

Transcript

Senate Occasional Lecture, 27 June 2014

Questions and Discussion

Dr Rosemary Laing: Thank you very much, Greg. Very deep – we've got a great range of topics to consider, and because our speakers have both been excellent time-keepers, we've got the perfect amount of time for some questions and discussions. And the rule I'm going to impose today – like a tweet, 140 characters, all comments and questions must be short. So if you have a question or a comment, I'd invite you to come to one of the microphones, there are two downstairs and one upstairs in the gallery. And let me start with you, sir, you're always quick to the microphone and I commend you for it.

Questioner: Thank you, thank you very much. You've reminded me of the truth that was once published in Victoria, full of scandal; and then the other one was the Bible, known as *The Age*. I was brought up on *The Age*. Then somebody came along. The one who came along – and this is my question – is Neil Ferguson, a Scottish financial historian. And his question was this: What is the framework? What is the context of financial management on all political commentary? What is the financial context of all political commentary ?

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

Dr Greg Jericho: Judith, you're actually on salary, so you can actually tell... [audience laughs] I'm a poor freelancer.

Judith Ireland: I know, but my employers may not be keen on me talking about who owns media and who doesn't, that's probably the difference.

Dr Rosemary Laing: We could take it as a comment.

Judith Ireland: We could. I mean, I think that is interesting in terms of social media. Obviously Australia has, even though the media landscape in some ways has diversified with the internet I was talking about since say the eighties, it's still a very small media landscape. So with social media, we're not just relying on people with a lot of money to give us information, and I think that's a positive thing. I don't know if that answers the question.

Dr Greg Jericho: For me, it brings to mind also, it's that whole thing of trust and who is the person tweeting and knowing actually who they are. And quite often people use pseudonyms and I certainly used a pseudonym, but it's a case of – especially in America, not so much in Australia, but there are examples of sort of astroturfing using social media to suggest that there is this groundswell of view, where it's actually just companies trying to do that. So it certainly does bring – just because they're on social media, doesn't mean they're not owned by somebody.

Dr Rosemary Laing: Thank you, sir.

Questioner: Greg, you made some really interesting comments that social media is a lot more than just Twitter. It's really interesting, picking up Judith's point, that when we talk about social media in Australia, some of the audience, I get the sense that their reaction is 'my goodness, this is happening

so quickly', but we're so slow compared to what's happening State-side. What do you think of broadcast phenomenons [sic] such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* or even *The Young Turks Network*, do you think we're big enough for some of those sorts of things down under?

Dr Greg Jericho: Well, the evidence so far would be that outside of the ABC, no. *The Hamster Wheel* kind of tries to do it, and Micallef –

Questioner: So you've forgotten his name?

Dr Greg Jericho: Yeah [Audience laughs]. 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 pretty much just to kind of almost do what Judith does and 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 – they were watching every TV show all the time, and it's an amazing amount of resources, and the audiences... if you can get a million people watching, you're doing extremely well. I think commercial networks just can't justify it, I think.

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

Questioner: Okay, thanks.

Dr Rosemary Laing: Next question. [Phone ringing] Is that you guilty?

Questioner: [Laughs] That was embarrassing. Two questions. One is, how much is social media opened up the world to extraordinary conspiracy theorists who see politics through that prism. Greg's last comment I thought was very interesting – of course, once upon a time we used to think that the daily newspaper was the first draft of history. Now, it's Twitter is [sic] that's the first draft of history, and maybe it's newspapers are the ones who have to step back. Your comments on those two things, especially the conspiracy – we saw it with Julia Gillard, and a lot of bloggers out there running conspiracy theories about her and Wilson, the AWU person.

Dr Greg Jericho: Oh yeah, it's fertile ground for conspiracy theorists. I mean, just think of the Malaysian Airlines aircraft going... If you're on Twitter, the number of theories being put out by nameless people or by Rupert Murdoch as well suggesting terrorism and everything was involved, and you're right. I guess that's my point about that original raw data is, that you always need to be – when you're reading Twitter – to be aware of those things, especially with things like when Nelson Mandela was seriously ill, god, there was so many people desperate to be the first to tweet that he had died. And it's like, I'm pretty sure that when he actually does die, we'll all know about it through an official source, there's no need to sort of think, 'this announcement must be it'. It's always that case when you're dealing with social media to be aware of what it is and what type of media... and just as when you read any magazine, you always view it in the context. If you're reading *New Weekly*, you might view a story in there about someone's friend saying that someone's marriage is on the rocks, you might view that a bit differently than if that story was put up on the ABC website. So I think you've always got to I think be aware of the context, and not think that social media is perfect.

