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A Chance for Diversity? Australian Online Journalism

Axel Bruns

ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation

Queensland University of Technology

Brisbane, Australia

a.bruns@qut.edu.au – <http://snurb.info/> – @snurb_dot_info

Introduction

As it enters the second decade of the new millennium, Australian journalism – and Australian *online* journalism with it – is experiencing a period of significant disruption. On the one hand, some news organisations and enterprising journalists are actively seeking to explore what ways of reinvigorating the profession may be open to them – not least by drawing on the affordances of a changing media environment that now also includes online, social, and mobile media platforms. On the other hand, however, there remains a significant and at times belligerent resistance to change, especially where that change is likely to lead to a shift in the professional role and public standing of journalists at an individual level, or to the repositioning and restructure of news organisations at an institutional level. The conflict between these two broad positions is played out, at times vocally, between the news organisations and individual journalists representing them, as well as (by proxy) between journalism academics in Australia.

The situation in the country is further complicated by “the extraordinary concentration of media ownership in Australia” (Jones & Pusey 2008: 587). Its print, radio, and TV news markets are each controlled by a handful of major nation-wide operators: the newspaper market in most Australian states and territories is dominated by one or two major regional papers, for example, published either by Rupert Murdoch’s News Ltd. or by the Fairfax Media group, with significant amounts of content syndicated nationally within these news organisations. As these newspapers have developed their online presences, the same remains true here, too – for example, content from Fairfax’s *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper or its Melbourne equivalent *The Age* is regularly rebadged for the company’s online-only Brisbane outlet, the *Brisbane Times*, at times even without removing references to the *Herald* as the originating paper or otherwise adjusting the material for an interstate readership.

This oligarchic environment provides only limited incentives for product innovation or an experimentation with new reporting and publishing techniques: news organisations have generally preferred to preserve the relatively settled *status quo* of the Australian news media industry rather than to explore new opportunities in pursuit of as yet unknown and unknowable competitive advantages. Historically, indeed, most significant investment in new news ventures seems to have been driven by a perceived need to preserve the news organisations’ status, and by the egos of the news proprietors, more than by commercial or professional imperatives and opportunities: so, for example, Rupert Murdoch’s costly launch of *The Australian* as a national newspaper in 1964 was in large part designed to establish Murdoch as the nation’s leading news proprietor, and to provide him with a national platform from which to wield political influence, while Fairfax’s introduction of the *Brisbane Times* as an online paper was an attempt to develop a news presence in the important Brisbane market, which had until then only been served by News Ltd.’s *Courier-Mail* newspaper.

A further striking example of the use of news publications as status symbols is provided by the long-running Australian news magazine *The Bulletin*, which had been operated by the third major player in the Australian media industry, Publishing and Broadcasting Limited (PBL), since 1961. Much like *The Australian* for Murdoch, *The Bulletin* was seen as an object of personal prestige for PBL chairman Kerry Packer, who continued to support its publication – in conjunction with the Australian edition of *Newsweek* – even in spite of its persistent unprofitability and a significant haemorrhage of readers since the mid-1990s (resulting from a

shift of readers to the emerging online news sources). Packer's death in 2005, and the subsequent acquisition of most of PBL's media interests by a private equity firm in 2007, are seen as direct causes for *The Bulletin's* termination on 23 January 2008: media analyst Peter Cox is quoted as saying that "the magazine had been a favourite of Kerry Packer and, upon his death, there had been no need to keep it open" (Steffens 2008: np).

At the turn of the millennium, the Australian news industry could have been described as one of the last bastions of a form of journalism that is driven by the political intervention and practical involvement of news proprietors in the day-to-day operation of newsrooms, then. Further, given the significant experience of these media barons in developing Australia's print and broadcast news industries, online news remained a mere add-on to what continued to be seen as the 'main game' of journalism, and an unwelcome disruption threatening the *status quo*. Since then, arguably, Packer's death, and the gradual shift in Murdoch's focus away from his Australian origins and towards emerging markets, along with protracted leadership issues at Fairfax Media, have left a vacuum of leadership within these key Australian media companies. This lack of forward direction is impacting especially notably on their ability and willingness to explore new opportunities in online journalism, and in some cases provides the basis for a continuing animosity and belligerence towards those emerging and established Australian media organisations which are engaged in building new and innovative online platforms.

Innovation in Online Journalism: The ABC and the Independents

Against the backdrop of a generally slow-moving commercial media industry still bemoaning the decline of its traditional sources of revenue and readership, more aggressive innovation strategies have been pursued by a number of other media organisations. Chief amongst them is the major public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which established a New Media division within the organisation in the year 2000 and has since developed Australia's leading online news platform, *ABC News Online*. Its activities in this sector are clearly inspired by the successful model of *BBC News Online* (the BBC has long served as a role model for the ABC overall), and under the leadership of current Managing Director Mark Scott, the ABC has put particular emphasis on exploring innovative news formats through online, social, and mobile media – indeed, the New Media division was reconstituted as ABC Innovation some six months after Scott was appointed to his role at the ABC in June 2006.

