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Green, Jonathan - *The Year My Politics Broke*, Melbourne University Press, 2013, pp. 192 ISBN: (Paperback) 9780522864373

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“ The first rule of being a political junkie is to always remember that you are a very weird person, and most people are not like you” (New York Times blogger Ezra Klein in Green, 2013, p. 17). ”

A good way to teach new students of journalism the basics of writing is to ask them to explain a situation to an alien who has just arrived on earth. It's much harder task than it sounds. But Jonathan Green's book *The Year My Politics Broke*, is a bit like that exercise – it gives excruciating detail, much of which we had hoped to forget – of how the Australian news media and politicians worked in unison to collectively fail the people in the lead up to the 2013 national election.

The most difficult part of this book, however, is that Green offers little in the way of suggestion for an improvement in the status quo. It leaves the reader believing that the death roll of politicians and media cannot be stopped, and will take with it any respect for institutions, or a basic observance for the dignity of national office (Green, 2013, p. 38). Green's best attempt at offering a way forward is to suggest that the media “reawaken” a sense of what serving democracy's Fourth Estate might entail (Green, 2013, p. 44).

It's a shame Green doesn't flesh out an alternative future, perhaps like that put forward by Alain de Botton in his new book *The News: A user's manual* (de Botton, 2014b). De Botton makes some practical suggestions for improving the quality of reporting, including a call for news organisations to signal how their stories fit into the large themes in which we are genuinely interested.

“ The problem with facts is that nowadays there is no shortage of reliable examples. The issue is not that we need more of them, but that we don't know what to do with the ones we have (de Botton, 2014a). ”

De Botton further argues that it's not censorship of news that is the real enemy of democracy, but rather turning readers away from news.

“ The modern world is teaching us that there are dynamics far more insidious and cynical than censorship in draining people of political will: these involve confusing, boring and distracting the majority away from politics by presenting events in such a disorganized, fractured way that most of the audience is unable to hold on to the thread of the most important issues for any length of time (de Botton, 2014a). ”

The one area in which Green does surprise is in praising the often overlooked Australian public service. He outlines a range of public policy outcomes that originated, not within the bowels of the

Australian Labor Party, but as part of “Australia’s diligent bureaucratic policy apparatus” (Green, 2013, p. 6). Although, of course, Green also notes that even with the best support from the public service, the political masters can always make a hash of it. After all: “... [p]olitical survival is always the primary objective; that there is no issue so pure, so noble, that it cannot be manipulated” (Green, 2013, p. 104).

Green uses 13 chapters to forensically detail the failures of individual politicians and journalists, the inadequacies of factional power block, the unfairness metered out to strong female leaders, and the serious constraints of a dying print media with its own broken business model. It’s beautifully written in Green’s distinctive voice, even if it does seem to be depressingly repetitive in places. That is, of course, the nature of the Australian news media and politics.

He outlines how Australians are at the mercy of policy that has been drawn up to appease the voters in a few volatile seats in western Sydney. It is in these seats that the cries of “less tax, no boats, and safer streets” are heard, researched and policy tested. It’s what Green says is to blame for the tail wagging the dog.

“ This gives the attitudes of people like the residents of (the Federal electorate of) Greenway a national importance beyond what might be warranted by both their number and intrinsic merit of their concerns. Why does Australia have such a punitive approach to asylum seekers? To please the people of Greenway (Green, 2013, p. 165) . ”

As Green himself suggests, there isn’t much in this book that will surprise the small but influential number of Australians who wake up each day listening to the national public broadcaster, the ABC’s Radio National. It is surprising for an age where there is so much information freely available to the public, that quality information is consumed by so few. Green points to a creeping anti-intellectualism and a faux populism in Australia.

“ The informed minority is dismissed by both the defensive mass media and the crusading conservative commentariat as a self-interested, progressive elite (Green, 2013, p. 10). ”

He also notes that it is a collective failure, one not helped by the economic reality that the quality press is failing under the pressure of 20 years of failing revenues and fragmenting audiences.

