

❖ **Jericho, Greg – *The Rise of the Fifth Estate: Social Media and Blogging in Australian Politics* Melbourne, Scribe Publications, 2012, (pp. 313) ISBN 9781921844935**

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It seems that not a day goes by [sic] before yet another person who has “worked in communications, political and advocacy roles for the past 25 years” offers their opinion on social media. The old media people seem to be having a hard time getting over the fact that the rest of us also have a voice now.

The comment above was posted in response to a recent article on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) online opinion and analysis portal *The Drum* by Paula Matthewson, herself a blogger and tweeter of renown who writes under the ‘nom-de-net’ DragOnista. It is typical of the tenor of debate raging around the significance, usefulness and legitimacy of so-called “new media” such as Facebook, Twitter and the blogosphere for political engagement in comparison with traditional forms of mainstream media (MSM). Matthewson argues that political engagement via social media is merely ‘digital chatter’ that substitutes for genuine commitment and concrete action, and that at worst, Twitter in particular, is mostly ‘sound and fury’ without real impact. It is into this brave new world, (labelled ‘the Fifth Estate’ by American media academic Stephen Cooper in 2006), that Greg Jericho wades in this timely book.

Jericho is better known as blogger Grog’s Gamut, and his stated aim in this book is to ‘focus on the interaction of the blogosphere and social media with the overall coverage of Australian politics’ (3) and yet he does much more than this. The book argues that the internet and new forms of social media are challenging the traditional symbiotic relationship between the MSM and the political elite, and that this is not only eroding the business models upon which newspapers in particular have traditionally operated, but is also laying siege to the gatekeeping powers of the Fourth Estate, mostly for the good. The reach and influence of MSM to reflect and shape public opinion and to influence political debate and public discourse, the book argues, is being reshaped by the blogosphere, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. While the roles of journalists, editors and sub editors are evolving and being challenged, resistance is futile and is like trying to hold back the tide.

Tipping his hat to W.B. Yeats, Jericho (who holds a PhD in Literature), evokes this ongoing struggle as a metaphorical “widening gyre” as exemplified by a stanza from Yeats’ famous poem ‘The Second Coming’:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity (4).

The book provides a snapshot of this tension and state of chaos and, using a combination of well researched and thoughtful analysis told with an accessible and conversational narrative style, Jericho attempts to capture the dynamic. He argues that:

The MSM and those in power – politicians and governments – seek to hold the centre, but the Internet and the social-media world is a cyclone. It is a centrifugal force spinning control away from the centripetal forces of the establishment that is seeking to manage and formalise it (4).

Jericho interweaves his analysis with anecdotes from his own time in the social media ‘trenches’. His personal experience of being ‘outed’ as a Canberra public servant by *The Australian* after his then-anonymous blog, *Grog’s Gamut*, developed a following for its biting critique of the MSM’s coverage of the 2010 election campaign forms a central moral tale of revenge, of “ Sturm und Drang”, around which the narrative is structured. He notes that, like many bloggers, he doesn’t consider himself, or

aspire to be, a journalist, but is merely a political 'tragic' or policy 'wonk' who likes to write in his spare time and who seeks to proffer an alternative perspective. Taking a position that most mainstream journalists may find confronting, he is particularly critical of attempts to narrowly classify journalism in today's multi-platform media world and quotes fellow blogger Tim Dunlop who argues that:

Instead of trying to draw a fine line between 'journalism' and 'blogging', revering the former while denigrating the latter, they would be better served making a distinction between quality work and shoddy work (123).

The early chapters of the book give a useful and engaging overview of the evolution of political blogging in Australia and the so-called 'blog wars', but also challenge the notion of bloggers not only as a homogeneous species, but as merely self-indulgent amateurs writing within a medium with few rules and free of the responsibility which applies to MSM. He also makes the point that the evolving power of social media means that bloggers, regardless of the size of their readership, can fight back against the powerful who seek to control the debate and the media agenda. Of this he says:

In the blogosphere, as with all other aspects of the social media world, the centre cannot hold. Bloggers must abide by the laws of the land, but they do not have to abide by the old ways of submitting quietly, with no way to counter the voice of the well connected. Everyone can now be connected to everyone else (56).

He analyses the political leanings of the blogosphere and concludes that while traditionally it has been mostly left-leaning (47), this is a reaction to the overwhelmingly right wing commentary on news blogs in most newspaper opinion pages written by the likes of Andrew Bolt, Tim Blair, Piers Akerman and Miranda Devine, to name a few. As other bloggers have joined the 'conversation' in recent years however, the ideological spectrum has broadened.

