other organisations (from news publishers to government, NGO, and corporate entities) and collate and comment on what is relevant to their own interests.

But where these gatewatchers, these alternatives to industrially produced news, gain particular impetus is in cases where there is a demonstrable shortcoming in the reports of the mainstream media, well beyond the acceptable limitations in time and resources. News bloggers and citizen journalists shine brightest if the lustre of mainstream journalism has already grown dull, due for example to poor reporting, uninformed commentary, or persistent political spin. In the recent past, we've seen this most notably in the U.S., where in the lead-up to the Iraq war, the mainstream news media's refusal to ask critical questions about those purported Weapons of Mass Destruction (for fear of being branded 'unpatriotic' by a belligerent government) opened a wide space for alternative commentators from the *Huffington Post* to the *Daily Show* to establish themselves as critical voices.

And I'm sorry to say it, but in Australia, too, there clearly are significant shortcomings in the mainstream news media. (I'm afraid I may end up getting a little polemical here, but after the election campaign we've just had, it's really difficult not to.) If you asked me to give you a very quick appraisal of the performance of Australia's main news organisations in their recent political reporting, I'd probably say about the following:

- The commercial TV networks tend not to touch politics at all if they can avoid it – any house fire or hail storm gets higher billing than those finicky political stories, except if there's a juicy scandal or if (à la Laurie Oakes or Mark Latham) they can make themselves the story.
- And where they do, their handling of it is all too often simply execrable. Were Channel Nine a person, for example, you'd put them under observation for a tendency to self-harm – the ill-considered Latham stunt has now destroyed what little credibility that bastion of self-righteousness, *60 Minutes*, still had left – and the less said about Nine's and Seven's promos for their election night coverage (Hollywood blockbuster style the one, bad politician impersonators the other), the better. *The Chaser's* criticism of them let them off far too lightly.
- The ABC is barely keeping up with reporting what's happening today; for the most part, they're hoping major stories will break during normal office hours – and if they don't, like the Gillard spill, they'll run at least a couple of pieces the next day on how their heroic reporters braved the dark Canberra streets.
- Fairfax is worried about their continuing slide in quality, due to their diminishing resources, so they're constantly reporting what they think will happen tomorrow, in order to be able to claim to have scooped their competitors the next day if those stories do come true.
- The Murdoch papers – and here, *The Australian* is the worst offender – report from the strange alternate universe inhabited by Dennis Shanahan and his fellow political operatives with such persistence as to turn that fiction into a reality in its own right. At least its slogan is honest: '*The Australian? Think again.*'
- Finally, I'm not quite sure whether even to include *Sky News* here at all, since its being a pay TV channel hardly qualifies it as a mainstream news source – but at any rate, at least since the Rooty Hill fiasco (with an 'impartial' audience which was stacked worse than the LNP branch that preselected Michael Johnson) its credibility has gone well down the drain, too.

I should make one thing perfectly clear here: I'm not at all taking issue with the idea that specific news outlets might embrace particular political leanings. If *The Australian* wants to align itself with the Coalition, for example, that's perfectly legitimate – few Australians will have failed to notice that alignment (and in the

political blogosphere, the *Oz* has long been nicknamed the *Government Gazette* – under Howard – or the *Opposition Organ*, after 2007). The story would be slightly different for our taxpayer-funded public broadcasters, of course – if the claims of ‘ABC bias’ hadn’t been disproven in so many independent studies, we would have grounds for complaint.

No, the only reason that inherent and overt bias in specific commercial media outlets is a problem is Australia’s high concentration of media ownership, and the consequent lack of political diversity in the mainstream media. Contrast the situation in Australia with that in many European countries of similar size, for example: where here, News and Fairfax are essentially dividing the (print and online) newspaper market between them, there, you’ll usually find a much greater diversity of voices at local and national level. A country like Germany – less than four times the size of Australia, in terms of population – has the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* as its equivalent to the *Australian* (a national conservative broadsheet), for example (though they may be a little upset at the comparison), but *also* has national papers which are loosely aligned with, though not uncritical of, its social democrat, liberal, green, and left-wing parties, to name but a few.

And interestingly, over there the phenomenon of citizen journalism and news blogging remains comparatively underdeveloped – in my view, precisely because the level of critical political discourse which takes place in the mainstream media makes the development of alternative news media options less urgent a task. The main exception from the rule is the *Bildblog*, a blog dedicated to correcting errors in Germany’s all-conquering bottom-of-the-barrel tabloid, *Bild*.

So, I would go as far as saying that the presence of a strongly developed alternative media sector – including news blogs, citizen journalism sites, and similar other outlets – is a direct indication that there are significant problems with the mainstream media. However we assess the performance of news blogs and citizen journalism as an alternative fourth estate in Australia – the fact that we’re asking the question in the first place is reason enough to worry about the quality of the mainstream news media in this country.

