

## **The Impact of Social Media on Political Journalism\***

*Judith Ireland and Greg  
Jericho*

**Judith Ireland** — I appreciate that every journalist will have a different view about social media. After all, it's up to each of us to determine how we use it: who we follow, how enthusiastically we post and how many pictures of adorable kittens we retweet amongst our serious political commentary.

I have mostly worked for the web in the Fairfax Media bureau here at Parliament House for the past three years, both as a breaking news reporter and blogger. And this provides the basis for my thoughts about the impact of social media on political journalism.<sup>1</sup>

Some journalists in Canberra have wholeheartedly embraced social media, to the point where it is one of the main ways they do their jobs. Others grumble about how silly and shallow it is and how they shouldn't have to have an account.

I would place myself somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. I joined Twitter three years ago and while I use it almost every day, I am not a 24/7 tweeter.

At the moment, on *The Pulse* live politics blog, I work with photographers Andrew Meares and Alex Ellinghausen to cover sitting days as they happen. This means having three TV screens, two computer screens, two telephones and the radio going all at once to try and stay on top of what politicians are doing and saying.

Alex, Andrew and I tweet the highlights throughout the day. But I also keep a beady eye on Twitter to see if people have comments or questions about what we are doing.

And to see what else is happening. Because if something breaks, it will break via social media first, not the wires, radio or the 24 hour TV channels.

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\* These papers were presented as a lecture in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House, Canberra, on 27 June 2014.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Peter Hartcher, James Massola and Annabel Crabb for their advice when preparing this lecture. Any errors or omissions are my own.

There is no shortage of things that have changed around how Australian politics is covered over the past decade.

Four different federal governments, a hung parliament, a brave new Senate, the internet and 24 hour news—as well as big revenue challenges and job cuts in the media industry—have all shaped the process and output of political journalism.

But social media has also had an impact on the way we do our jobs.

I am going to largely restrict my social media comments today to Twitter. While there are far less Twitter users than Facebook users in Australia (about 2.9 million<sup>2</sup> compared to about 12 million<sup>3</sup>), I would argue that when it comes to political journalism, Twitter is the more interesting and significant beast.

Facebook and other social media like Google+ are important for sharing articles and generating traffic back to our websites—and there is certainly a difference between stories that do well on the web versus the paper and social media—but Twitter is more important in terms of agenda setting.

In a relatively short space of time, Twitter has become part of the fabric here in the press gallery. While it existed at the time of the 2007 federal election, it wasn't part of the political play.

The 2009 Liberal leadership contest between Malcolm Turnbull and Tony Abbott was a key moment for establishing Twitter in Canberra. When journalists used Twitter to provide live updates as the race unfolded, it demonstrated how it can bring moving politics alive.

Fast forward to today and it is standard practice for MPs and journalists to be on Twitter (Peter Hartcher and the real Christopher Pyne being notable exceptions here).

## **Four impacts**

So what is the impact of this? I would like to talk about four effects of social media on political journalism, the first of which is speed.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Hyland, 'Twitter Australia MD eyes bigger online ad share', *Australian Financial Review*, 19 March 2014.

<sup>3</sup> M. Ross, 'Facebook turns 10: the world's largest social network in numbers', *ABC News*, 4 February 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-02-04/facebook-turns-10-the-social-network-in-numbers/5237128>.

As I mentioned before, one of Twitter's major features is that it is the speediest way to shout something from the rooftops. There is no middle person—no editor, no producer, no publishing process—just 140 characters and the 'tweet' button.

Journalists can now tweet about press conferences and question times as they happen. We can post stories or developments throughout the day, needing only our phones to do so. We can also post things that are interesting or quirky but not worthy of an entire story. Such as 'Clive Palmer just hung up on me again'. Or 'Labor have released a transcript of Malcolm Turnbull's interview with Alan Jones'.

I think this enriches the coverage we provide. It allows us to give readers more of the nuts and bolts of politics—and can help to build trust with audiences by being less mysterious about what we do.

Something that is also useful for the blog and online is that MPs and other political players, such as interest and community groups, will react very quickly on social media if something is happening. And this can be less scripted than the usual talking points. For example, by the time Wayne Swan had been named and sent out of parliament on 22 June for 24 hours, he had already posted his reaction:

Happy to be thrown out of QT if it helps shine the light on Abbott Gov  
trash talking Aus economy & telling lies about debt and carbon price.

The communications flow is of course two-way and this gets to the second impact: feedback.

Social media is not simply a way for journalists to talk quickly and directly to their audiences, it is a way for audiences to talk back to them.

This works in several ways (some very welcome, others less so).

Twitter provides a constant straw poll. By looking at hashtags, trending topics or things like retweets or favourites, you can get a sense of whether something is getting a public reaction.