Key elements in the ABC's digital media strategy are the continued expansion of its Web platform *ABC News Online*, and its close interconnection with the ABC's broadcast news operations; the ABC now provides rapid online transcripts and podcasts for a large number of its key news bulletins and current affairs shows in both TV and radio, as well as significant online-only coverage. Additionally, it has also followed the BBC's iPlayer example by offering iView, a multimedia application that allows for online catch-up viewing of its news and entertainment shows as well as providing access to online-only content; an ABC iPhone app with similar functionality is also available. Of particular interest amongst these multimedia offerings is the online broadcast of its ABC News 24 channel, which was launched in July 2010 as a terrestrial digital television channel – the first domestic free-to-air TV news channel in Australia (previously, News Ltd.'s *Sky News Australia*, available only to pay-TV subscribers, had been the only Australian 24 hour TV news channel). ABC News 24 is available for streaming to Australian Internet users, and the geoblock which otherwise restricts overseas access has been lifted by the ABC during significant events including the 2010 federal election as well as recent natural disasters in Australia and New Zealand.

The ABC's ability to develop such new journalistic offerings for online audiences is aided by the fact that unlike its European counterparts, which as a public broadcaster moulded after European models it otherwise closely resembles, it is not subject to the EU competition legislation that has led to the introduction of 'public value tests' of various forms in those national markets. In several countries, chiefly including Britain and Germany, European Union legislation designed to protect the open media market from the undue influence of government-funded public broadcasters has led to tight limitations especially of new online and mobile ventures; the German public broadcaster ARD, for example, has been heavily criticised for developing an iPhone application for its main news bulletin and Website, the *Tagesschau* (Focus 2010), and is now forced to

remove news stories from its Website after a grace period of seven days (Niggemeier 2010). Objectively, rather than merely avoiding a distortion of the market in favour of government-funded public broadcasters, as they were designed to do, such rules appear to have the effect of actively distorting the market to their disadvantage.

In Australia, although occasionally the ABC has been criticised by its commercial rivals for distorting the market (see e.g. Leslie 2010), no similar rules exist. Additionally, the fact that its public broadcasters – in addition to the ABC, the second public broadcaster SBS serves Australia’s minority populations – are funded directly by the government, rather than through licence fees raised from the public independently of their taxes, combines with persistent complaints about the limited level of government funding for public broadcasters to create an impression of the ABC as a perennial underdog, forced to make do with a pittance while commercial news organisations are awash with cash. While – given the significant revenue crisis experienced especially by newspaper publishers in Australia as well as abroad – such perceptions may no longer fully resemble reality, they have led to a generally positive predisposition of the Australian populace towards ‘Aunty’, as the ABC is affectionately known. Australians generally appreciate ‘their’ ABC, and not least its online services, and value the quality of its news coverage. By contrast, ABC Managing Director Mark Scott has observed that in Britain, “a reliance on licence fees came with several burdens including stiff opposition from people who rarely tune into the BBC and plenty of arguments over how the broadcaster spends its money” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2009: np).

Criticism of the ABC’s comparatively expansionist approach under Scott has therefore come mainly from its competitors. Through a series of public speeches and interviews, Mark Scott and both Rupert and James Murdoch have engaged in a discussion at a distance about the future course for journalism, especially online: while the Murdochs loudly decried the distorting presence of public broadcasters like BBC and ABC in the overall news market, Scott responded in kind – in a public speech pointedly entitled “Media after Empire”, aimed squarely at “Rupert”, as he called him – by suggesting that the paywalled online news models currently pursued by the Australian News Ltd. and its international parent NewsCorp were unworkable and based on outdated ideas:

The Murdoch push is fascinating. You sense this rage at the injustice of what the online world is doing to his traditional print business model. Murdoch has always been willing to cross-subsidise his print passions. Papers like *The Times of London*, *The New York Post* and *The Australian* endured years of losses and survived, because he said so. And because he had *The Simpsons* there to soak up the red ink.

And, ironically given his current plans, one of his strategies was always to cut the price of content – to cheap and almost uneconomic levels – to put his competitors under the gun.

But now, the man who just four years ago said he wanted to “make the necessary cultural changes to meet the new demands of the digital native” says he’s not going to respond to the demands of these digital natives. Instead, they – who have never in their lives paid for news online – will be asked to respond instead to his demands and start paying. (Scott 2009: np)

This vocal challenge to the long-standing Murdoch primacy in the Australian media industry has opened a clear and defined faultline between Scott’s ABC and News Ltd.’s various print, online, and broadcast outlets, with Fairfax papers as interested but comparatively uninvolved observers.

Arguably, however, what is at stake in this debate are not just the financial prospects of the commercial media organisations which are now facing renewed competition from the free content provided by a reinvigorated public broadcaster, but also their leading role in setting the news agenda and determining the way specific news stories are framed through reporting. This latter question – of who takes the lead in informing the nation and its debates – has been the focal point of recent debates in Australian journalism, and extends well beyond the ABC and its mainstream commercial counterparts alone. In addition to these long-established media interests, the past decade has also seen the emergence and establishment of a variety of

smaller, independent news and commentary providers, especially online – ranging from the long-running *On Line Opinion* to *Crikey* and *New Matilda*, and beyond them to a thriving ecosystem of news and political blogs (cf. Bruns 2008; Bruns & Adams 2009).

