

Transcript

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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'm taking a bit more of a theoretical view about it, but I've got hopefully some good practical examples in there.

What I'm doing – and 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 actual PhD that I did 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 did some great work despite Stalin not wanting him to do such great work, and he had some theories about language that have really good relevance for what's happening now with social media and political journalism in traditional media. See, Bakhtin, his basic theory was that language is never unitary, that the modern language has evolved from the primitive 'monoglossia' to a 'heteroglossia'. Now, what he meant by heteroglossia is that there's lot of different voices, there's different jargons, there's different slang, lots of different groups contributing their own aspect to the whole language. He, for example, would argue 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, and he wrote that the word in living conversation is directly blatantly oriented towards a future answer-word. We say things expecting a response. This is crucial with social media, because that's really what it's about, I think that's what the key thing is. Yes, it speeds up everything because we're 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's 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 really that's as far as it got, they might write 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're a newspaper, your authority is pretty important in actually getting people to buy your product. If your product doesn't have this cone of authority, people are less inclined to do it.

The Australian blog sphere started in around the early 2000s, so it was a fairly small thing, but it really started getting going around 2006, 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 blogs about polls, about Newspoll, about Nielson polls and so on and so forth. *The Australian* at the time really did not like this, and they responded on July 12th 2007 with an actual editorial about

these blogs, these blogs which were hardly read by anyone. This was really before Twitter, Facebook was sort of there but basically you had to know about these blogs to know that they were existing. 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 with this real sense of saying – and it wasn't just a criticism, it was trying to take ownership again of meaning and of truth, that we, the newspaper, we, the members of the press gallery, we 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 on the truth'. It suggests that the online news commentary doesn't have this. It went down to the – in the second box there – one of the greatest lines of all time in any Australian newspaper editorial, where it says, 'Unlike Crikey and these other blogs, we understand Newspoll because we own it'. So you can see it's not just a case of 'our words are true because we've got the experience of Dennis Shanahan' or whoever it was who was writing about it, but 'because we actually own the truth'. You can see it's a real fight between 'how dare these other voices try and stratify or spread 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 a lot of again 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're reacting and everything, there's no way Obama's going to lose'. Peggy Noonan, writing the day before the election in *The Wall Street Journal*, she 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're out there on this sweaty, cramped bus following these guys around, eating crap food for three months, we know the truth'. She argued that who knows what to make of the weighting of the polls and the assumptions of who to vote, who knows the depth and breadth of each party's turnouts? She argued that 'maybe the American people were quietly cooking something up, something we don't know about. I think they are, and it is this: A Romney win'.

Here was Simon Jackman on *The Huffington Post*, here was his predictions the day before of what would happen with the election, and there's what happened. It pretty much happened as was expected. He actually did know what the people were thinking. But there was this real sense of 'how can bloggers do this? They're not doing it the right way, how can they own the truth, and 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 doesn't just apply to polling that they were concerned about the truth. A wonderful example in 2010, *The Australian*, which wrote a story saying that 'Rio Tinto shelves billions in projects'. A couple hours in the morning, 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 (change from 'shelve'). But in the article, the journalist wrote that 'In an announcement to the 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 planned new mining tax"'. In the *Australian Oxford Pocket Dictionary*, the word 'shelve' is defined as 'to put aside, especially, temporarily'. They

use that to justify that their original story was actually correct, that they were 'shelve' to mean that, not 'shelve' 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 with the Andrew Bolt case when he was done for the *Racial Discrimination Act*, and Chris Kenny at the time was writing on it, and again it's this sense of not just arguing the toss of 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 Broomberg said some of Bolt's words meant 'more than their literal meaning', and while he accepted the literal meaning of some of Bolt's mitigating phrases, he found that Bolt did not believe them. He goes on to say that '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'. Kenny wrote, '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'

This kind of view was being parodied back in the nineteenth century. Lewis Carroll was writing *Through the Looking Glass*, of Humpty Dumpty saying 'When I use a word, it means what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less'. It's a case of clearly we've 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'. And 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's kind of on board of actually that view of what language is. Especially when you think that back in March, Chris Kenny wrote that he is quitting Twitter, whereas if you actually go on Twitter, you'll see that Chris Kenny is still very much there, so who the hell knows what meaning really is anymore.

It's a case of sometimes with social media that the criticism will be that 'oh look, it's just an opinion'. And it certainly is true, there is a hell of a lot of opinion on social media and on blogs, on Twitter, on Facebook. But what we often find is that the media will often try and suggest that their opinion is actually the truth. This happened back in 2012, *The Australian* put out a 'Top 50 Most Influential People in Australian Politics' list, and everyone's got a good opinion and everything, good discussion. What struck me when I was reading, 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 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. The list was then culled and further soundings taken before the committee convened again to sign off on the final document'. There's a sense of 'we're signing off on something like it's an audit process, and we've now got the final unquestioned document on who's the most powerful in Australian politics ranked in the correct order. It's this sense of never considering that, really, what you've got is four journalists who sat around and came up with their opinion, and that's 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 audit. There's no sense of 'your truth is more true than anything else'.

