

The Blogification of Australian Journalism? Notes from the Election

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Hi, and thanks for the invitation to speak at this conference. I think I've been asked to speak here as something of an *agent provocateur*, discussing the state of Australian journalism as it appears from the outside looking in, especially in the context of the federal election – and given the subject, I should acknowledge from the start that the following may well turn out to be something of a rant. But let's see.

My overall contention is that from Mark Latham to Grogsgate, from Tony's speedos to Julia's treasonous lack of handbags, Australian political journalism hasn't exactly wowed us with the quality of its coverage these past months – with ample help, it should be noted, from the two sides of politics and the respective small target strategies themselves. Tim Dunlop has gone as far as to suggest that during the election we've seen politics and the media locked in a death spiral (<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/35594.html>) – an observation we might want to take up in the panel discussion – but even without the dramatic language the overall tendency has been that of a race to the bottom in the quality of political discourse in this country, with very few exceptions. And as a result, trust in journalism – the professional esteem in which journalists are held by their audiences – has been steadily declining for some time. Australian journalists are hardly alone in this, of course: this decline is a dynamic which has been observed in many other nations, too.

And yes, there are exceptions – there still are a handful of excellent political journalists in Australia, whose articles are a joy to read –, but the very fact that they stand out so much points to the comparatively modest level of quality with which they have to compete. Would it be an exaggeration to say that mainstream news in Australia consists of 70% badly rewritten agency copy and PR releases, and 30% unsubstantiated gossip and fact-free commentary? Perhaps, but not by much.

Part of the problem is clearly structural – as funding dries up, especially in print, commercial journalism is an industry in decline, with flow-on effects in staffing and resourcing; additionally, journalism also has to contend with the continuing erosion of its authority as a result of the multiplication of media channels since the advent of online media. The effects of this are twofold: one the one hand, not just a decline in quality as such, but more problematically also a decline in the collective will to strive *for* quality; and on the other, a kind of petulant defensiveness (and occasional lashing out) against those alternative media outlets who dare challenge established media narratives or criticise the performance of journalists. And the latter is a malady that seems to be spreading – at first we had the established mainstream media ganging up on *Crikey* and attacking independent political bloggers, but now even *Crikey's* own Eric Beecher has seen fit to take a swipe at the ABC's opinion outlet *The Drum*.

To discuss why this is problematic, let's go back to the very basics for a moment. 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.

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).

And Joh's evident lack of basic democratic knowledge also points to the importance of journalism – in its full breadth, that is, also including political bloggers and other commentators – as an important fourth pillar of democracy. 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 decline in trust which mainstream journalism now faces. This decline 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 (a.k.a. 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 *all* of 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 mainstream 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, and the informative role is shared across a larger number of shoulders. 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.

And as *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger put it in his Olle lecture last week, "we should be pleased, not resentful, that [this user activity] in some measure parasitical – that many of the referrals and links take people to so called legacy media companies, who still invest in original reporting, who still confront authority, find things out, give context and explain" (<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2010/11/19/3071359.htm>). At its best, what emerges here is a symbiosis, rather than a merely parasitical relationship.

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.

In Australia, we've probably not had as extreme a case as this; disenchantment with mainstream journalism here seems to me to be due not to the kind of pre-emptive self-censorship which occurred in U.S. media post-9/11, but rather to a perception that journalists and politicians have formed their own symbiotic relationship of such a co-dependent nature – the 'death spiral' again – that news reports all too often pull their punches or simply regurgitate political talking points. The idea of 'spin' has been the defining theme of the past decade, and while usually originating from political operatives, journalists are just as complicit in its distribution. Those audiences which haven't yet switched off completely are, I think, desperate for journalists beyond the righteous few to finally cut through the fog of weasel words and ask probing questions.

Indeed, I'm only half joking when I say that the greatest journalistic achievements of the past few months came from non-journalists: Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor engaged in some fine investigative reporting to uncover the Coalition's multi-billion dollar costings hole, and Andrew Wilkie deserves a Walkley for investigative reporting for his *News of the World*-style undercover sting that exposed Tony Abbott's billion dollar offer for Tasmanian hospitals. You half expected Wilkie to produce grainy spy-cam footage of the meeting – and given his ASIO background, I still wouldn't rule out its existence.