While some of these sites – especially *Crikey* – have gradually moved to include some degree of first-hand news reporting into their repertoire, the majority continue to focus mainly on political analysis and commentary; they are acting as gatewatchers (Bruns, 2005), observing and commenting upon what is reported in other news outlets and what becomes available from first-hand sources including government and NGO reports and unfiltered news releases, rather than acting as gatekeepers, deciding what events are worth reporting about, and in what context. In doing so, they have positioned themselves in direct competition with the established political commentariat of mainstream news organisations (often referred to, due to the location of their workplaces in Parliament House, as the Canberra press gallery) – and by challenging the interpretations of political events which are offered by mainstream industry journalists in both their news reporting and subsequent political analysis, they have opened up a significant new front in the struggle between traditional and new modes of journalism.

This struggle has both personal, procedural, and political dimensions. On the *personal* level, it is widely acknowledged that in spite of the institutional rivalries between the various mainstream Australian news outlets, the close working conditions of the Canberra press gallery have led to a significant amount of camaraderie and interchange between the individual journalists involved – a situation which has been criticised as leading to a substantial amount of groupthink in Australian political news reporting: individual nuances notwithstanding, political events are generally perceived by journalists through a shared frame, leading to a very limited set of perspectives on political events actually being represented in the resulting news reports. Such observations are comparable to the results of studies of journalists' attitudes in specific newsrooms (see e.g. Gans 1980), which detected similar shared frames.

By contrast, the analysts and commentators contributing to the second tier of independent news organisations in Australia are generally not members of the press gallery, and operate independently and at a distance from mainstream journalism; while – even in spite of the absence of a shared physical newsroom space for most of these online news sites – a shared frame for interpreting news events might exist amongst their contributors, too, that frame is likely to be markedly different from that of the press gallery. What results are news reports and analyses that diverge notably from the logic of Australian mainstream journalism, but are often no less compelling.

Additionally, as the gatewatching approach of these independent news organisations enables them to depart to significant extent from conventional journalistic practice, it also enables the participation of a wider range of contributors – who are not necessarily trained as professional journalists, but bring different skillsets to the task. One of Australia's most highly-regarded independent political commentators, for example (operating under the pseudonym Possum Comitatus first on his independent blog and then as part of the *Crikey* stable of political bloggers), is a trained psephologist – a scientist specialising in the interpretation of public opinion polls – and has brought this expertise to bear in a number of debates about the true meaning of political opinion trends.

While undoubtedly the core practices of journalism – especially those associated with the first-hand reporting of events and issues – remain crucial, then, the new breed of online news analysts and commentators contributes important new impulses to Australian journalism at the *procedural* level, too. Rather than relying on journalists to incorporate the analysis and perspectives of experts in their news reports, these expert commentators choose to become active in their own right, bypassing standard editorial procedures altogether; in doing so, they are able to freely point to omissions and misrepresentations in the mainstream journalistic coverage and can ensure that their own views are communicated correctly and in full.

Finally, this broadening of available perspectives on and interpretations of political issues also has effects at a *political* level – it provides contrast to the framing of stories in the mainstream news outlets, and thereby makes it easier to identify persistent political bias in the reporting of specific news organisations. This should not be seen as a simplistic argument against political bias in news reporting altogether – many strong

democratic systems, especially in Europe, are inherently built on the robust engagement between a variety of news organisations, each with its own in-house political bias, as a representation and orchestration of political debate within the population itself. Demonstrably, however, Australia has a substantially more impoverished media system that is dominated by a small handful of mainstream media outlets, each of which tend to claim to have no house bias; this results in political debates that often simply descend into claims and counterclaims of bias, rather than accepting and appreciating that bias and instead engaging in the necessary struggle between divergent political ideologies in a more constructive and respectful fashion. Intelligent, independent online news commentary and analysis that acknowledges its own political perspectives has the potential to overcome this impasse, and to move political debate in Australia from a debate *over* bias to a discussion *between* differently biased political perspectives.

To date, these challenges have not always been readily accepted by the mainstream journalism industry in Australia, however; rather, the news organisations' first response was often to attack and denigrate their new online challengers. A number of key cases from recent years illustrate this point. First, the 2007 federal election campaign saw a protracted battle between leading political reporters (especially at *The Australian*) and independent election analysts over the correct interpretation of opinion polls which had consistently predicted a change of government (from the conservative Coalition under Prime Minister John Howard to the Australian Labor Party under Kevin Rudd). Howard, in office for more than a decade, was widely seen by voters as out of touch, and this was reflected in poll results indicating a landslide Labor victory – but a number of political journalists sought to interpret any minute shifts in poll results towards Howard as the beginning of a narrowing of the gap between both parties; indeed, they did so with such vigour and repetition that talk of 'TEH NARROWING' (*sic*) has now become a standing joke amongst political bloggers.

Through their blogs, psephologists such as Possum Comitatus (now at *Crikey*) provide a clear and detailed counter-narrative to this journalistic interpretation, focussing especially on clearly documenting their methodology for making election predictions. With journalists often basing their comments on shifts in the poll results of one percentage point or less, the psephologists pointed most frequently to the fact that the opinion poll methodologies used by the major pollsters tended to have an unavoidable margin of error of two percentage points or more, rendering any speculation about smaller poll shifts absurd.