Judith Ireland: I'd say I think politics is full of conspiracy theories. I mean, staffers and MPs are constantly peddling conspiracy theories about the other side, so in one sense we're sort of used to that, and 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've now got a Royal Commission looking at this stuff, and some of this stuff is now being seriously looked at, whether or not it's true. So that shows you the power of this stuff, because some of these blogs were very persistent about the things they were saying about Julia Gillard, and so that shows that power. I think also just in question time, if I'm tweeting something Pyne has said, a whole lot of people will come back and 'rah rah rah Christopher Pyne this, this and this', so there's this low-level conspiracy theory stuff going on all the time, but I kind of get back to the fact that in politics people are constantly putting out sexy stories, if you like, about the opposition and you've sort of got to filter through that in the same way.

Dr Rosemary Laing: We've probably got time for two more, so I'll invite you to ask your question.

Questioner: I was just wondering, do either of the speakers have a view about the change to the rollout of the NBN given that it facilitates the engagement through being able to watch videos fast, being able to post things fast, and whether you think owning the news has an impact on how it's being rolled out or a concern perhaps, Judith, about productivity? [Audience laughs]

Judith Ireland: Always my concern.

Questioner: Or whether it really is just about the money?

Judith Ireland: I don't know that I have a particular view about the timing and rollout of the NBN and how that relates to people's social media use and so forth or their ability to... I mean, of course it will make watching videos easier and that's great, thanks to the government. I'm not sure I have a particular view about that, I'm sorry.

Dr Greg Jericho: I don't think it's 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's actually very much a written medium, it's about writing which actually doesn't take up much megabytes or megabits or whatever it is to do. And sure, being able to watch question time live on a livestream or even this on a livestream certainly helps if you've got broadband, but for a lot of the social media use and the actual discussion about reporting, it actually doesn't really need too much bandwidth going on. But because, it really comes down, when I started my blog, I had a dial-up, I think, and it certainly is easier and better when you've got the fast broadband but it's not too much of a barrier.

Dr Rosemary Laing: Last question.

Questioner: I'd be interested in the reaction of both speakers to the Clerk's question. My impression was that roughly two thirds of the people here indicated that they were not using social media, and in particular whether that's an indication that there are still a lot of people in the community who prefer serious, considered, in-depth journalism to these quick, short, pithy immediate responses?

Dr Rosemary Laing: Can I start on that one, just very briefly? From my point of view, it's a question of lack of technical facility and lack of time to enjoy the medium. But let me pass to the panel.

Judith Ireland: I think one of the things with Twitter, I know studies have been done in the US so I'm not sure how much here, it does tend to be younger people on social media, although there are high 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's not there as part of the conversation, and I think that's 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, it's not necessarily – I think 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 the 140 characters would suggest.

Dr Greg Jericho: Yeah, absolutely. 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 things and articles and academic pieces that I probably wouldn't have come across if I wasn't on Twitter, and in terms of – It is very much a generational thing, and older people are less likely to be using it than younger people, but even that's kind of changing. You've got to remember, we now have people in university who can barely remember not being able to access the internet by phone. It's a fundamental change that has occurred, and it's 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's just people tweeting about cats or something. It can be if that's all you want to do, but it's actually an amazing tool for actually finding that in-depth discussion that you actually might really enjoy, but that you're actually missing out on because you're thinking 'I'll get that if I just use the newspapers', but actually some of these blogs are written by Nobel laureates who are incredibly interesting that you only really become aware of through social media.

Dr Rosemary Laing: On that note, I'm afraid our time is up. I know we could continue this discussion for quite some time. It's been a fabulous session. Thank you all for coming, and please give a hand to our panel. And look out for our next episode next month, July.