Take, for example, when Tony Abbott said 'I am a conservationist' during a TV interview in Washington DC. I was watching the interview and at the end had to call my editor to discuss if we would write a story and if so, what the lead would be out of the five or so topics covered.

When Abbott called himself the ‘c-word’, I tweeted his comment directly, almost as a note to myself. It immediately started getting a reaction. People were retweeting it, some critically, some just out of interest. And this acted as a reality check for me: the most revealing thing about the interview was not the Prime Minister’s nuanced messaging about the relationship with China, but his self-described environmental credentials.

In this sense, social media is a way for journalists to get out of the so-called ‘Canberra bubble’. I am not a self-hating journalist and I am not saying that we always need to be corrected. But listening to politicians and other reporters talk politics all day long can obviously skew your world view about what is important.

Social media has also made it much easier for members of the public to tell journalists what they think of their work. Yes, they still can ring through from the switchboard (although you can get pretty wary about taking calls this way), send an email or comment on an article (*The Pulse* usually receives more than 300 a day)—but it is far easier to just tweet.

I won’t dwell on online abuse here, other than to say that if your opening comment is an expletive about my IQ, I will probably just block you. But amongst the unpleasantness out there, there are also the people who get in touch to politely point out I have made a typo on the blog, to ask what the ‘Reps doors’ mean and to wonder how the double dissolution trigger created last week might play out.

Or to tell me it is not fair to pick on Ricky Muir because he is not a senator yet.

Again, I think this helps ground what we do on the blog. It forces me to think about how someone who does not work full-time in politics will engage with what we are covering. And it makes the final product a bit more collaborative.

In terms of feedback, I should probably also note it is not just readers who challenge your take on things. We now see MPs taking to Twitter to dispute stories and journalists to disputing right back. This gets back to the nuts and bolts that social media can show: an argument that may have previously just happened over the phone is now happening in the public domain as well.

The social media feedback works in a broader sense too. And this leads to the third impact: story generation. The chat on social media can create stories in and of themselves.

I seriously wonder whether Tony Abbott's 'Canadia' gaffe would have become such a big story without social media.<sup>4</sup> The same goes for the mini-hurricane over his press release that combined comments about D-Day commemorations with his desire to repeal the carbon tax.<sup>5</sup>

They were both stories built around the *reaction* the incidents received. And that reaction was generated via social media.

Perhaps most significantly, social media reaction played a large part in the analysis of Julia Gillard's 2012 misogyny speech. It took it out of the hands of the day to day politics (i.e. Gillard defending Peter Slipper in the role as Speaker) and into a much broader debate (i.e. the state of modern gender relations / what it was like to be Australia's first female prime minister). It also played a role in suggesting to mainstream outlets that they pay more attention to the March in March rallies earlier this year.

So social media provides not just a reality check but another input into what the news actually is and what it means.

Stories can also emerge fully formed out of social media. An example of this was the sexist menu at that Mal Brough fundraiser last year, which came to light after a staff member at the restaurant posted it on Facebook.<sup>6</sup>

With social media it is now almost impossible to suppress information in the way it was say, in the 1980s, when the Packer, Murdoch and Fairfax families and the ABC had the Australian media just about tied up. If they didn't cover something it didn't exist.

Social media alone can't take credit for this information free-for-all. The internet, with sites such as Crikey and New Matilda and blogs, have all contributed to this new environment—even if tools like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube make sharing information even easier.

The fourth impact of social media on political journalism is a sub-set of story generation. Twitter has provided a reliable new source of gaffe production. Letting MPs loose on 140 characters has had some 'interesting' results.

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<sup>4</sup> AAP, 'PM's "Canadia" mispronunciation a Twitter hit', *West Australian*, 9 June 2014.

<sup>5</sup> A. Back, 'Tony Abbott raises eyebrows after linking WWII D-Day memorial with policies on mining and carbon taxes', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 2014.

<sup>6</sup> K. Murphy, 'Julia Gillard calls for Mal Brough to be disendorsed over sexist menu', *Guardian Australia*, 12 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/12/julia-gillard-abbott-sexist-menu>.

In November 2009, at the height of the Turnbull leadership crisis, Joe Hockey tweeted:

Hey team re The ETS. Give me your views please on the policy and political debate. I really want your feedback'.<sup>7</sup>

In the careful dance that the leadership aspirants were doing, this tweet didn't help Hockey's chances. Turnbull was for the ETS, and challenger Tony Abbott was against. The tweet made Hockey look like he didn't have a view.

Others—across the political spectrum—have come unstuck in less subtle ways.