Such criticism (by experts in the field) only served to inflame the rhetoric from professional journalists, however. With sad predictability, *The Australian* attacked its psephologist critics as “sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper”, and – somewhat illogically, given that what was at issue in the debate were the political sentiments of the general public, and the clarity with which they pointed to a defeat of the Howard government – as “out of touch with ordinary views” (*The Australian* 2007: np). The eventual result of the election – a 20-seat majority in federal parliament – clearly vindicated the psephologists' views.

The chief reasons for *The Australian's* belligerent reaction are both political and institutional. For the staunchly conservative newspaper, maintaining the possibility of a conservative comeback in the polls, against all odds, was an important aim in itself, which was pursued in part by the paper's unsustainably up-beat interpretation of the opinion polls. This keeping of the conservative faith was made all the more difficult by the persistent counter-narrative provided by the psephologist bloggers, however, who not only argued against it but also provided clear evidence for the logic of their interpretation. Further, then, this clear defeat in the political debate, especially as it comes at the hands of non-journalists, also undermines the professional standing of *The Australian* (and by extension of its parent company, News Ltd.) as a news institution: it positions the paper as a news organisation which will not allow to get basic psephological facts – such as margins of error in opinion polling – in the way of the political stories it intends to tell its readers. From that perspective, in fact, the paper's final shot in its attack on the psephologists and their publisher appears especially hapless: when the paper claims that “unlike *Crikey*, we understand Newspoll because we own it” (*The Australian* 2007: np), rather than adding support to *The Australian's* argument this only serves to damage the News Ltd.-owned pollster Newspoll by undermining its scientific independence. (See Bruns 2008 for a further discussion of the 2007 'blog wars'.)

During the intervening years, the posture of *The Australian* as the most belligerent critic of the new online news commentators and analysts which have emerged in Australia has not diminished; consequently, neither has their criticism of its news reporting. While the significant dissonance between the paper's observably conservative political stance and its fulsome claims to represent the mainstream 'heart of the nation' has contributed to positioning it as the most obvious lightning rod for critics of political journalism, however, that criticism addresses what is perceived as a more fundamental problem in Australian journalism: a lack of depth in news reporting, a reluctance to engage with the facts of a story, and a focus on political gossip rather than on policy substance. Such criticisms were aired especially against the backdrop of the 2010 federal election contest between Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, most vocally and persistently perhaps by the then-anonymous author of the blog *Grog's Gamut*:

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.
(*Grog's Gamut* 2010: np)

Although writing anonymously – what was known about him at the time was only that he was a public servant in the federal capital, Canberra –, Grog had established significant status in the Australian political blogosphere, and his running commentary on the media's performance during the election campaign was widely read; indeed, it provoked a response from none less than ABC Managing Director Mark Scott himself:

Half way through the campaign, the ABC Executive met on a Monday morning and discussed the weekend blog by the Canberra public servant, writing under the tag Grog's Gamut. It was a lacerating critique of the journalists following the candidates, their obsession with transient matters, the political scandal of the day. He met a chorus of praise and support, triggering a barrage of criticism of campaign coverage.

I think there is quite a bit of beard-stroking on this issue. There will be big political stories and they often have important implications – like how united or divided a party is – or how seriously they treat matters of national security. Leaders must be questioned on these issues.

And often it is hard to ask nuanced questions about a policy that is only delivered in press release form to your hands at the beginning of the press conference, if at all. In fact, often the leaders only want you to ask questions on their policy of the day, on their terms, without allowing you to dig – avoiding the news stories and deflecting other issues for another occasion.

You need both of course. The journalists on the bus firing questions, the team back doing the digging, taking paths away from the mainstream. So that we don't just get more and more about less and less.

One of the questions of this campaign is whether we took advantage of the increased capacity to create and deliver content using digital media to provide the breadth and depth of coverage that was possible. And if we did – whether we really helped interested voters to find it.

(Scott 2010: np)

While this reaction from the management of one of Australia's leading news organisations is encouraging, however, the responses from a number of the political journalists concerned were less positive; much like *The Australian's* response to its psephologist critics in 2007, they resembled the well-familiar tendency by journalists to circle the wagons in defence against criticism from outside the profession.

Ultimately, such responses resulted not in a reasoned debate about the future direction for Australian political journalism, but in a far more base attempt to dispose of the messenger: Grog's personal identity – as

Canberra public servant Greg Jericho – was unmasked in a piece in *The Australian* by journalist James Massola (2010). While this action was at first justified by the paper’s Media Editor Geoff Elliott as supposedly serving “the public’s right to know” (Elliott 2010a: np), that defence rings hollow given that – as Jericho noted soon after – Massola had known his true identity for some ten months before the unmasking (Jericho 2010). It is difficult, therefore, to see Massola’s action as anything other than a naked attempt to cause personal and professional difficulties for Jericho, and thereby to pressure him to tone down his criticism or cease blogging altogether. Indeed, Jericho did suspend his blog for several weeks following the incident, but the strong support which he received from the Australian political blogging community kept him from quitting his blog altogether. Far from silencing criticism, the affair (dubbed ‘Grogsgate’ by the bloggers) has only served to further cement a perception of Australian political journalists as reacting with petulant defensiveness as soon as criticisms of their professional performance are raised.

