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Milissa Deitz

Excerpt

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Introduction

Halfway through 2009 I was talking to some of the first-year communications students I teach at the University of Western Sydney about *Balibo*, the Robert Connolly film starring Anthony LaPaglia. They wanted to know what it was about, and whether it was a documentary. I told them briefly about the 1975 murder of five Australian journalists by Indonesian soldiers in East Timor and explained that, although the film was closely based on actual events, my understanding was that it was also a drama, a political thriller.

Seeing a potential opportunity in an environment of textoverts whose preferred communication method requires keystrokes, I scurried off to the movies. I thought I'd take advantage of the students' seeming interest in the film to fuel talk about the material practice of journalism, not to mention cultural imperialism and the balance between the historical and the personal. I was also hoping to coax them to draw parallels between Timor and, say, Rwanda or Darfur in the context of mainstream media coverage.

Having asked the students to do a little research for themselves, I arrived for the next class with some information about Connolly's aims. Needless to say, I had underestimated who I was dealing with. I had barely finished delivering my ad-hoc review when one student raised the historical context of the news of the Balibo Five – the end of the Vietnam War and the soon-to-be-dismissed Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. Another told me the film was based on Jill Joliffe's book *Cover-Up: The Inside Story of the Balibo Five*, which argues that the Australian government has always known the exact circumstances surrounding the murder of the journalists. This same student then went on to talk about current issues in Timor and Indonesia.¹

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[More information](#)

I was a little surprised. From where were they getting their information? I asked. They looked at me the way the cast of the *Muppet Show* often used to look at their only human guest star – with a mixture of pity and bemusement.

‘The internet, Miss,’ said one finally. ‘The film’s website has lots of cool links.’

The film’s official website does indeed link to historical background as well as to current information about Timor. The film’s consulting historian, University of New South Wales academic Dr Clinton Fernandes, oversees a ‘sub’ website, which is linked to the film’s official site. It draws on the work of East Timor’s Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, which was established as an independent statutory authority in July 2001 by the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor. In an interview broadcast on Radio National, Connolly mentioned that he was excited by the idea that a website could be used in relation to a film the way footnotes are included in a historical or political textbook.²

Not long after this discussion, the *Kyle and Jackie O* talkback radio debacle occurred. While much of the fiasco revolved around poor timing and delay, the ensuing debate about media ethics was perfectly timed for my curriculum. In what has now been a much-publicised incident, the 2DayFM announcers attached a lie detector to a 14-year-old girl and questioned her about her sex life, only to discover she had been raped.

Rather than pillorying the radio announcers with barely concealed glee, as did many parts of the media, my students were mostly concerned about the personal ethics of the teenager’s mother, who had known about the rape and had been in the studio at the time of the incident. They were also more interested, not surprisingly, in the sex lives of teenagers. But not in the way one may assume: what was sobering was the discussion that ensued about sexual assault, or young people being encouraged to have sex against their better judgement.

Earlier in the year, talk had turned to the media coverage of the Victorian bushfires. A couple of students mentioned they had

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

first heard about the fires, or had only understood the extent of the disaster, when information started coming to them via their online social networks.

My students were born in the 1990s. Most of them don't read newspapers, watch television, or listen to the radio much. They may not, arguably, have the general knowledge of older generations but, as journalist Margaret Simons has pointed out on her compelling blog about the state of the Australian media, *The Content Makers*, if younger generations need information they know how to access it and how to do so quickly. Many take for granted the research skills that journalists once thought of as their professional preserve. Indeed, as a recent hoax hatched by the ABC's *Hungry Beast*³ shows, some professional journalists fail to do the basic online research that is now second nature for many young net natives.

As a teenager in the 1980s, I grew up in a household where the *Sydney Morning Herald* was delivered every morning and Dad arrived home with the *Daily Mirror* every evening. We would watch *Dr Who* and the news before dinner. Mike Willesee was a respected newsman and journalist and *A Current Affair* was not the poor man's *Today Tonight*. By the end of that decade I was working at Kerry Packer's magazine empire ACP as an editorial assistant on *Australian Business Magazine*.⁴ People still smoked in the office and I can remember the excitement – admittedly it may only have been my own – when everybody got computers on their desks.