In 2012, Labor backbencher Steve Gibbons got in trouble for tweeting—among other things—that Julie Bishop was a 'narcissistic bimbo'.<sup>8</sup> Brendan O'Connor last year received a similar backlash when he suggested Tony Abbott's rural fire service volunteering was a 'stunt'. And Liberal pollster Mark Textor became a Twitter quitter after his 'Pilipino porn-star' comments—made in response to revelations Australia tapped the phone of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.<sup>9</sup>

Tweet gaffe stories follow a similar (and at times tedious) trajectory: the tweet is noticed, condemnation builds until the offender apologises (or is forced to apologise) and the tweet is taken down. All the while, the easy outrage distracts from whatever else we could be focusing on in that day of politics.

I do have a hunch, however, that MPs are becoming savvier about the gaffe potential of social media. And the parties are aware of this too, certainly around election times. I don't think we are seeing as many 'oops' moments as we used to, even a year ago.

Here, I would also add that in terms of generating stories, Twitter is no substitute for the old-school journalistic techniques of contacts, sources and an encyclopaedic knowledge of Australian politics. While social media can provide good kindling—and at times the odd worthy log—it does not fuel daily news production.

#### **Four questions**

Having talked about what I would class as four mostly positive impacts of social media on political journalism—speed, feedback, story generation and gaffe production—I would like to raise four questions about it.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Ireland, 'When tweets go wrong', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 January 2013.

<sup>8</sup> J. Swan, 'Labor MP retreats after labelling Bishop a "bimbo"', *Sydney Morning Herald*.

<sup>9</sup> M. Whitbourn, 'Mark Textor quits Twitter after death threats', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 2013.

The first of these is: why are people really here?

Many of those in and around politics are not on Twitter just to discuss policy in a big digital version of a Viennese coffee house. We are there because it is also an important part of maintaining a 'brand' or presence in political discussions. Journalists tweet stories they have written; MPs tweet events they have attended and announcements or speeches they have made.

A not-insignificant part of social media is self-promotion.

For journalists in an era of questionable job security, having as many social media followers as possible is also seen as a positive to employers. And comfortingly means you are self-sustaining as an information source (even if you are not self-sustaining as a financial one).

As I alluded to at the start, an important part of being on Twitter is keeping an eye on what your colleagues and competitors are doing. This brings me to the second question: is there too much speed?

Because everyone is constantly watching everyone else on social media, it further compresses the time that a story is an exclusive. It means that as soon as someone tweets a new development, everyone else can leap on that too. If they don't, they might have their news desks calling to ask why they haven't.

Given that Twitter is updating by the second, this can be dizzying. You have to remind yourself that instead of watching social media all the time—lest you miss something—perhaps you should just pick up the phone and talk to someone instead.

The fact that we now tweet as we go through the day also means that unlike the old days, when you had the whole day to perfect a story—you are providing readers with a draft, that can change, or in some cases, turn out to be wrong.

As we saw with Clive Palmer's amazing press conference on Wednesday, sometimes it could be more useful for everyone to wait for the answer than wade through hours of confusing speculation.

My third question about social media and journalism could also be asked more generally about the internet: is it too distracting?

Another way Twitter has impacted on—certainly my journalism—is that it is a powerful procrastination tool. While writing this presentation, one minute I was

searching for a particular tweet about the carbon tax and the next, found myself immersed in an article about the perils of maintaining a fringe. The next I knew it, I was looking at pictures of deli goods that someone bought at my local IGA.

Perhaps this says more about my self-discipline than the evils of Twitter, but I do wonder if the productivity we gain through social media's speed is lost through its many distractions.

The fourth and final question I have about social media is one that has been asked before: as compelling as Twitter can seem—who is tweeting and how representative are they?

No matter how conscious you are to follow people from across the political spectrum, your followers list is not a carefully chosen focus group or a scientifically sampled poll: we self-select who we follow. And the most retweeted comments or people with the most followers are not necessarily the most correct.

In Australia, a 2012 study by Sentia Media found that while it was a 'reasonably sound bellwether' of public opinion, Twitter leant to the left and was more vitriolic and polarised than talkback radio.<sup>10</sup> A Pew poll of US tweeters last year found Twitter conversations can be at times more liberal and more conservative than survey responses.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to dismiss what is going on here. It could be argued that Twitter in Australia serves as a counterbalance to the more right-leaning talkback. But what journalists and others thinking about social media and politics need to be careful of is directly correlating a few retweets with voter or reader 'sentiment'.

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Social media is an unwieldy and mixed bag for political journalism. It is both liberating and informative that individuals have their own platforms. It also facilitates a conversation between journalists and audiences that enables the two groups to understand the other better.

But social media does have its drawbacks. It speeds everything up in ways that are not always conducive to sanity. And at times, can serve as a distraction to the day's news. It can also be very distracting on a personal level too.

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<sup>10</sup> P. Hartcher, 'Tweeters, talkers reveal their stripes', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 2012.