Again, I'm only partly joking here. True, those independents were people with exceptional access and bargaining power – but the Canberra press gallery are hardly without influence, either. A more significant difference, as far as I can see, is that the independents were able and prepared to ask probing, specific questions of their subjects; they were well across their topics of discussion, and ready to call 'bullshit' when they encountered it.

By contrast, the focus of most journalists covering the election seemed to be on political gossip and the distractions of the campaign trail, rather than on any meaningful content. *Sky News* stooped as low as trotting out a body language analyst to evaluate the first public meeting between Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, to present us with the staggering insight that, guess what, they don't like one another all that much at the moment; Nine drove a final stake into the festering carcass that is *60 Minutes* by hiring Mark Latham to play a psychopathic campaign stalker. And print outlets hardly fared any better, prompting the then-pseudonymous blogger at *Grog's Gamut* to observe that Australian news media largely cover *politics* rather than *policies*:

There's a dearth of ability to write and comment about [policy] in Australia's media. It is why blogs such as Possum's and others flourish. And it's why 95 percent of the media following Julia and Tony around are pointless – they don't know what questions to ask, and lack the ability to explain the complexities in a way that non-specialists would be able to understand or find interesting. And so we get "The NBN: How much it will cost you" or some such.

(<http://grogsgamut.blogspot.com/2010/07/election-2010-day-14-or-waste-and.html>)

What results from this lack of depth is what the great media theoretician Stephen Colbert has called 'truthiness': the process through which an uncritical repetition of political talking points just *makes* things true,

in the eyes of an audience, even in the absence of any supporting evidence; it's Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence' as amplified by the echo chamber of the press gallery. My favourite recent example for this is the so-called 'pink batts fiasco' which ultimately contributed to Peter Garrett's demotion: as far as I can tell, nobody, but *nobody*, of the journalists covering the story actually sought to independently verify the numbers being bandied about which purported to demonstrate the failure of the home insulation programme. Only one lonely Possum had the nous to access the (readily, publicly available) data and crunch the numbers for himself. The result: before the scheme, Australia experienced some 1.3 fires per 1000 insulation installs; during the scheme, that number dropped to 0.16 fires per 1000 installs (<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollytics/2010/10/19/insulation-fire-risk-%E2%80%93-the-data-is-in/>). 'Pink batts' was some eight times safer than previous insulation installs. Who knew? No, seriously – who in this audience, who in the country, other than regular readers of *Possums Pollytics*, has come across that information? And given the volume of debate on the subject, and the way in which the scheme is still used as an example of governmental failure – wouldn't it have been vital for us to know? Would it not be important to set the facts straight, even now?

Now, of course it's not the job of the media to defend the government against opposition attacks – and indeed, it's just as concerning that neither Garrett nor his department seemed to have the interest or ability to independently verify those figures and provide a factual basis for debate, rather than act like a rabbit caught in the headlights. But it *is* the job of journalists to report, and to report the political facts rather than just the 'he said, she said' gossip of politicking. Here, and in many other examples, Australian journalists have been found wanting.

And of course it's in this context that it would be easy for us to enter again into the hopelessly simplistic debate of 'bloggers vs. journalists' which has been with us for the best part of the decade. Yes, it was the pseudonymous *Crikey* blogger Possum who crunched the pink batts numbers, and who also provides a thoroughly evidence-based running commentary debunking many a spurious interpretation of opinion poll results in the mainstream media; and yes, it was the then still pseudonymous blogger and public servant Grog whose criticism of journalists' performance on the campaign trail prompted the ABC's Mark Scott, at least, to demand more quality in reporting from his staff. And yes, some news outlets – chiefly the self-proclaimed 'Heart of the Nation' – still react with rabid rage to any perceived slight, by political bloggers, of their journalistic mastery. Less than a month ago, *The Australian's* Caroline Overington, editor of the paper's 'Media Diary', still wrote without a trace of irony of the 'swamp that is the web' – and consequently, we can only assume that she'll campaign aggressively, as is her wont, for the discontinuation of *The Australian's* own Website.

But outside of the editorial dungeons of *The Australian*, reality is considerably more complex – the line between journalists and bloggers, between news reporting and punditry, is becoming a lot more blurred. As I've said earlier, the weight of the informative role is now shared across a larger range of outlets, professional or otherwise – but are we any better for it?

