Watch This Space
The future of Australian journalism

Milissa Deitz is a journalist and author and currently lectures in Media at the University of Western Sydney. She has written extensively for magazines and newspapers including the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Sunday Telegraph* and *Vogue* and co-hosts the TVS book show, *Shelf Life*.

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Encountering Australian journalism

Series editor, Tony Moore

The Cambridge University Press *Australian Encounters* series comes at an important time in our national life, when the old orthodoxies of left and right are proving inadequate to understand or remedy the challenges facing Australia. In each volume, readers will encounter new research and thinking by scholars and public intellectuals about an issue or problem confronting Australia that refreshes our public debate and aids civic renewal. One aim is to provide a bridge between academics undertaking innovative research in our universities and readers seeking new ideas beyond the homilies of media pundits and politicians.

Journalism is a mode of investigation and analysis that Australians, like other moderns, rely upon to interrogate their society. But lately, journalism itself has become the subject of interrogation. In conferences and speeches, blogs and tweets, the question being asked is: will journalism survive? This is an important question for Australian democracy, and the subject of this volume, *Watch This Space*. There is no shortage of critics who believe our enthusiasm for sourcing and sharing information over the internet has delivered a death blow to the markets, business models and standards that have long sustained journalism across the traditional media platforms of print, radio and television.[1]

However, for media scholar Milissa Deitz, these rumours are greatly exaggerated. Indeed she is optimistic that, far from being a gravedigger, the internet is journalism's saviour. What will perish, however, is the 20th century's version of journalism. In Australia this orthodoxy, born of the age of press barons, oligopolies, mass markets and paternalist public broadcasting, is changing rapidly in response to new media applications and technologies, convergence of old media forms on single platforms, audience fragmentation into niche interests, consumers' insistence on participation and the

emergence of a new suite of cultural entrepreneurs happy to service these demands. Far from 'dumbing down' and weakening democracy, these trends are broadening the definition of what constitutes news, and taking political debate beyond the mainstream consensus insisted upon by the powerful and their spinners. There will be journalism, Deitz argues, but not as we've known it.

Whereas the jeremiahs fixate on a 'golden age' that happily coincides with their own career trajectories, this book uses a longer time frame and recognises journalism's history as a mode of communication that changes through a dynamic interrogation of society.[2] For Deitz, new technology is restoring the partisan crusading, plurality of perspectives and engagement with change that made journalism the midwife of modernity in the 18th and 19th centuries. Building on media academic John Hartley's study of the relationship between newspaper journalism and the popularisation of coffee-house liberalism and radical thought that helped bring about the American and French revolutions, Deitz finds in our postmodern times a citizen journalism in lock step with a confident cyberspace political activism – spanning the Obama presidential election campaign, Osama Bin Laden's viral videos, GetUp's mobilisation of the conscience constituency in Australia's 2007 federal ballot, anti-corporate culture jamming and the rise of the prankster satire – that delivers once-marginal politics to centre stage.[3] Indeed, in Australia's 2007 poll, the Canberra press gallery struggled to keep up with unprecedented citizen intervention via the internet.[4]

Watch This Space does not deny that 20th-century journalism's claim to 'objectivity' is a casualty of the new citizen journalism. It does argue that objectivity was always a self-serving ideology, observed in the breach, that never accurately described the reality of journalistic practice. There were always more sides to a story than the centrist left–right binary of two-party politics that journalists too often substitute for original research. The failure of Australian newspapers to seriously engage with scientific evidence about climate change, and the treatment of efforts to reduce carbon pollution as a fringe 'green' cause until Al Gore and Nick Stern conferred

'northern hemisphere' legitimacy, demonstrates just how blinkered the practice of objectivity can be.[5] Deitz welcomes the shift from *faux* balance to more transparent partisanship, and demonstrates why the new journalism – by including far more people, ideas, causes and genres – represents a reinvigoration of the Australian public sphere. Digital media's breaching of the border between professional journalists and audiences has called into being a new type of amateur commentator, a latter-day revival of the 19th-century 'man of letters' or Gramsci's 'organic intellectual', that is surely a plus for civic life.[6] The national conversation proves to be much broader – and much less earnest – than the agenda editors in both the 'quality' and 'tabloid' newspapers deign to legitimise as news.

The established gatekeepers – proprietors, editors and professional journalists – do not always welcome changes that necessarily diminish their power, influence and profits, but the liberal capitalism to which the mainstream media long ago hitched its star thrives on creative destruction.[7] Even in a polity like Australia, with its long tradition of cosseting cartels, the older media empires have had little choice but to open their gates to the digital barbarians. To do otherwise would leave the traditional media running the equivalent of an RSL slide night to dwindling audiences. It has been amusing to watch commercial media companies, which have extolled the sovereignty of market forces in other areas of our lives, protest against the preferences of consumers, advertisers and upstart entrepreneurs for the internet and its new aesthetics and politics. Meanwhile, old media regeneration has occurred in that least likely of places, the once bureaucratically moribund ABC, which is now busily shedding its Aunty image (a moniker redolent of patronising elitism inherited from the BBC) with a decisive exploitation of digital capability as it seeks to transform itself from a mass public broadcaster into a narrowcasting hub distinguished by a more diverse, participatory and lively conception of the 'public'.[8]