<sup>11</sup> A. Mitchell and P. Hitlin, 'Twitter reaction to events often at odds with overall public opinion', Pew Research Centre website, 4 March 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/2013/03/04/twitter-reaction-to-events-often-at-odds-with-overall-public-opinion/>.



Yet, I can't imagine a time in the future when social media—in some form—will not continue to play a part in political journalism. It is too useful and too entertaining not to.

**Greg Jericho** — Fortunately, Judith and I are taking slightly different aspects given that her role has got a little bit more of a practical view of it. I am taking a bit more of a theoretical view about it, but I hope I have some good practical examples in there.

The topic of my lecture is 'Social media and political journalism: the contested space'. Even though I blog on economics and write mostly about economics, my PhD was in English literature. Like all good PhD students, I had a favourite theorist, and my favourite theorist was Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literature critic who had some theories about language that are relevant for what is happening now with social media and political journalism in traditional media. Bakhtin's theory was that language is never unitary, that the modern language has evolved from a primitive 'monoglossia' to a 'heteroglossia'. Now, what he meant by heteroglossia is that there are lots of different voices, jargons and slang; lots of different groups contributing their own aspect to the whole language. Bakhtin would argue, for example, that the dictionary might contain the vocabulary of English, but it is not out of the dictionary that the speaker gets his or her words. Instead of the static nature of the dictionary, for Bakhtin language was fluid and organic. He wrote that the word in living conversation is oriented towards a future 'answer-word'. We say things expecting a response.

This is crucial with social media, because that is really what it is all about. Yes, it speeds up everything because we are tweeting the moment we see something, but for me the key impact of social media on political journalism—and on all journalism—is that it has introduced this dialogic nature. Language has become a dialogue; the language of political commentary and political reporting has become a dialogue. And it is not just between Dennis Shanahan and Lenore Taylor or Laura Tingle, as it was previously. It is now between those players and the audience. The audience has shifted from being passive (reading the newspaper and perhaps writing a letter to the editor) to now being able to respond either with a tweet, a blog, with a comment on Facebook, that can actually generate a dialogue.

Now this has some traps and some concerns for the traditional media people, because if meaning and truth of things and their version of events is now contested, then that diminishes their authority. And when you are a newspaper, your authority is pretty important in getting people to buy your product.

The Australian blog sphere started in around the early 2000s but it really started getting going around 2006 or 2007 in the run-up to the election of 2007. The big area where there was a lot of growth was in what's called 'psephology', where it was commenting on polls—about Newspoll, about Nielson polls and so on and so forth.

*The Australian* at the time really didn't like this, and they responded on 12 July 2007 with an editorial about these blogs which at that stage were hardly read by anyone. This was really before Twitter; Facebook was sort of there. What these blogs were doing was criticising how *The Australian* was reporting Newspoll and how they were interpreting it. And so *The Australian* fought back and it wasn't just a criticism, it was trying to take ownership again of meaning and of truth, saying that we, the newspaper, we, the members of the press gallery, know the truth of things. Our version of the truth is really the only truth.

It starts off by saying, 'The measure of good journalism is objectivity and a fearless regard for truth'.<sup>12</sup> It suggests that the online news commentary doesn't have this. In one of the greatest lines of all time in any Australian newspaper editorial, it says, 'Unlike Crikey, we understand Newspoll because we own it'.<sup>13</sup> So you can see it's not just a case of our words are true because we have got the experience of Dennis Shanahan or whoever it was who was writing about it, but because we actually own the truth. How dare these other voices try and stratify or spread out the different versions of what something is.

It didn't just happen in Australia. In America in the run-up to the 2012 election, there were again a lot of these psephologists, people like Nate Silver, writing a lot of blogs, ironically writing a lot of them on *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* websites, where they basically declared that the election was over in about June. There was a long time to go before the election, but these guys were basically saying, 'If you look at all the polls, if you look at how they are reacting, there's no way Obama's going to lose'.

Peggy Noonan, writing the day before the election in *The Wall Street Journal*, reacted really in this traditional journalism's sense of 'How can you guys sitting at home in front of a computer know the truth? We are out there on this sweaty, cramped bus following these guys around, eating crap food for three months. We know the truth'. She argued:

Who knows what to make of the weighting of the polls and the assumptions as to who will vote? Who knows the depth and breadth of each party's turnout efforts? ... maybe the American people were quietly

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<sup>12</sup> 'Editorial: history a better guide than bias', *Australian*, 12 July 2007.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

cooking something up, something we don't know about. I think they are and I think it's this: a Romney win.<sup>14</sup>

Simon Jackman of *The Huffington Post*, predicted an Obama win the day before the election, and things pretty much happened as he expected. He actually did know what the people were thinking. But there was this real sense of how can bloggers do this? They are not doing it the right way. How can they own the truth? If a blogger is able to declare the election three months out, then why is anyone going to bother reading our coverage of the election when basically the race is already run?