Indeed, beyond their individual shortcomings, there also has been an overall trend in the Australian news media, more and more away from actual reporting and towards endless commentary and analysis. You would have noticed that around the same time that the dearly departed *Bulletin* closed its doors, dismantling another potential space for investigative reporting, all three major Australian news organisations set up or expanded their venues for news commentary: the ABC introduced *The Drum*, Fairfax re-launched the *National Times*, and News Ltd. threw *The Punch*.

Similarly, news commentary plays a prominent role on the ABC’s new 24-hour news channel – with a *Drum* chat show, and rebroadcasts of various related shows (for example, *The Gruen Transfer*) from the other ABC channels. No doubt there are valid funding reasons for this – but the result is that *ABC News 24* resembles the much-diminished talk-based CNN of the Noughties much more than the more news-focussed CNN of the 80s and early 90s. Thankfully, we’ve been spared the massive interactive visualisation screens or holographic reporters so far, but again I’m not sure whether that’s a budget or an editorial decision.

On the one hand, this could be seen to support the argument that news and political blogs and similar sites are now part of the fourth estate: in many cases, there’s now little difference between the content of Australia’s leading political blogs and those new commentary sites run by industry players – and indeed, there’s even considerable overlap in personnel. *The Drum*, for example, featured pieces by people like Mark Bahnisch, Tim Dunlop, Grog’s Gamut, and Stilgherrian in its election coverage, all of whom are prominent in the first place as Australian political bloggers.

But if what we're seeing here is a kind of blogification of Australian political reporting, then I think that's cause for concern as well. The pendulum, I fear, is swinging all too far towards mere commentary, or worse, pure gossip, which no longer has much basis in the facts, simply because news stories which provide those facts are increasingly drowned out by incessant speculation and interpretation. 'Blogification' isn't even the right term for this, because the best blog posts are always the ones which are based on a solid understanding of the facts, and utilise that understanding to advance the debate. What we're seeing today is, if I take a pessimist reading, better described as a kind of intellectual laziness, most of all on part of those who are actually paid to do better: the journalists.

The best of our blogs publish intelligent and insightful commentary on current political issues – and when they misstep, they still have the excuse that they're doing all of this *pro bono*, out of personal interest rather than as a professional activity. When our journalists and journalistic pundits produce so much poorly reasoned, factually incorrect copy, then that is much more of an issue. When no editor challenges them, because to do so would go against the established media narrative, then we have a real problem. And I think we do. And I think we are beginning to realise that we do: just look at the continuing post-mortem of the media's performance during this election campaign.

So if our media are, if not failing, then certainly not doing their job as well as they should, does this leave the door open for news and political blogs to assume the 'informative' role, the role of the fourth branch? Yes and no. The process of operations which such blogs tend to follow depends on the availability of quality, spin-free news reporting in the first place – not an interpretation of what Gillard and Abbott said at their latest pressers, reduced to a few glib soundbites, but the actual announcements they made. But more often than not, that's no longer what we're getting from the mainstream media – it is not the policies which are reported, but some sideline issue of who leaked what to whom, whether all meetings were attended in person, or what the body language was. Frankly, these are issues which few people outside the Canberra press gallery will care about, but still they dominate our news. And they provide political bloggers with precious little of substance to discuss – indeed, I might go as far as saying that this reporting *drags down* the discussion in political blogs, down to the level of political punditry which is now commonplace in our mainstream media.

Against this, however, political bloggers also do have an increasing amount of direct access to the source materials which previously were available only to professional journalists. I'd applaud *ABC News 24* for showing many press conferences of the election campaign in full (and I hope they'll continue to do so if and when we come out of this electoral death roll), and of course more and more statements, reports, and releases from government, industry, and NGO bodies are made available in full online as well. So, political bloggers are able to do at least some of the direct sourcing that journalists used to do – with the exception of interviews, usually. That's if those bloggers have the time and resources to invest in this process, of course. In other words, in their discussion of political events, these bloggers are now increasingly able to bypass industrial journalism altogether, and go straight to the source.

Where they do, perhaps they do become part of the fourth branch, and perhaps they're even replacing those journalists who are now no more than partisan commentators existing in a relatively fact-free universe. Bloggers as informing the public, journalists as commentators: that would constitute quite a role reversal, considering how both sides have traditionally been perceived. But to really inform the wider public, those bloggers still face the challenge of cutting through the noise machine of the press corps – and except for a few notable trailblazers, I just don't see that happening.

Instead, I'm afraid we're stuck in a muddle, where journalists won't and bloggers can't exercise the informative function with as much energy and commitment as it actually requires – and that's a very problematic state of affairs, especially in a political situation that is as confusing as the one we now find ourselves in.

Reference

Evan Whitton. *The Hillbilly Dictator: Australia's Police State*. Sydney: ABC Books, 1993.