These days, as an established journalist, author and media scholar, I rarely buy newspapers and sometimes the online sites of Fairfax, News Ltd and the ABC are the last places I visit when trying to follow up on news. I listen to the car radio daily, but more often than not I am alerted to news via links posted by friends, associates and groups on the social networking site Facebook or the micro-blogging phenomenon Twitter. Like many other people, I now use my connections to make my own 'newspaper'. (As one who professed no interest in 'what people had for lunch' I was a latecomer to Twitter, the platform allowing users to post short messages of no more than 140 characters. Yes, it is used for status

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[More information](#)

updates including the poster's taste in cuisine, but it is also used for news alerts and, importantly, allows 'hashtags' – user-generated coding for searchable online terms – enabling it to be integrated into real-time events. Although I am one of the original Marcel Marceaus of Twitter, I do regard it as an important journalistic resource.)

Such a system, whereby large groups of often unrelated people connect, converse and work together in the ether, has been referred to as collective intelligence. The American media scholar Henry Jenkins argues that, along with participatory culture and convergence, collective intelligence is one of three main concepts in which the contemporary mediascape is rooted.⁵ 'Participatory culture' refers to the dissolving distinction between media consumers and producers. For instance, while a mainstream media outlet such as News Ltd obviously has more power than a blogger or a lone teenager hacking iPhone apps,⁶ the idea is that all media users now participate somehow in media. The term 'convergence' is used when referring to the crossing over of media platforms, such as the online component of a print newspaper incorporating a clip from YouTube (the video-sharing website on which anyone with internet access can add and share video clips). The term is also used when large phone and film companies collaborate to increase their profits (for example, Time Warner's merger with AOL in the United States and Telstra's proposed takeover of Fairfax in 2004).

However, convergence also occurs when people take media into their own hands. What I believe is significant about convergence is that it is an ongoing process which, as I said, is why the concept of a media ecosystem makes the most sense to me when I think about the future of Australian journalism. McKenzie Wark, a media scholar at the New School for Social Research in New York, and I discussed the fact that media as an ecology is a powerful metaphor that, in its application, must also be considered carefully. An ecology is not really a closed and harmonious system, he pointed out, but rather is more usually open and unstable, driven by both internal dynamics and external shocks. Of course

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ecologies have within them forms of competition and collaboration, can fluctuate and can sometimes shift states with alarming speed. Wark added:

What distinguishes media ecologies from naturally occurring ones is that we can consciously intervene in them. We can have a policy aimed at warding off their worst outcomes, even if we can't always know all consequences of any media policy. We know enough about 'when good ecologies go bad' to think and act consciously to sustain them.

Ecologies are not entirely predictable. There are too many factors – economic, political and cultural – as well as technical. What is also significant at the moment, of course, is the power shift. Major media outlets are finding it hard to come to terms with the idea that they are no longer in charge. Traditional practitioners are finding it hard to come to terms with the loss of their exclusive power to define newsworthiness. Sharing their profession with the general public also works against the long-held ideas of journalists as the first draft of history, and against the concept of 'journalist as hero'.⁷ While no longer being in charge doesn't necessarily mean one becomes devoid of influence, many powerful people and privileged institutions are of course losing out financially. This is in many ways a broader aspect of capitalist modernity, which, along with the need for a new business model, will be further explored in chapter 2.

In August 2009 I was close to finishing this book when media mogul Rupert Murdoch announced News Corp's plan to charge for access to online news. He added that he expected other media companies to follow with similar plans. It was not long before Fairfax Media's managing director Brian McCarthy announced that Fairfax was considering charging for online content and that he would be happy to consider talking shop with Murdoch. However, less than two months later, McCarthy had this to say in his speech to Fairfax Media's AGM:

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[More information](#)

In relation to charging for online content, a great deal has been said and written on this subject over the past six months or so. We are looking closely at this issue and at this stage we have not made a final decision as to what course of action we may take.