It wasn't just polling where they were concerned about the truth. In a wonderful example in 2010, *The Australian* wrote a story saying that 'Rio Tinto shelves billions in projects'.<sup>15</sup> A couple of hours later Rio Tinto, perhaps thinking this might affect their share price, put out a statement to the stock exchange saying 'no decision to shelve projects'. You might think, well there you go, the meaning's pretty clear there, *The Australian's* going to have to back down. But of course not. This was how they responded: by saying that 'Rio Tinto reaffirms reviewing iron ore projects'. In the article, the journalist wrote:

In an announcement to the Australian Securities Exchange today, Rio said there had been no final decision by its board to 'shelve' any projects in Australia following the announcement of the government's proposed new mining tax.

In the Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary, the word shelve is defined as 'to put aside, esp[ecially] temporarily'.<sup>16</sup>

They used that to justify that their original story was actually correct, that they were using 'shelve' to mean that, not what Rio Tinto were actually meaning when they were saying the word 'shelve'. It's this sense of, 'the words we use are the correct words and they are really the only interpretation of meaning that you can have'.

Another example was the Andrew Bolt case when he was found to have breached the Racial Discrimination Act. Chris Kenny, at the time he was writing on it, was not just arguing whether the act was right or wrong, it really came down to the truth and who gets to determine what truth is. Kenny wrote that Justice Mordecai Broonberg:

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<sup>14</sup> Peggy Noonan's Blog, *Wall Street Journal*, 5 November 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/peggynoonan/2012/11/05/monday-morning/>.

<sup>15</sup> 'Rio Tinto shelves billions in projects', *Australian*, 6 May 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah-Jane Tasker, 'Rio Tinto reaffirms reviewing iron ore projects', *Australian*, 6 May 2010.

said some of Bolt's words meant more than their literal meaning and that while he accepted the literal meaning of some of Bolt's mitigating phrases, he found Bolt did not believe them.

So now when airing opinions on matters of public interest, Australians are subject to sanction by a court according to a judge ascribing extra meaning to the words we use, or denying our sincerity in the use of other words.

If that is not frighteningly Orwellian, nothing is. And, may it please the court, that is exactly what I meant to write. No more, no less.<sup>17</sup>

This kind of view was being parodied back in the nineteenth century. Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass*, had Humpty Dumpty saying 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less'. Clearly we have moved beyond this and knowing that you can't just say, 'Oh look, I was just kidding when I said that, you can't take it in a different way to what I said'. Given that Chris Kenny has just been involved in a defamation hearing when he took a different view of what was said by the Chaser guys, I think he is on board with that view of what language is. Especially when you think that back in March, Chris Kenny wrote that he is quitting Twitter<sup>18</sup>, whereas if you actually go on Twitter, you will see that Chris Kenny is still very much there. So who knows what meaning really is anymore.

Sometimes with social media the criticism will be 'oh look, it's just an opinion'. And it certainly is true, there is a lot of opinion on social media, blogs, Twitter and Facebook. But what we often find is that the media will try and suggest that their opinion is actually the truth. This happened back in 2012 when *The Australian* put out a 'Top 50 Most Influential People in Australian Politics' list. What struck me when they were launching this list was that they tried to explain how they came up with them. The journalist wrote:

The list went through a multi-stage assessment process.

A long list was compiled and considered by an editorial committee comprising The Australian's editor in chief Chris Mitchell, editor Clive Mathieson, political editor Dennis Shanahan and online national affairs editor Ben Packham.

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<sup>17</sup> Chris Kenny, 'Silencing dissent won't resolve indigenous issues', *Australian*, 3 October 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Kenny, 'Why the unbearable darkness of the twitsphere has made me quit Twitter', *Australian*, 22 March 2014.

The list was then culled and further soundings taken before the committee convened again to sign off on the final document.<sup>19</sup>

There is a sense of we're 'signing off' on something like it is an audit process, and we have now got the final unquestioned document on who are the most powerful people in Australian politics ranked in the correct order. It is this sense of never considering that, really, what you have got is four journalists who sat around and came up with their opinion, and that is no more weighty or less than if I got four of my mates who were very interested in Australian politics to also come up with an order.

A classic example was the misogyny speech. When this was reported, the press gallery reported it from a political angle. But the blogs and especially Facebook looked at it from a completely different angle. They didn't really care about the politics or whether Julia Gillard's speech would improve the Newspoll rating. It had nothing to do with that. It was purely 'here is a woman basically standing up to a man'. It was done in the context of every woman who has had a crappy boss or has had to put up with something like this from someone. Here was someone saying what we always wished we could say, and said it better than we could ever say it.