A classic example, and Judith referred to this, was the misogynist speech. When this was reported, the press gallery reported it as from a political angle. But social media – and by this I really don't

mean Twitter, Twitter was kind of trapped up in that political vortex as well – but more the blogs and especially Facebook looked at it from a completely different angle. They didn't really give a stuff about the politics, they didn't care whether Julia Gillard's speech would improve the Newspoll rating or anything like that. It had nothing to do with that. It was purely 'here is a woman basically standing up to a man', and it was done in that context, the context of every woman who has had a crappy boss or something or has had to put up with something like this from someone. Here was someone saying what we always wish we could say, and better than we could really ever say it. That's a perfectly valid version of interpreting that speech, and 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've got it right, we know what's 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', to the ludicrous point of Dennis Shanahan going on *Jezabel* and reading the comments and passing them to let us know this is what the commenters on *Jezabel* website are really talking about. It was this absurd sort of sense – instead of just being able to say 'actually, we've missed this, let's include this aspect of meaning of something', it's this continual sense of saying 'no, there is no other meaning than what we have stated there is. Once we've stated it, we'll never acknowledge that we're wrong, we'll never acknowledge that we've missed something'. It's just something that really doesn't work in a social media environment because social media does not allow for a unitary meaning of words, of events, of truth.

I'll give you a nice little example that I was actually involved with. Sorry, one of the things that happened as a result of this misogyny speech is that Macquarie University changed, or broadened, the meaning of what 'misogyny' meant. And of course that got criticised, so suddenly the dictionary was wrong, we couldn't even cope with the dictionary's static version because suddenly dictionaries weren't static – who knew that the English language actually evolved?

An example that I was involved with which was really about this contestability of truth, of meaning, of events, involved the G20 summit in Mexico that Julia Gillard went to in June 2012. It was reported like this, this was in *The Daily Telegraph*, and was reported similarly in *The Australian* and other media outlets, even the ABC, that Julia Gillard had been 'slapped down' at the summit by the President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso. I read the article and thought it was the standard thing, Gillard was mentioned in one sentence and it's been hyped up and all that, and I thought nothing more of it, the standard thing, Australian journalists over in a foreign country have got to get some sort of an Australian angle on anything. 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, which I was one of the 433 people to bother actually listening to, and 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. This is just on my own blog page, and it was in the context of that day there'd been a number of job cuts by Fairfax, and I just wrote a thing about how I was... when everyone's complaining about media readership and people not paying for it, I was writing in the context of I'm finding it hard to justify buying media, buying newspapers when I'm not trusting what's being reported in them. Trust is a fairly crucial thing and if newspapers are losing that, and one of the

reasons they're losing that is that you 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 to actually find out what the speech was; if we've got the time we can go listen to it and draw our own conclusions. So I wrote about this, and 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 Los Cabos this week. 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 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'. And you can see there he's favoured the tweet, and the link was to my blog. An interesting thing – he didn't mention me, he mentioned Annie O'Rourke but that's okay.

One of the upshots of this – you'd think it might end there – but 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 Gallery, if I think something's wrong I'll 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 now, instead of seeing that, you'll see this. 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 really started with Annabel Crabb – a very, I guess you could say, foundation member of the traditional media, very much ABC, before that Fairfax, really a member of traditional media but 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 Gallery. It's a real sense of '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 really 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 really is absolutely 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 gonna solve the case. And you went on Reddit, and you could see they'd found all photographs and they'd worked out it was a missing Brown student from Brown University that did it, or perhaps that it was someone holding the bag. And rather stupidly, the traditional media got caught up in this – well, the *New York Post*, anyway. And they put this on the front page, because these guys had been found in the Reddit forums, that these guys are the suspicious ones, these ones perhaps, this guy on the right, his bag could be holding a pressure cooker that could have the bomb in it – a real sort of absurd-style thing. Instead of the traditional media standing back and going 'well, that could be a bit iffy', they tried to replicate it. And now they're getting sued for a great deal of money by these two guys, because of course they weren't involved at all.

What I view – and this is kind of to conclude – the interaction with social media, traditional media and all of that together is a bit like how data is used for the unemployment rate. What happens, the ABS puts out, there's 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 the fact that there's always a lot more people in January every year because it's holidays and businesses aren't hiring. So the original data really isn't real, they have to take that into account, and so they do a seasonally adjusted version which is trying to get a bit more context to things. Then they also have the trend line, which is a rolling 13-month view of things, a real sort of let's just step back and not get too excited about things.

What I often view is that 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're reporting that that is the only truth, then you're missing out on something, you're missing out on the seasonally adjusted. And perhaps the media should be trying to give us that view. But the thing is, sometimes the trend version is better but sometimes the seasonally adjusted gives us a bit more 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, it's a real contest of what is the best version of it, what is the context that we should be focussing on? I think that's where we are with social media and traditional media and the reporting of politics. It's this real sense of everyone trying to contest between the original, the seasonally adjusted and the trend. They're all true, but there's a good debate to be had there, and if it's 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're going to get a more full and a better picture of things. And I think if you're 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. And this contest of ideas, this contest of what truth is, is here to stay. Thank you.