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[i].

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.

**

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'm 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[ii] compared to about 12 million[iii]), 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.**

As I mentioned before, one of Twitter's major features is that 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, 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 Monday 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 two weeks ago. 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’m not a self-hating journalist and I’m 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’ve 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’re 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[iv]. 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[v].

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 staff member at the restaurant posted it on Facebook[vi].

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 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.

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"[vii]. 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"[viii]. 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[ix].

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 focussing 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're 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.

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 to 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 talk back radio[x]. A Pew poll of US tweeters last year found

Twitter conversations can be at times more liberal and more conservative that survey responses[xi].

This is not to dismiss what's going on here. It could be argued that Twitter in Australia serves as a counter-balance to the more right-leaning talk back. 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".

**

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 as a personal level too.

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

---

[i] 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.
[ii] A Hyland, 'Twitter MD eyes bigger online ad share,' *The Australian Financial Review*, 19 March 2014, <http://www.afr.com/p/technology/twitter_australia_md_eyes_bigger_quQNElwi7Qw8SlDZHe18UN>
[iii] 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>
[iv] AAP, 'PM's 'Canadia' mispronunciation a Twitter hit,' *The West Australian*, 9 June 2014, <https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/latest/a/24196815/pms-canadia-mispronunciation-a-twitter-hit/>
[v] A Back, 'Tony Abbott raises eyebrows after linking WWII D-Day memorial with policies on mining and carbon taxes,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-raises-eyebrows-after-linking-wwii-dday-memorial-with-policies-on-mining-and-carbon-taxes-20140602-39cuy.html>
[vi] 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>
[vii] J Ireland, 'When tweets go wrong,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 January 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-opinion/when-tweets-go-wrong-20130115-2cqty.html>
[viii] J Swan, 'Labor MP retreats after labelling Bishop 'bimbo,'' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/labor-mp-retreats-after-labelling-bishop-a-bimbo-20121128-2acm9.html>
[ix] M Whitbourn, 'Mark Textor quits after Twitter death threats,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/mark-textor-quits-twitter-after-death-threats-20131123-2y2hf.html>
[x] P Hartcher, 'Tweeters, talkers reveal their stripes,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 2012,

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tweeters-talkers-reveal-their-stripes-20121213-2bcnz.html>

[xi] A Mitchell and P Hitlin, 'Twitter reaction 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/>