From Online to Social Media

However, if since the early 2000s independent political bloggers have provided a challenge to Australian journalists that is as yet to be fully addressed, then the subsequent rise of further social media tools and their embedding into journalistic and political discussion practices has only served to further complicate the situation. *Twitter*, in particular, has proven especially popular – at first perhaps with the authors and readers of Australian political blogs, but a growing number of Australian mainstream journalists, politicians, and other public figures have now embraced the medium as well, if at times reluctantly.

In discussing *Twitter*, there is always a danger of overestimating the impact of this platform on public communication – certainly, in Australia as well as at a global level, it continues to run a distant second or third to *Facebook* as the preferred social networking platform. However, it must also be noted that available studies of *Twitter*’s user demographics appear to indicate that they closely match those of the group of politically engaged citizens whom Stephen Coleman (2006) might describe as “political junkies”: generally well-educated, well-connected, urban professionals within the 25-45 year age bracket; in this, these demographics may well match those of the readers of political blogs (although clear data on this is much more difficult to gather), pointing again to the high likelihood of significant overlaps in participation between these two channels. While with a broadening of the overall *Twitter* userbase such demographics may continue to change, for now the key observation remains that *Twitter* is used to significant extent for political discussion and activism.

This is also aided by the fact that – in stark contrast to the underlying model of *Facebook* – it is possible for *Twitter* users to form loose, *ad hoc* communities around shared interests and themes without needing to ‘friend’ one another’s profiles or to ‘like’ particular pages; indeed, it is even possible for users without their own *Twitter* accounts to follow these distributed discussions within the community. This is facilitated through the use of *Twitter* hashtags: short keywords or abbreviations, preceded by the hash symbol ‘#’. Any *Twitter* user can include a hashtag in their tweets, making those tweets visible to any other users (or non-users) following or searching for the hashtag; no prior sign-up or other form of subscription or registration for the hashtag is necessary to use it. On the one hand, this makes it possible for interest groups to form around specific themes at a very rapid pace (a process observed especially in the context of breaking news, where hashtags emerge usually within minutes of the first *Twitter* reports); on the other, it also enables participants to make contributions to continuing conversations about the topic over the course of days, weeks, months, and even years, without necessarily following each and every tweet posted to the hashtag tweetstream.

Both patterns have been in evidence in the *Twitter* community’s coverage of major Australian political and other events during 2010 and 2011, and have had a significant effect on Australian online journalism. *Twitter* was a key site for rumours and speculation when in the evening of 23 June 2010, news broke of the prospect of a leadership challenge (or ‘spill’) within the Australian Labor Party: credible sources reported that it was becoming increasingly likely that Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard would request a party-room vote to replace Kevin Rudd – Labor’s election winner in late 2007, whose popularity ratings as Prime Minister had gradually declined during the first half of 2010. *Twitter* discussion of these rumours, and of the possible

implications of a leadership challenge, rapidly centred around the hashtag '#spill', generating over 13,000 tweets per hour at its peak (Bruns 2011).

What is especially significant during the course of this event, however, is the interplay in covering the story – between social and mainstream media, at a general level, and between everyday *Twitter* commenters and known journalists and politicians on *Twitter*, at a more specific level. Discussion activity on *Twitter* followed the release of news updates by online and broadcast media at least to some extent, with a number of the journalists covering the story also posting live updates directly to *Twitter* as news came to hand; network analysis of the #spill discussion patterns shows these journalists to be near the centre of the overall network of *Twitter* users replying to one another (using the platform's @reply functionality, through which users can address one another by including @[username] in their tweets).

This clearly demonstrates that, far from the reductively and counterproductively adversarial 'us vs. them' mentality that continues to persist on both sides in some of the interactions between Australian political bloggers and journalists (which we have discussed above), it is possible for proactive journalists to maintain positions of significant authority and centrality within social media environments, too (see Bruns 2010a/b, for a detailed analysis of the #spill discussion network as it unfolded over the course of the evening of 23 June 2010). Such constructive uses of *Twitter* as an extension of the journalist's ability to address an interested public clearly also depend on journalists adopting new modes of working, however – chiefly, on engaging in a two-way conversation with the public rather than on persisting to simply report to them; in other words, on once again becoming a correspondent in "its original meaning of 'one who corresponds,' rather than the more recent one of 'well-paid microphone-holder with good hair'", as Glenn Reynolds so memorably put it (2003: 82).

The Labor leadership spill controversy – the first such challenge in Australian history against an elected first-term Prime Minister, and one of the first times that *Twitter* had played a substantial role in covering breaking political news in Australia – also set the scene for a sustained coverage on *Twitter* of the subsequent election campaign, pitting new Prime Minister Julia Gillard against conservative Opposition Leader Tony Abbott (who had himself assumed his role in a leadership challenge only months earlier). *Twitter* debate of the 2010 election was organised through the hashtag #ausvotes, generating more than 10,000 tweets per day during most days in the second half of the campaign, and peaking at nearly 95,000 tweets on election day, 21 August 2010 (an average of more than one tweet per second throughout the entire 24 hours of the day).

