

❖ **Deitz, Milissa - *Watch This Space: The Future of Australian Journalism*, Cambridge: New York and Melbourne, 2010 (pp. 160) ISBN 978-0-451-14428-5**

Reviewed by Lisa Lynch— Concordia University

*Watch This Space* is a lively and unabashedly optimistic consideration of what the author, Milissa Deitz, suggests is the future of Australian journalism – namely, a shift to a hybrid form of journalism that takes direction from emerging media forms such as blogs, social media sites, and media activism. More conversational than scholarly in tone, Deitz’s book serves as a useful introduction for those curious about the uncharted waters currently explored by media outlets in Australia and elsewhere.

Deitz’s premise is that commercial media in Australia as presently constituted is something of an obsolete form – unable to serve the Fourth Estate role it has long embraced. Rather than the older division between commercial or mainstream media and the politically engaged “alternative” press, Deitz sees the emergence of a “media ecosystem” made possible by online publishing, defined by blurred boundaries between amateur and professional media-makers. Though Australia has suffered cutbacks in newsrooms she notes, it has at the same time profited from the increasing presence of citizen journalists able to do the street-level reporting that their professional counterparts now eschew.

Though Deitz recognises that some in the media industry have expressed concern about the fragmentation of the media market, her thesis is the multiplication of media outlets allows media consumers to access a broader range of perspectives, not only politically liberal or conservative perspectives, but the perspectives of media “insiders” as well as media “outsiders.” Deitz profiles two Australian journalists who now run popular blogs – Margo Kingston of *Webdiary.com.au* and Tim Blair of *TimBlair.net* – observing that both bloggers utilise skills developed as media professionals, but also devote part of their blogs to media critique, drawing on their new “outside” status to explain and challenge the media’s role.

Interviewing Kingston about *Webdiary* (in this section, as throughout the book, Deitz relies heavily on interviews with media producers), Deitz draws attention to *Webdiary’s* role as an outlet of public conversation and citizen participation. Kingston details how her active moderation of the blog allows it to remain a civil space of conversation for people from “all walks of life,” while also assuring readers of Kingston’s own ability to publicly accept criticism for the positions that she herself expressed.

Using their blogs as means to facilitate conversation, and welcoming suggestions from readers for possible topics to address, Kingston and Blair also embrace what Deitz identifies as an

increasing trend toward participatory media. Her discussion of audience participation encompasses not only proto-journalistic efforts such as *TimBlair.Net* and *Webdiary*, but also the sort of participatory media activism exemplified by Australian groups such as *GetUp!* and *YouDecide2007*, both media campaigns geared at younger, alienated constituencies. Suggesting that the nurturing of amateur content makers by both media outlets and political campaigns gives formerly passive audience new strategies for engagement and individual and group empowerment, Deitz speculates "a possible future for journalists which lies in creating, coordinating and nurturing participatory online communities for amateur content makers" (98).

Deitz's consideration of the media practices of progressive political organisations sets this book apart from similar books about the current state of the media in ways that are both productive and problematic. Her book suggests that we see such media work as part of a continuum, at least a formal continuum, along which we might also locate the formal innovations of professional journalism and the efforts of amateur media-makers. These formal similarities are undeniable and worthy of note, whether they are generated through conscious imitation or simply through the infectious interchange between media practitioners interested in new tools and practices.

Still, I find that Deitz does not devote enough attention to the real distinctions between journalists and activists. These distinctions persist even in the face of shifting technologies. In some cases, the tensions between the old and the new have deepened the antagonism between those who see new technologies as blurring boundaries between citizen-activist and citizen-journalist; and those advocating for an idea of journalistic objectivity that requires that journalists set themselves apart from the political maneuverings of the society they inhabit.

Indeed, the battle between the old guard of media and the upstarts that Dietz champions is far from over, in Australia and elsewhere. And perhaps more to the point, the audiences that media outlets are competing for have, by some accounts, drifted to new places that haven't been well mapped. Dietz begins her book with an endearing anecdote about being humbled by her student's breadth of knowledge about the historical events behind the docu-drama *Balibo*, only to discover that her students had retrieved their information from links appended to the film's website. Though Deitz uses the anecdote as an illustration of her student's research skills, it also serves as a reminder of how one's individual storehouse of knowledge is increasingly mediated through consumption, in this case the consumption of a popular film. Where Dietz sees new media technologies as facilitating a form of media less tied to the ideologies of the market, others might argue for the simultaneous emergence of a spectrum of tools that facilitate the suture of media consumption and product consumption: Conde Nast's new iPad version of *O Magazine*, which allows one to seamlessly purchase items from the Christmas lists of Oprah's best buddies, being a prime example of such innovation.

Deitz's unwillingness to look to the dark side of the street also makes her turn away from the increasing constraints placed on the online environment. If it is sometimes the case that, as she argues, publishing online "overcomes potential distribution problems and production costs as well as government sedition laws" (33), it is also true that challenges to net neutrality, Internet filtering, and the persecution of information activists such as those involved with the Wikileaks website all point to a future in which online publishing might be far less free in every sense of the word.

In conclusion, there are parts missing to Dietz's map of the media ecosystem, but there are also moments when her cartography is admirable. It is difficult to argue with her claim that we all benefit from a broadening of the formats and filters through which ideas and events are presented through the media. But if it is the case, as Deitz would have it, that "the future of journalism in Australia depends somewhat on the rejection of the assumption that there are

two sides to any story" (118), then those truly invested in the story of journalism's future might do well to supplement this book with others that might tell a somewhat darker tale.

### **About the Reviewer**

Dr Lisa Lynch teaches journalism at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. Dr Lynch worked from 1987-1992 as a magazine and newspaper journalist in the San Francisco Bay Area and then in Pennsylvania, writing on science and cultural affairs. Since beginning her academic career, Dr. Lynch has written about the prison system, Guantanamo, and nuclear policy for both academic and popular publications.

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