That is a perfectly valid version of interpreting that speech, just as interpreting the political aspects of that speech, as the press gallery did, is also valid. But instead of many of the news organisations then realising 'ooh, we missed an aspect of this', what they did was to fight back and say no, your version of that speech was not true, it was not accurate, you've got it wrong. We have got it right, we know what is right, and here's Dennis Shanahan, Paul Kelly, Christopher Pearson, Chris Kenny, Peter van Onselen and so on to tell you why you've got it wrong. It got to the ludicrous point of Dennis Shanahan going on *Jezabel* and reading the comments and passing them on to let us know this is what the commenters on *Jezabel* website are really talking about. It is just something that really doesn't work in a social media environment because social media doesn't allow for a unitary meanings of words, of events or of truth.<sup>20</sup>

One of the things that happened as a result of this misogyny speech is that Macquarie University changed, or broadened, the meaning of 'misogyny' and of course that got criticised. So suddenly the dictionary was wrong. Suddenly dictionaries weren't static—who knew that the English language actually evolved?<sup>21</sup>

An example about this contestability of truth, of meaning, of events, that I was involved with was the G20 summit in Mexico that Julia Gillard went to in June 2012. In *The Daily Telegraph* (and in *The Australian* and other media outlets, even the

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<sup>19</sup> Ben Packham, 'Influence in politics is more than power', *Australian*, 2 February 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Dennis Shanahan, 'PM's speech goes from bad-ass to bad', *Australian*, 13 October 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Christian Kerr, 'Silly Macquarie', *Australian*, 18 October 2012.

ABC) it was reported that Julia Gillard had been ‘slapped down’ at the summit by the President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso.<sup>22</sup> I read the article and thought it was the standard thing, that Gillard was mentioned in one sentence and it had been hyped up and I thought nothing more of it. Australian journalists over in a foreign country have got to get some sort of an Australian angle. But then I was on Twitter, as I always am, and Annabel Crabb tweeted this: ‘Just listened to the entire Barroso press conference. His rant about criticism of Europe was in response to Canada. Not Julia Gillard’. And she then tweeted a link to the speech. It was true; Julia Gillard didn’t get a mention. The response that had been used to the ‘Julia Gillard slapdown’ was actually a response to a question from a Canadian journalist asking about Stephen Harper.

And so I wrote a blog on my own blog page. There had been a number of job cuts by Fairfax that day and in the context of everyone complaining about media readership and people not paying for it, I wrote I am finding it hard to justify buying newspapers when I am not trusting what is being reported in them. Trust is a fairly crucial thing and one of the reasons that newspapers are losing that is that we can actually go watch the raw data. We can go watch the speech and get our own view. We don’t need Simon Benson to write about the speech for us; if we have got the time we can go listen to it and draw our own conclusions.<sup>23</sup>

A couple of days later Simon Benson wrote on his blog on *The Daily Telegraph’s* page that ‘Anyone who thinks Julia Gillard’s lecture to Europe went down well with the leaders of the largest economic bloc in the world, obviously wasn’t in Los Cabos this week’.<sup>24</sup> Again, that sort of sense of ‘how would you know the truth of something, you weren’t there, you weren’t part of it, you can’t do this unless you’re actually a member of the press gallery; if you write for this newspaper, then you’re able to know what the truth is’.

He had this odd sort of thing right down the bottom where he said ‘If only the armchair experts like former Labor staffer Annie O’Rourke had actually gone to the G20 instead of googling it they too may have learned something’. I was wondering why the mention of Annie O’Rourke, and that was because she had tweeted to him ‘@simonbenson please read this. You are the reason people don’t believe they should pay for media’.

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<sup>22</sup> Simon Benson, ‘PM Julia Gillard “slapped down” at G20 summit by the President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso’, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 June 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Greg Jericho, ‘Fairfax and G20 visits—What do we need? What do we trust?’, Grog’s Gamut, 19 June 2012, <http://grogsgamut.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/fairfax-and-g20-visits-what-do-we-need.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Benson, ‘Why Gillard looks like a European bloc-head’, Simon Benson Blog, 21 June 2012, *Daily Telegraph*, [http://blogs.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/simonbenson/index.php/dailytelegraph/comments/why\\_gillard\\_looks\\_like\\_a\\_european\\_bloc\\_head](http://blogs.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/simonbenson/index.php/dailytelegraph/comments/why_gillard_looks_like_a_european_bloc_head).