Inter alia, a close analysis of key themes discussed under this hashtag clearly points to the fact that the *Twitter* community of political discussants accurately mirrors neither the agendas set by the mainstream news media, nor the political preoccupations of the wider populace as indicated by contemporary opinion polls. Rather, in spite of a campaign dominated by arguments over which side of politics would be better able to curb 'illegal' immigration, to address the challenge of climate change, and to manage the economy during the continuing global financial crisis, discussion on #ausvotes showed a strong bias towards the themes favoured by Australia's most committed Internet users: the proposal by the Labor government to introduce a mandatory Internet filter (officially designed to combat child pornography and similar materials, but also able to block other 'undesirable' content), and the commitment by the conservative opposition to cancel Labor's plans to build an A\$43b fibre-to-the-home National Broadband Network (itself in part a major nation-building initiative which was launched in order to avert a domestic recession as a result of the global financial crisis).

[insert Fig. 1 here]

Fig. 1: Key daily themes on #ausvotes during the 2010 Australian election campaign (normalised to 100%)

For the course of the five-week campaign, Fig. 1 tracks the volume of tweets per day that related to the five most prominent policy issues. It demonstrates this technological focus: with only a single exception, from day ten onwards tweets discussing the Internet filter or the National Broadband Network consistently account for 50% or more of the daily tweets (see Bruns 2010c/d/e/f for a detailed analysis of #ausvotes). Additionally, there is also a significant change of balance between the two technology-related topics: while discussion of the

Labor Internet filter (shown in red) dominates during the early weeks of the campaign, from 10 August onwards the focus shifts decisively towards the National Broadband Network (in blue). This shift also demonstrates the continued importance of mainstream media in setting the political agenda: it is caused by a disastrous appearance of the Opposition Leader on the ABC's current affairs programme *7.30 Report*, during which he reiterated his strong opposition to the NBN project but was unable to provide a clear reasoning for doing so. Abbott's appearance in the programme culminated in his statement "I'm no Bill Gates here and I don't claim to be any kind of tech head in all of this" (*7.30 Report*, 2010) – an admission of ignorance which for *Twitter* users, even in spite of the Internet filter project, appeared to clearly position Labor as the lesser of two evils in the field of communications policy.

Additionally, however, the *Twitter* community's persistent focus on the NBN project during the final weeks of the campaign is also out of step with mainstream media reporting: while news coverage during the election returned to other themes shortly after 10 August, *Twitter* discussion clearly did not, as Fig. 1 indicates – tweets referred to themes related to the question of national broadband policy more frequently than to any other key election topics, by a significant margin. While the shift towards the NBN project as an election issue on *Twitter* is clearly driven by a mainstream media event, then, this is the case only because the *Twitter* community permitted the *7.30 Report* to set the agenda in this way, by focussing on a topic which touched on users' pre-existing interests; once set, however, *Twitter* users continued to frame the election to a substantial extent as a contest for or against a National Broadband Network, even in spite of the other frames provided by subsequent journalistic coverage. This positions the *Twitter* #ausvotes community as an independent entity governed by its own interests, rather than merely as an adjunct to political reporting whose coverage is determined by mainstream news agendas.

It is notable as a footnote to these observations that at the end of 2010, following the Labor leadership spill and subsequent federal election, and the substantial online coverage of these events on *Twitter* and elsewhere, one of the political journalists who most consistently appeared at the centre of *Twitter* discussion networks, Latika Bourke, was appointed by the ABC to a new position of 'Social Media Reporter'. According to a statement released by the ABC at the time,

The new role will be attached to the ABC's existing award-winning radio news and current affairs team, and will be part of a range of measures designed to explore how social media can be used to enhance and extend the ABC's coverage of national politics. (*ABC TV Blog* 2010: np)

While it is too early to assess the outcomes of this exploration, it nonetheless represents a significant qualitative shift, especially in the context of ABC Managing Director Mark Scott's strong support for an expansion of the ABC's social media activities: this appointment may mark the first time that an Australian news organisation has not only used *Twitter* and other social networks as additional channels to disseminate its news updates, on a more or less automated basis, but has positioned a member of its journalistic staff as a dedicated social media reporter.

The increased attention which mainstream media organisations now pay to *Twitter* and other social media has also positioned them as a new battleground for journalism ethics and institutional politics, however. This was highlighted by events in late November 2010, when University of Canberra journalism lecturer Julie Posetti was threatened with legal action over alleged defamation by the editor-in-chief of *The Australian*, Chris Mitchell. Attending the annual conference of the Journalism Education Association of Australia in Sydney, Posetti had used *Twitter* to report on a conference panel including Asa Wahlquist, a former journalist for *The Australian*. Wahlquist had claimed interference from Mitchell in her coverage of climate change, and Posetti reported these claims via *Twitter*, where they were widely retweeted by Posetti's network of followers. Mitchell, in turn, took exception to these reports, and publicly threatened to sue Posetti (rather than Wahlquist, notably) for defamation (Elliott 2010b); he failed to withdraw his threat even after audio recordings from the conference panel, documenting Wahlquist's statements and thus the accuracy of Posetti's coverage, became available (Thomson 2011). With Posetti in turn reporting the threat of legal action against her on

Twitter, the issue (known under the *Twitter* hashtag #twitdef) itself caused substantial debate in the social media community.