The demarcation within the 'widening gyre' between 'amateurs' in the blogosphere mainstream and 'professional' journalists who see themselves as operating without bias and with fearless regard for the truth, is a central theme. He challenges the oft-implied mantra from some, (and he is particularly critical of *The Australian*), that we should 'let the professionals do their job'. The new 24/7 media paradigm with its attendant tighter deadlines and commercial imperatives, have morphed many traditional practices as well as reader expectations. He writes that:

Journalists who just view social media as communications platforms that earn no money and are full of cranks, and who think that bloggers don't engage in real journalism, need to realise that it may not be the journalism they thought they signed up for – but it is journalism (226).

The blogosphere has created what ABC chairman Mark Scott describes as a 'shared space' (120) and Jericho argues that the rules and the dynamics are in a state of flux and that MSM need to be creative and embrace the new order in order to both re-engage readers, but also to remain true to the ethos of the Fourth Estate.

While outlining and acknowledging some legitimate concerns about the style and substance of online debate and commentary, Jericho argues that beneath the criticism there runs a thread of anti-intellectualism by some who complain about the overly analytical nature of some blogs. However, it is this depth of policy analysis, more akin to 'academic work and literary criticism' (128) that he sees as one of the most valuable contributions of some parts of the blogosphere, particularly as it is increasingly lacking in mainstream political commentary. Regular readers of *Grog's Gamut* would be familiar with Jericho's measured prose, careful expositions, as well as his love of graphs and charts to deconstruct and critique much of what is merely reported verbatim by the mainstream commentariat in a "he said, she said" fashion. The descent of much MSM political reporting into a kind of soap opera where the confected drama of personality politics has overtaken coverage and analysis of policy substance, has been the subject of much recent critique. One example is that of former Rudd government minister Lindsay Tanner in his 2011 book *Sideshow: Dumbing down democracy* (see my review). Jericho contends that social media platforms provide an important companion to counter this trend. The time pressures of the 24/7 newsroom have created a tendency for much MSM content to rely on reconstituted PR, much of which is unchecked and unchallenged. This has left space for bloggers and tweeters to become what Arthur Brisbane of *The New York Times* labelled media 'truth vigilantes' (224). However the need for the two arms to work together is echoed by *Crikey's* Bernard Keane in his commentary on the stoush about the declining standards of traditional journalism.

Rare is the false claim by a politician or spinner now that won't be picked up and torn apart online. But fact-checking on a little-trafficked blog, or on Twitter, won't match fact-checking in the originating report, particularly when that will be viewed far more widely in the community than online-only material. Greater dialogue between journalists and social media participants, making stories more of an online conversation and less about authoritative pronouncements, partly addresses the resourcing issue, but alters the role of mainstream media journalists in a way many are uncomfortable with (227).

Jericho's tale is not entirely told through the rose-tinted spectacles of a social media tragic. The active, messy nature and idiosyncratic nature of many blogs with its potential for readers to contribute, and which cater for both a broader range of topics and views, is part of both their power and appeal, but also their weakness. While blogs allow anyone with a computer to 'sidestep the gatekeeper' (189), they are not all equal. They can become both an echo chamber of readers' political prejudices and predilections, as well as ideological silos 'in which the left talk to the left, the right talk to the right, and never the twain do meet – except on Twitter' (47) and hence have the potential to narrow, rather than widen, debate. Analysing the comments related to Andrew Bolt's blog posts on climate change as I have done recently, certainly supports this observation. Chapter 2 explores this characterisation of blogs and other social media forums as uncivilised, anarchic spaces inhabited by trolls indulging in various forms of anti-social behaviours, aided and abetted by the ability to post anonymously, where rumour, innuendo, unsupported assertions and hearsay gain legitimacy by virtue of repetition and sharing.

Chapter 3 notes the gender imbalance in the composition of the blogosphere itself and in political debate generally – 'less than

20% of blogs on Australian politics are written by women, and only another 10% are group blogs that include both men and women' (57). He concludes that blogs are quite 'blokey' in nature and this is reflected in the gendered rate of participation in the commentary sections, the more aggressive too-ing and fro-ing being more suited to men than to women. In terms of the charge that the online world is full of 'misogynists and nut jobs' to quote Prime Minister Julia Gillard, he says that while women are more likely to be subjected to a higher level of abuse online, there is much more condescension rather than overt sexism (78) but that this mirrors that of levels of female representation in both politics and in business more broadly.