One of the upshots of this was that Nick Green and a few other people made a complaint to the Press Council about the reporting of this speech. I had nothing to do with complaining to the Press Council; if I think something's wrong I will just write a blog about it. But one of the things was that they cited my blog coverage of this speech in their submission to the Press Council. And the Press Council agreed with them, which is why if you go to the website with Simon Benson's article now you will see a link to the Press Council adjudication.<sup>25</sup>

To me, this was a wonderful example of this collision between social media and traditional media. And the best thing about it wasn't really because of my involvement, but because it all started with Annabel Crabb, a foundation member of the traditional media. It was her use of social media that alerted me to this speech which then enabled me to write something which then cannonballed on towards this complaint being upheld by the Press Council. It would never have happened were it not for social media. I wouldn't have seen the tweet by Annabel Crabb because that wouldn't have existed. I wouldn't have been able to watch the speech on the internet because before social media there was only just dial-up and I wouldn't have bothered doing it. And as a result, the version of truth of that speech would have been what was reported in the newspaper. That contestability of meaning and of truth is given a real turbo-charge through social media.

This doesn't mean that social media always ends with us getting a better version of the truth. A classic example was with the Boston Marathon bombings. When that happened, social media went into overdrive. They were going to solve the case. If you went on Reddit you could see they had found all the photographs and they had worked out it was a missing student from Brown University that did it. Or perhaps that it was that person holding the bag. And rather stupidly, the traditional media got caught up in this. *The New York Post* put this on the front page. Instead of the traditional media standing back and going 'well, that could be a bit iffy', they tried to replicate it. And now they are getting sued for a great deal of money by the two guys they depicted, because of course they weren't involved at all.

To conclude, the interaction between social media and traditional media is a bit like how data is used for the unemployment rate. The Australian Bureau of Statistics puts out original data, the raw data, the actual number of people who were unemployed that month, and then they put out the seasonally adjusted version which takes into account the fact that there's always a lot more people unemployed in January every year because it is holidays and businesses aren't hiring. So the original data really

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<sup>25</sup> 'Adjudication No. 1561: Nick Green/The Daily Telegraph (April 2013)', Australian Press Council, 3 April 2013, <http://www.presscouncil.org.au/document-search/adj-1561/>.

isn't real and so they do a seasonally adjusted version to try to get a bit more context into things. Then they also have the trend line, which is a rolling 13-month view of things.

Twitter and a lot of social media is a lot about the original data. It's raw, it's rushed, it's 'this is what's happened'. It is actually true, but if you are reporting that as the only truth, then you are missing out on something; you are missing out on the context of the seasonally adjusted version. And perhaps the media should be trying to give us that view. The thing is, sometimes the trend line version is better but sometimes the seasonally adjusted gives us a bit more of an indication that we've turned a corner, whereas the trend is a little more slow about doing these things. But they're all true; all three of those are true.

What is the best version? What is the context that we should be focusing on? I think that is where we are with social media and traditional media and the reporting of politics. It is this real sense of everyone trying to contest between the original, the seasonally adjusted and the trend. They are all true, but there is a good debate to be had there. If it is a good debate where journalists and people on social media are aware that their truth is not the only truth or the only version of events, we are going to get a fuller picture of things.

And I think if you are a journalist who can't cope with that, then I think you really should think about getting into another profession because social media is never going away. This contest of ideas, this contest of what truth is, is here to stay.



**Question** —What is the context of financial management and media ownership on political commentary?

**Rosemary Laing** — Who owns the media? Would either of you like to make a brief response?

**Judith Ireland** — I think that is interesting in terms of social media. In Australia, even though the media landscape in some ways has diversified with the internet since about the 1980s, it is still a very small media landscape. So with social media, we are not just relying on people with a lot of money to give us information, and I think that is a positive thing.



**Greg Jericho** — For me, it brings to mind also that whole thing of trust and knowing who is the person tweeting. Quite often people use pseudonyms and I have certainly used a pseudonym. In America, not so much in Australia, there are examples of astroturfing—using social media to suggest that there is this groundswell of view, whereas it is actually just companies trying to do that. So just because they are on social media, doesn't mean they are not owned by somebody.

**Question** — Greg, you made some really interesting comments that social media is a lot more than just Twitter. It is really interesting, picking up Judith's point, that when we talk about social media in Australia, some of the audience's reaction is 'my goodness, this is happening so quickly', but we are so slow compared to what is happening State-side. What do you think of broadcast phenomena such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* or even *The Young Turks Network*? Do you think we are big enough for some of those sorts of things to happen down under?

**Greg Jericho** — Well, the evidence so far would be that outside of the ABC, no. *The Hamster Wheel* tries to do it, and Shaun Micallef. It costs a lot of money to do these shows, you need a lot of research. When I worked on *The Hamster Wheel*, my job was to look at all the raw footage of all the Parliament House interviews and read every newspaper and all that just to find something funny in there. And I was just one of the people who was doing that. They were watching every TV show all the time. It is an amazing amount of resources and if you can get a million people watching, you are doing extremely well. I think commercial networks just can't justify it.