Watch This Space finds much to celebrate in the contemporary Australian media ecosystem. But while *Crikey*, *The Drum*, *Q and A* and hoax-heavy satire like *The Chaser* and *Hungry Beast* may

have given Australian journalism back its mojo, what of so-called 'quality' journalism? Outside the taxpayer-funded ABC, how will media companies pay for long-haul investigative journalism of the sort that makes politicians and business leaders squirm and brings down government?[9] While Deitz is sympathetic to this problem she asks an embarrassing question for those who defend the status quo: how often in recent times have the broadsheets, or quality current affairs broadcasters, exposed a great misdeed in the political, economic or social life of Australia? Indeed, she argues that the diseases of PR spin, political management of the news cycle and office-bound reporting crippled 'quality' journalism even before the business models began to stumble. Perhaps in-depth investigative journalism will return as an expanded niche specialty of the traditional news companies, which will persuade a significant section of readership to pay for an online subscription? In the meantime, in preference to a 'fourth estate' holding powerful institutions to account, senior journalists operate as another institution of power in Australia, and not surprisingly find themselves vulnerable to new media hoaxers and the subject of critique on sites such as *Crikey* and *New Matilda*.[10]

Australians have been at the forefront of experiments in reimagining journalism, yet these innovations are too often presented as a threat to business models that were always too dependent on state-sanctioned oligopoly. Odd, then, that many left-of-centre commentators join their right-wing sparring partners to lament the passing of a media status quo that has seldom embraced dissident voices. *Watch This Space* is a timely scholarly intervention in a debate that in this country has been polarised between defenders of a romanticised past and boosters of the latest gadget. Deitz moves beyond nostalgia and technological determinism to question journalism's own myths and practices, while placing the agency of audiences at the centre of her analysis. This work will be a valuable resource for teachers and students of journalism, media and cultural studies, but it will also be appreciated by journalists who wish to think critically about what they do, and what they might do differently.

Preface

Over the last few years I have attended a number of conferences, held internationally and in various cities around Australia, about the future of journalism.[1]

In addition to my work as an academic, my experience as a working journalist has been important to the way I frame journalistic culture and my understanding of the limitations faced by those who work in it. While my professional experience enables me to recognise the utility of a model that focuses on conflict at the expense of complexity, I find myself sometimes questioning this journalistic practice, which is at odds with my personal politics. Over the last few years, I have found that it is not only the general public and activists but also mainstream journalists who have begun questioning conventional frameworks for analysing and reporting on politics and culture. A number of those journalists have moved their practice to blogs and other online media vehicles.

Until recently I was finding myself frustrated at the limits on what I could glean from the mainstream press or TV about issues and events shaping the world. The Australian society I moved through was not reflected in its mainstream media. Now I have myriad websites, blogs and other platforms through which to access news and current affairs.

In 2005, in his report to New York's Carnegie Corporation, US media consultant Merrill Brown said that through new media, including mobile phones and instant messaging, people are accessing and processing information in ways that

> challenge the historic function of the news business and raise fundamental questions about the future of the news field . . . new forms of newsgathering and distribution,

> grassroots or citizen journalism and blogging sites are changing the very nature of who produces news.

In April of the same year, in what was arguably a watershed moment, Rupert Murdoch gave a landmark speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Expressing sentiments that seemed not to create much of a stir at all in mainstream media circles, he argued that there was 'a revolution in the way young people are accessing news'. As part of his speech, Murdoch argued:

> They don't want to rely on a god-like figure from above to tell them what's important. And to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they don't want news presented as gospel. Instead, they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it.

Of course now we know that, just like St Augustine, Murdoch scurried back to add, 'but not quite yet, Lord'.

Donald McDonald, chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) from 1996 to 2006, argues that alternative media should be seen as more of a challenge than an alternative. When noting how, among the variety of blogs, 'citizen journalism' is one branch that has recently monopolised attention in the US due to its contest with mainstream media, he argues that the bridge built by the internet between mainstream and citizen journalism may just see better journalism as its outcome. 'Citizen journalism will not make institutional journalism redundant or irrelevant . . . It will make traditional journalism stronger, better, more responsive. Sceptics tend to make you lift your game.'[2]

What I believe to be critical to the future of news, journalism and the Australian media is the idea that popular culture is political. As far as the future is concerned, the concept of a media ecosystem makes the most sense to me. This would be an ecosystem – a unit of interdependent organisms that share the same habitat – in which journalism is a joint project between journalists and non-journalists,

accidental journalists, celebrities, bloggers and the general public. The evolution of journalism will also depend somewhat on how traditional journalists and media outlets learn to continue to add value to the contemporary media landscape by adapting traditional practices rather than by just adopting new technologies.

Milissa Deitz

I'm sure there was a time when they were saying,
'You know, only half the people are getting
news from town criers that used to.'

Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show*