Chapter 4 looks more closely the nature and import of online comments and some of the more unsavoury characteristics of parts of the online community – the favourite MSM *bête noir* for moral panics about the dangers of cyberspace. Generally speaking, he maintains they don't represent majority views as only a small number of readers actually post comments and in general comments on online news sites in particular are 'cretinous in nature' and 'illumination is not found nor desired there' (237). The answer for bloggers is a glaring need for careful moderation. In a conclusion which echoes the old adage, 'if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen', Jericho argues that the golden rule for anyone who has ever written a blog or online article is 'never read the comments' (81). In the case of widely reported examples of cyberbullying such as that metred out to celebrity blogger Mia Freedman, and more recently to television presenter and model Charlotte Dawson, not to mention prime minister Julia Gillard (as overviewed in a wonderful essay by Anne Summers), this advice seems sage. But it does not really get to the substance of why anonymity online seems to license such behaviour? Perhaps that was not the point?

Chapter 5 titled 'MSM vs the Bloggers: let the professionals do their job', looks in greater detail at the 'blog wars' and the impact of blogs and Twitter in particular on the efficacy of political coverage in MSM. Jericho argues that the non-structured and free form nature of the new media debate is as equally legitimate, and in fact often more representative of broader public opinion, than those who write from the cloistered and somewhat 'incestuous' confines of the Canberra Press Gallery. Post the publication of this book, this point is most clearly illustrated by the disconnect between the reactions of much of the Gallery and those of social media to Prime Minister Julia Gillard's now famous 'misogyny speech' of October 10, 2012, and is a case study in how the goalposts in political engagement and perceptions have shifted. According to Mr Denmore in the blog 'The Failed Estate':

In this case, a passionate and thrilling speech by a prime minister about sexism and the low-level tactics of a political opposition leader beyond cynicism attracted world attention. But our gallery are too clever to see that.

Exploration of the growing use of Twitter by journalists and politicians takes up most of the second part of the book. The immediacy of Twitter with its ability to allow users to engage broadly and in real time is part of its strength the book contends. While there are the obvious problems of an unmoderated medium for abuse and bullying, there is also the ability to take part in an argument or conversation for journalists to communicate directly with readers as never before, "a newswire, a font of information, and a way of meeting people across divides that would never previously have been bridged" (249) The reporting on the ground of events during the Arab Spring are an example of this. Jericho uses three major important political events – the Howard-Costello 'non challenge' of 2007, the Turnbull-Abbott leadership spill of 2009 and the Rudd-Gillard coup of 2010 – to illustrate the impact of Twitter in particular, on how these events played out. In the case of the Rudd-Gillard challenge, he argues that the immediacy afforded the Gallery to report in real time a rapidly unfolding story, created a situation where the events took on a life of their own, effectively making it impossible for the protagonists to quell the leadership crisis once it had been leaked.

Social media has also enabled individual journalists to become media identities in their own right, beyond the confines of the news organisation for whom they work. In many ways, the reporters and commentators themselves have become actors in the political drama. On the reverse side, he observes that what many journalists fear about the social media effect is the lack of control over how their reports and their words will be read and used. It is this loss of power that he believes lies at the heart of much of the acrimony.

However the major strength of the Fifth Estate, is its potential to hold politicians, journalists and sometimes powerful interest groups to account. This was powerfully illustrated recently in a recent case of a serving police officer, Peter Fox, who acted as a whistleblower on the ABC's *Lateline* program to expose police complicity in the cover up of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Because of the sensational nature of the allegations, Suzanne Smith, the reporter in question, expected attempts to discredit Fox, and used Twitter to garner support for both Fox and the cause and to rebut allegations that he was psychologically unstable. With support from other prominent political tweeters as well as the broader community, the campaign rapidly gathered momentum. As she later wrote on *The Drum*:

This phenomenon coincided with a concerted campaign by many victims and supporters outside social media. It was propelled by the public's mood; they had had enough. The idea [of a Royal Commission] went viral and by the end of the day on Monday (November 12), a national royal commission was announced.

In answer to the criticisms of the medium's predilection for triviality and abuse, he sees it as a microcosm of the variety of people, personalities and responses in the real world (250) and he concludes that while Twitter is no nirvana, like other forms of social media it requires vigilance to both filter out the noise and distraction, and care to avoid rash and thoughtless comments that may end up in a 'pile on' or 'twitspit'. The caveat advice offered to politicians and journalists more generally is that their interactions and responses should be organic and that they should not merely use social media as another PR platform as this is something which younger media consumers will very quickly see through and react against, often to the peril of the tweeter.

Finally, it is the dynamic impact upon journalism of Twitter in particular that Jericho champions in this book. The ability for amateurs and professional journalists to interact, for newsrooms to seek sources on the ground and to garner reactions from

their readership about either the accuracy of their information or their interpretations of it, is what he finds so exciting and empowering. While he acknowledges that MSM remains dominant, the occasional triumphs of alternative opinion arriving unexpectedly from left field (two examples of which I've cited), allows us to glimpse the possibilities for a broader, fairer and less manufactured political coverage. An enlightening and enjoyable read.

About the reviewer

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