In the first instance, this case could be seen as another example of an established news organisation seeking to silence its perceived detractors amongst citizen journalists and social media users; as other examples discussed above indicate, *The Australian* has long pursued a notably belligerent line against its online critics. According to media reports, Posetti herself has stated that

the case had had a “chilling effect” on her rights to free speech and academic freedom. “I refuse to be cowed into silence, but Mitchell’s threats mean I’m reluctant to speak as freely as I’d like as I’m conscious of the possibility of ongoing legal action of the sort which would demand caution in my public writings and statements on the issues surrounding Twitdef.”(Thomson, 2011)

But more generally, too, the #twitdef case also highlights the fact that our understanding of users’ social media activities in reporting and discussing news and political issues has yet to be fully formed. Questions in this context mirror those which have already been raised for blogging as well (but are yet to be fully answered there, too): can tweets be regarded as a legitimate form of journalism – and thus attract applicable legal protections for journalistic speech –, and under what circumstances? Does the accurate reporting of a public statement by another person exempt the *Twitter* reporter themselves from possible legal repercussions for defamation? Posetti herself – who, as a journalism academic, may be able to draw on legal protections for both journalistic and academic free speech – may have grounds to be relatively confident of being able to mount a successful defence, should Mitchell ever choose to carry through his threats of legal action; the same, however, may not be true for random *Twitter* users reporting (or even just retweeting) similar material.

The Politicisation of Journalism in Australia

Cases such as #twitdef, but also the broader complaints about the quality (or otherwise) of professional journalism which we have outlined above, ultimately point to the growing concerns about the politicisation of journalism in Australia – with *The Australian* often positioned as a chief lightning rod for criticism. In the first place, ‘politicisation’ refers here to a perceived gradual shift from a more straightforward reporting of the facts to a focus on the political – and politically partisan – interpretation of the news story, even within the news report itself. This is evident across most major Australian news outlets, and even in the journalistic work of the major public broadcaster, the ABC, whose news reports now often no longer provide merely the facts of a story, but are framed from the start by how government or opposition representatives have reacted to them. For audiences, the result is that facts and political spin are becoming harder to distinguish from one another.

Alongside these shifts in the core business of journalism – news reporting –, Australia has also experienced a substantial growth in mainstream outlets dedicated to news analysis and commentary. At the same time that *The Bulletin* as the major remaining proponent of investigative journalism in the country closed its doors, each of the major news organisations in the country – Murdoch’s News Ltd., the Fairfax group, and the public broadcaster ABC – introduced dedicated online spaces for (largely political) news commentary: respectively, *The Punch*, *The National Times*, and *The Drum*. The latter also generated a spin-off television show of the same name on the ABC’s new 24-hour TV news channel, joining the broadcaster’s other major initiative in facilitating political debate, the weekly TV talkshow *Q&A* (which has also developed a substantial *Twitter* following under the #qanda hashtag).

Online, such commentary sites served as mainstream additions and alternatives to the already existing independent news commentary spaces provided by *Crikey*, *On Line Opinion*, or *New Matilda*, as well as the news and political blogs; indeed, they frequently share their contributors with them: many of Australia’s leading political bloggers have also become more or less regular authors for these new commentary outlets. Similarly, many established and emerging political journalists, as well as politicians, business leaders, academics, NGO representatives, and other public figures have published their contributions here. In their selection of authors, as well as in structure, style and content, then, these new mainstream political

commentary sites sit somewhere between the – itself increasingly politicised – news reporting by the major news organisations, and the open ecosystem of the independent political blogosphere in Australia; in particular, their publishing format – with a blog-style stream of articles, and (usually) a facility for readers to add their own comments, but under the imprimatur of major news organisations – mixes elements from both sides.

On the one hand, this development supports an argument that news and political blogs and similar sites have now become part of the journalistic establishment. But if what is taking place here is a gradual ‘blogification’ of Australian political reporting, then that is cause for concern as well: it may well lead to an overabundance of mere commentary (or worse, pure gossip) which no longer has much basis in the facts, as any news stories which would provide those facts are increasingly drowned out by incessant speculation, interpretation, and agitation. Indeed, ‘blogification’ is hardly the appropriate term to describe this shift, because Australia’s leading political blogs *are* based on a solid understanding of the facts, and utilise that understanding to advance the debate through considered argument; the same cannot be said for a significant proportion of the material published by the mainstream media-operated commentary sites, authored by professional pundits (see Bruns 2010g for a further discussion of these issues).

In fact, placing such professional commentators not in opposition to, but *alongside* political bloggers – as they now so frequently are, due to the growth in opinion sites that we have outlined here – 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. For all their faults, the leading Australian political bloggers publish intelligent and insightful commentary on current political issues – and when they misstep, they still have the excuse of doing this work mostly *pro bono*, out of personal interest rather than as their core professional endeavour. Journalists and journalistic pundits producing poorly reasoned, fact-free copy are unable to provide a similar excuse; neither do the editors commissioning their articles or approving the resulting material for publication.