Shortly after this Mark Scott, the CEO of 'our ABC', took a shot at commercial media in general and seemingly Murdoch in particular when he gave a speech at Melbourne University titled 'The fall of Rome: media after empire'.⁸ I won't carry on about Rome not being built in a day or the dangers of fiddling about with the strings of your lyre during a fiery emergency, but I will say this: for many commentators in earlier centuries, the fall of Rome marked the death knell of education, literacy and sophistication. The term 'the Dark Ages' was coined because written sources were few and far between. That and the fact that life was hell and people were probably grateful when they inevitably died young.

To certain commentators, our contemporary mediascape is akin to a modern Dark Age, one that has lost sight of the core values of journalism. Many highly respected and prominent Australian journalists and commentators, including Eric Beecher, Jana Wendt, David Salter, Robert Manne and Monica Attard, have all made alarmist comments about 'quality' journalism being under threat in Australia and the West; citizen journalists having no respect for truth or ethics; and there being less coverage of the things that matter, less variety of sources of news, more reliance on government spin, and less accountability. Beecher, for example, has opined more than once that relatively few people care about the subjects that matter to 'serious' journalists and 'regard high-end media as increasingly irrelevant to their lives'.⁹

It is true that, as the distinction between the cultural authority of certain forms of media is eroding, so too are traditional boundaries dissolving between objectivity and subjectivity, journalism and writing, source and audience, and information and entertainment.

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So the aforementioned Jeremiahs may be right – we are all headed straight to a virtual hell in simulated handbaskets.

Not really. At least, I don't think so.

People of *all* ages are getting news; it's just not the news as we think we know it. The contemporary mediascape has been referred to as 'networked journalism' – a networked practice of producing, editing, forwarding, sharing and debating – and 'media work',¹⁰ intermediation,¹¹ mediamorphosis¹² and hybridisation.¹³

The now outmoded concept of 'Web 2.0', often simply referred to as social media – MySpace, Facebook and others, and the photo-sharing site Flickr – showcases possibilities for mass participation and collaborative work. In other words, these media harness and increase collective intelligence as more people use and contribute to, for instance, the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, YouTube, and blog software such as Blogger and Wordpress, which provide templates and help people set up their own blogs.

The entities mentioned above, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, are media *platforms*. They have been, often unwittingly, applying themselves to the traditional structures of news-making. They are not replacing journalism or journalists, but through their very existence are questioning the conventions of traditional news and current affairs, including how such conventions may constrain what and who is regarded as newsworthy.

For example, one thing so-called 'new media' do is redefine *how* the story is told, as well as link to primary resource documents. In one well-known example, during the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, many people looking online for news were directed to blogs for the latest, and sometimes the only updated, information. The story of the September 2009 dust storms across parts of Australia was online for days before the storm reached Sydney – and the mainstream news. The social phenomenon of citizen journalism became recognisably significant in 2005 with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the London bombings and the Boxing Day tsunami. The eyewitness reporting of ordinary people recast the conventions of the mainstream news coverage. When the

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[More information](#)

London bombings took place, for example, news agencies around the world relied on citizen witnesses for photos and videos taken mostly on mobile phones. (Building on the experience of coverage of the tsunami, the BBC put together a ‘user-generated-content’ team in place for the UK election of May 2005, which ended up being able to manage the July bombings material from the public.)

In his keynote address at the Media 140 conference held in Sydney in late 2009, US media academic and blogger Professor Jay Rosen said that traditional journalists and major news companies should stop expecting ‘open’ platforms like blogging and Twitter to behave like traditional production systems. He told the conference:

People who come from ‘closed’ systems see chaos, but they need to see that open systems work differently. If journalists can detach what they do from the medium, from the system [their work] runs on, they can see that having more participants creates a better news system.