**Judith Ireland** — I would love Micallef to be on every night in Australia, and he is a patchy commodity, I think, at best. And I think other political comedy shows haven't lasted the distance. I am an optimist on this one because I think we need more satire as an antidote to the news, but yes, I think we should not hold our breath on that one.

**Question** — How much has social media opened up the world to extraordinary conspiracy theorists who see politics through that prism? We saw it with Julia Gillard, and a lot of bloggers out there running conspiracy theories about her and Bruce Wilson, the AWU person. Also Greg's last comment I thought was very interesting. Once upon a time we used to think that the daily newspaper was the first draft of history. Now it is Twitter is that is the first draft of history and maybe newspapers are the ones that have to step back. I would be interested on your comments on those two things, especially the conspiracy theories.

**Greg Jericho** — It is fertile ground for conspiracy theorists. Just think of the missing Malaysian Airlines aircraft. If you are on Twitter, the number of theories being put out by nameless people or by Rupert Murdoch as well suggesting terrorism and

everything was involved. I guess that is my point about that original raw data, that when you are reading Twitter you always need to be aware of those things.

When Nelson Mandela was seriously ill there were so many people desperate to be the first to tweet that he had died. And it's like, I am pretty sure that when he actually does die, we will all know about it through an official source, there is no need to think, 'this announcement must be it'.

When you are dealing with social media you must be aware of what type of media it is, just as when you read any magazine, you always view it in the context. If you are reading *New Weekly*, you might view a story in there about someone's friend saying that someone's marriage is on the rocks a bit differently than if that story was put up on the ABC website. So I think you have always got to be aware of the context, and not think that social media is perfect.

**Judith Ireland** — I think politics is full of conspiracy theories. Staffers and MPs are constantly peddling conspiracy theories about the other side, so in one sense we are used to that. I think that the Julia Gillard/AWU example is a really good one that has leaped the conspiracy theory fire line, if you like. We have now got a Royal Commission and some of this stuff is now being seriously looked at, whether or not it is true. Some of these blogs were very persistent about the things they were saying about Julia Gillard, and so that shows their power. Also just in question time, if I am tweeting about something Pyne has said, a whole lot of people will come back with low-level conspiracy theory stuff all the time. I get back to the fact that in politics people are constantly putting out sexy stories about the opposition and you have got to filter through that in the same way.

**Question** — Do either of the speakers have a view about the change to the rollout of the NBN given that it facilitates engagement through being able to watch videos and post things faster?

**Greg Jericho** — I don't think it is too much of an impact. One of the great things about social media and in fact about a lot of the internet is that it is actually very much a written medium which actually doesn't take up many megabytes or megabits, or whatever it is, to do. And sure, being able to watch question time live on a livestream it certainly helps if you have got broadband, but for a lot of the social media use and the actual discussion about reporting, it doesn't really need too much bandwidth. When I started my blog, I had a dial-up and it certainly is easier and better when you have got the faster broadband but it is not too much of a barrier.

**Question** — I would be interested in the reaction of both speakers to the Clerk's question earlier about who uses social media. My impression was that roughly two thirds of the people here indicated that they were not using social media. Is that an indication that there are still a lot of people in the community who prefer serious, in-depth, considered journalism to these quick, short, pithy immediate responses?

**Judith Ireland** — I think one of the things with Twitter is it does tend to be younger people on social media, although there are large take-ups of social media amongst people over fifty. I think that is an issue in terms of the point I touched on at the end of my talk about how inclusive the conversation is and who is not there as part of the conversation, and I do think that is really important.

I think that Twitter in particular is a mix because it might be a link to a really interesting in-depth, long-read article. A big part of it is those quick-fire things: 'Tony Abbott just said this, oh my god'. But it does have links to other articles. It is also a conversation. As Greg was talking about, it is about people interacting with things, revising what has been said, so I think there is an in-depth side to social media aside from what the 140 characters would suggest.

**Greg Jericho** — For me, the great thing about Twitter is the conversations I have with people who are a hell of a lot smarter than me, who can point me in the direction of articles and academic pieces that I probably wouldn't have come across if I wasn't on Twitter. It is very much a generational thing, and older people are less likely to be using it than younger people, but even that is changing. You have got to realise, we now have people in university who can barely remember not being able to access the internet by phone. It is a fundamental change that has occurred, and it is little wonder that there are some people who are struggling to keep up with it.

But as I say, don't be fooled into thinking it is just people tweeting about cats or something. It can be if that is all you want to do, but it is actually an amazing tool for finding that in-depth discussion that you might really enjoy, but that you are missing out on because you are thinking 'I'll get that if I just use the newspapers'. Some of these blogs are written by Nobel laureates who are incredibly interesting and that you only really become aware of through social media.