At the centre of this argument, it should be noted, is not the instrumentalisation of journalism in pursuit of specific political aims: to stress the journalistic ideal of objectivity and impartiality would be an overly simplistic response to the challenges facing Australian journalism, not least because that ideal has itself been challenged as illusory by many journalism scholars. Again, it should be noted that the news media in many democratic nations are far from objective and impartial in their reporting; France and Germany, for example, both boast a diverse and thriving ecosystem of newspapers, broadcasters, and online news providers which are variously aligned with each of the major political parties, and this has strengthened rather than weakened political discourse in these countries.

Instead, what is problematic about the politicisation of Australian journalism is not that politicisation as such, but the fact that the highly concentrated nature of the Australian media industries inevitably causes a pronounced lack of choice and diversity in media outlets. The small handful of mainstream media organisations in Australia (chiefly, News Ltd., Fairfax, and the ABC) are able only to represent a small handful of divergent political views in their reporting and commentary; as a result, political discourse in the country is suffering – and it is notable that Australian politics itself, too, is at present severely polarised.

Against this backdrop, it is difficult at present to see a pathway allowing a return towards a more nuanced, constructive approach to Australian political debate, for either journalists or politicians. Online media may still provide the chance for a greater diversity of viewpoints, and political blogging as well as political discussion through other social media platforms remains a significant feature of Australian political discourse; however, the development of mainstream commentary sites by the three major news outlets also represents an attempt to colonise that space. Whether *Drum*, *Punch*, and *National Times* serve to undermine independent political commentary sites by poaching their most promising talent, or conversely to draw attention to these spaces by enabling their leading commentators to cross-promote the work they do outside the mainstream, remains to be seen; similarly, the question of whether the mainstreaming of blog-style debate through these sites lowers the barriers to meaningful political engagement for more users, or whether the hit-and-run commenters who

disrupt many mainstream sites will also begin to disturb the political debates on independent sites, has also yet to be decided. The future shape of the Australian online journalism ecosystem is still unclear.

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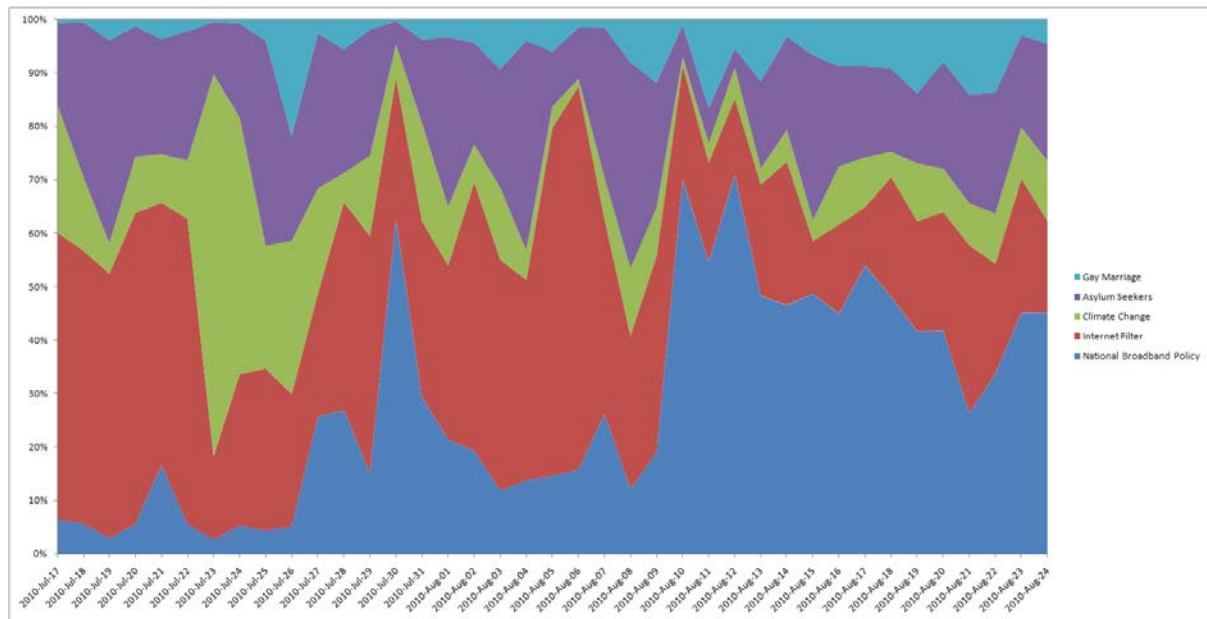
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Fig. 1:



Bio

Assoc. Prof. Axel Bruns
ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia
a.brunsqut.edu.au – <http://snurb.info/> – @snurb_dot_info

Dr Axel Bruns is an Associate Professor in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. He is a Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI), and has been a Senior Researcher in the Smart Services Cooperative Research Centre. Bruns is the author of *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Producersage* (2008) and *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (2005), and the editor of *Uses of Blogs* with Joanne Jacobs (2006; all released by Peter Lang, New York). Bruns leads a CCI research project to develop innovative new methods to track and analyse public online communication using social media such as blogs, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, and *Flickr* – see <http://mappingonlinepublics.net/> for more information. Bruns's research Website is at <http://snurb.info/>.