Traditional media are in decline for a number of reasons, not only because of the advent of the internet. The market has found a way to diversify through new forms of media, challenging the long-standing and traditional oligopoly of Fairfax, Murdoch and Packer in Australia. However, the issues are not only about the business of media; they are also concerned with the ideals of journalism.

This book concerns itself in part with interrogating the traditional virtues of the newsroom and the core ideals of journalism: objectivity and balance, quality control, ethical considerations and fact checking. I will argue in upcoming chapters that, far from undermining traditional journalism, the changes to the mediascape are returning journalism to its radical and democratic roots, recreating the feisty, informed public domain extinguished over the 20th century by the concentration of media ownership in Australia.

First, the importance of objectivity is probably the core journalistic ideal most often cited by those who believe quality journalism

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is dying. Yet one could argue that every decision a journalist makes is subjective; for example who and who not to interview, which questions to ask, which quotes to include, or how much background information to use in a story. The imperatives of daily reporting for mainstream publications – standardised frameworks and patterns, the isolation of facts and events – can be limiting. In previous decades, many journalists who deemed conventional forms and methods of news journalism inadequate for their purposes turned to literary reportage and, in doing so, broke new ground or advanced the practice of journalism in some way.

Returning from a trip to China and Japan after World War II, John Hersey wrote an article for the *New Yorker* that differed from any previous war coverage, telling as it did the story from the victims' point of view. Not only did Hersey interview victims; he also interviewed the enemy – *Hiroshima* was later published as a book. The work of George Orwell, Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion, among others, has illustrated how subjectivity can be a route to knowledge and understanding.

Secondly, there is the issue of quality control. I am not convinced that 'quality' journalism and commercial journalism (also referred to as tabloid journalism) are necessarily mutually exclusive. If we value credibility and analysis, and the Jeremiahs say we *should*, aren't we seeing more of these? Thirdly, I don't see how journalists – a diverse bunch of personalities if ever there was one – can claim to conduct themselves more ethically than their peers or indeed be expected to be more ethical than any other group in society. Naturally journalists should aim for high ethical standards at all times, but this is not the same thing. I also don't understand why they should expect to have the exclusive power to decide what matters.

Lastly, we have fact checking. It seems to me that there is a wider variety of sources of news today than there has ever been. As well as having the capacity to link to primary sources, journalistic processes are now more transparent. With the demand for 24-hour news, mistakes do happen: the speed at which news is expected

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and delivered makes this more and more likely. However, there is also more scope for editing and corrections. In addition to the professional journalists, amateur, accidental and citizen journalists provide opportunities via links for readers to source background material and make up their own minds, and to highlight their own errors quickly in order to correct them. So we no longer necessarily have to wait for *The Australian* or the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, to get their experts to interpret things for us.¹⁴ Also, the transitory and inexpensive nature of production means that many so-called content producers don't see the material they generate as precious but rather as ephemera that will be overlaid within a matter of hours. So who cares if it has spelling mistakes? (Admittedly, I do . . .)

To those who say the public is more interested in celebrity than 'serious news', surely the rise of the blogosphere and citizen journalism reflects a need for debate and discussion *beyond* the confines usually imposed by conventional news. American media academic Todd Gitlin describes the routine journalistic approach as 'cover the event, not the condition; the conflict, not the consensus; the fact that advances the story, not the one that explains it.'¹⁵

Traditional news reporting is grounded in an adversarial model, which favours aggressive interviewing techniques and an emphasis on drama. As Australian media studies academic and journalist Catharine Lumby has said when commenting on the traditional adversarial model of news, the privileged topics and sources tend to be the ones that mirror accepted social, political and economic hierarchies:

Such norms arguably impact not only on how stories are told, but on what can be said. Many social, political and cultural issues are not black and white, and mapping them into oppositional terms distorts the positions of various speakers in the debates.¹⁶

The trouble with this model is that it stopped working for the general public, who are treating news and journalism in the same