“ The so-called quality press – that rampart of the fourth estate – has wound back its intellectual presence and journalistic rigor in favour of whatever rat-runs of fast profit it might follow to turn a buck (Green, 2013, p. 12). ”

He mourns the loss of jobs – and hundreds of years of journalistic knowledge – from major Australian newsrooms stating that now “the journalist is less a reporter, more a receptacle for the daily distribution of a finely tuned message” (Green, 2013, p. 19). That same message has previously been well documented in Flat Earth News (Davies, 2008).

Green argues that the media and politicians are jointly to blame. The Australian media want just one thing from politics: entertainment.

“ Politics as a parade of character and frailty, of ambition, frustrated, stalled and realised. Of machinations and capitulation. Of victory and cruel defeat. Understand all that and the coverage of national politics starts to make a strange sort of sense ... (Green, 2013, p. 36). ”

Green recalls a media conference called by the Health Minister that was overrun by questions on the then leadership tussle between the ousted Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his successor Julia Gillard.

“ The one group dealt out of the exchange were the voters, the viewers, the ordinary Australians, the real losers in this cartel collusion between politics and press that substitutes reality for self-serving political factions (Green, 2013, p. 49). ”

Green reminds us that those in the bubble of political reporting in the national capital, Canberra, couldn’t even see the news value in reporting the then prime minister’s now internationally famous speech on misogyny. He also notes that it was the behaviour of these same reporters who ensured that the Australian public was never able to properly scrutinise and evaluate the on-again-off-again leadership bids by ousted Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Rudd and his supporters relied on the basic journalistic principle of confidentiality of sources, and the political reports were happy not to name names.

“ As much as anonymity can cloak the identity of a source for a good reason, it can also stand between a reader and the truth of a writer’s convictions – an uncomfortable truth if sources around the Rudd story turn out to be Rudd supporters and lieutenants and if the significance of their intelligence is weighted by writerly prejudice (Green, 2013, p. 25). ”

Green notes that this allowed journalists and their newspaper bosses to cast themselves as part of the political pantomime.

“ It is a rich irony that at a moment when its fortunes are being tested commercially and technically, there is so much in the conduct of modern journalism that undermines the very quality that delivers its greatest commercial and social value: trust (Green, 2013, p. 25). ”

Public trust in the media is an important point for Green, and he draws in some useful research but doesn’t make as much of it as it potentially holds. He uses polling from Essential Research on media trust which found that in a three year period, the trust Australians had in the country’s newspapers had dropped by 62 per cent in March 2010 to 48 per cent in January 2013. Trust in commercial television news and current affairs had similarly dropped from 64 to 44 percent. The national broadcaster the ABC, however, did better: 70 to 73 for television news and current affairs and 62 to 70 for radio news and current affairs (in Green, 2013, p. 45).

Green notes that the Gillard-Rudd governments were simply unable to change perceptions on a range of issues, even if they were dishonestly created views. Both the Gillard and Rudd governments were either sound economic managers or blessed to have governed in a time of economic growth, but the media and politicians became inappropriately obsessed with making arguments that made no economic sense. “It’s just old, broken, corrupted politicking with no eye to consequence. Which is a funny to approach an economy on which all our hopes depend” (Green, 2013, p. 95).

Books like *The Year My Politics Broke*, and say perhaps, Lindsay Tanner’s *Sideshow* (Tanner, 2012), are sadly part of the problem that Green is actually attempting to describe. Both see politics and the media as being at the epicenter of community life and fail to recognise that the inadequacies in the relationship between politicians and the media might be part of a bigger problem – the breakdown of community involvement more generally in civil society.

Instead of describing what happened in *The Year My Politics Broke*, it might have been better for Green to spend some time ruminating on what factors are making it break. Journalists, their bosses and celebrity-driven, power hungry politicians are clearly protagonists in the cycle, but they aren’t the entire story. It is the Fourth Estate’s responsibility to name this, and do something about it, because of its self-proclaimed, or real, interest in pursuing the public interest for the greater good. And that means, looking more widely at civil society, and perhaps starting with a reading group around the work of Robert Putman’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Putman, 2001).

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