What is now nearly indisputable as a world-wide trend is that the presence of a strongly developed *alternative* media sector in a country – 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 has been an overall trend in the Australian news media, and perhaps even world-wide, 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 talkfest 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 supports my argument that news and political blogs and similar sites have now become part of the journalistic establishment – that the weight of being the fourth pillar of representative democracy is now spread across a broader set of shoulders than before, which could be a good thing in a media environment that is as concentrated as the one we have in Australia. We may note that 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. Their contributions sat comfortably alongside the work of public figures from Malcolm Turnbull to Bob Ellis, as well as articles by the ABC's own journalistic staff.

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 any news stories which would provide those facts are increasingly drowned out by incessant speculation, interpretation, and agitation. 'Blogification' isn't even the right term for this, because – as I've noted – 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 through considered argument. 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.

Even those journalists who might be most expected to 'get it', to start restoring some professional pride in political journalism – those who've largely put the 'bloggers vs. journalists' debate behind themselves and accepted the multi-channel, multi-platform, read-and-write environment which journalism now finds itself in – still appear to be struggling to find a way to conduct their professional activities in this space. Without wanting to single her out overly much, it seems to me that someone like Annabel Crabb well represents this new generation of journalists: well-recognised, well-positioned, well-supported, and well-connected online, yet still not delivering on her own promise or ambition. In her recent AN Smith lecture, she outlines her dream for what she calls 'the new paradigm':

That we use all this extra space [in an expanded media environment] for a proper examination of the ideas on offer. That we give the polling a rest occasionally, for instance But if we want politicians to be courageous, then we need to reward political courage, not excavate it.

(<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/10/27/3050027.htm?site=thedrum>)

Yes please, to all of that. And yet, where is the serious pursuit of such lofty goals? Crabb's own follow-up pieces on *The Drum* seem firmly rooted in the old paradigm: full of more or less entertaining one-liners (like "Some mischievous worm has infested the prime ministerial cortex, adding rogue syllables, creating

intransitive verbs willy-nilly, and otherwise taking simple concepts and obliterating them under a toxic sludge of jargon.” [<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/11/12/3065051.htm?site=thedrum>]) but essentially devoid of any ‘proper examination of the ideas on offer’. In terms of journalistic insight and quality, it’s more *7pm Project* than *7.30 Report*. Should we not hold professional journalists like Crabb to the standards which they themselves have articulated?

Placing such professional commentators not in opposition to, but *alongside* political bloggers – as they now so frequently are, thanks to the growth in opinion sites that I’ve outlined – is an interesting exercise. What it reveals is the difference between those articles written out of a professional obligation to file copy, and those resulting from personal or professional interest and conviction. Political blogs are far from perfect, but the best of our bloggers publish intelligent and insightful commentary on current political issues – and when they misstep, they still have the excuse that they’re doing this mostly *pro bono*, out of personal interest rather than as a professional activity. When our journalists and journalistic pundits produce so much poorly reasoned, fact-free 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, or simply keep them from churning out the required amount of copy, 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 news 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 more and more of the ‘informative’ role, the role of the fourth pillar of democracy? 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, the actual policies they released. 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 and on time, or what the body language was. Frankly, these are procedural issues which few people outside the Canberra press gallery will care about, but still they dominate our news, warmed over again and again in an abundance of cheap-to-produce political talkshows. And they provide political bloggers with precious little of substance to discuss – indeed, I might go as far as saying that this kind of 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 and other citizen commentators 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 our ongoing political 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 displacing 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. Let me stress this: what is at stake here is more than simply the future of journalism as an industry and profession: rather – and that's why I've gone on about the role of journalism as the informative component of the democratic system –, a prolonged decline in the quality of political discourse will have profound negative effects on Australian democracy itself.

Already, I would suggest that our compulsory voting regime has masked a creeping disconnect between citizens and politics for some time, and the recent election has exposed the first cracks in that mask. At this point I can offer no more than anecdotal evidence for this, but over the 16 years that I've called Australia home I have sensed a gradual decline in political knowledge and engagement, and a rise in simplistic stereotyping and political delusion. I would attribute that decline in good part to the continuing problems with political coverage in mainstream journalism, as I've outlined them here – and unless journalism is able to find new ways of connecting with citizens in a way that is neither patronising in its lowest-common-denominator simplicity nor unintelligible in its press-gallery autism, it's a decline that's set to continue. The result is a weakening of Australian democratic structures, which opens the door to more of the brazen populism we've already seen around asylum seekers, economic policies, and ethnic and religious tolerance.

Reference

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