



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

## **Is talk cheap? How commentators, columnists and reporters influence politics.**

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23 August 2006 AN Smith Lecture in Journalism

It's such a great pleasure and honor to be here, at the University of Melbourne and in Australia. I have been saying in the past week as I traveled around this wonderful land that it is a good thing there is no law requiring absolute monogamy when it comes to loving countries, because I have developed a deep love for Australia over the years, thanks to warm friends here, because this is such a beautiful and deeply democratic place. And, yes – and I don't want to step into the political controversies of the last week – because it has such an extraordinary history. And that was such a generous introduction. I talk about politics in Washington and around the United States a fair amount and that was so much kinder than the introduction I recently received which ended: "And now for the latest dope from Washington, here's E.J.Dionne."

I looked at the list of distinguished people who gave this lecture before me and realized I'm standing on the shoulders of giants. It made me wonder whether I might just ransack their lectures for good lines and offer them as my own. But that, as Richard Nixon liked to say, would be wrong. It did make me think, though, of a great American politician named Al Smith who was confronted by a heckler in the 1920s who shouted out: "Tell 'em all you know, Al, it won't take long." And Smith, a clever man, shouted back, "I'll tell 'em all we both know, and it won't take longer." Maybe I should just sit down right now. And I hope I haven't given anyone in this audience any ideas.

There are so many wonderful stories about the media, and almost all of them reflect on

the foibles and shortcomings of our profession. Some of the older people in this audience -- or, better, those with long memories -- might remember the story told during the 1975 Australian election campaign when the Labor Party was flagging and a campaign adviser approached Gough Whitlam to tell him that something spectacular needed to be done.

“Listen, Gough,” he said, “you’ve always had extraordinary confidence in yourself. Now if you could only walk across Lake Burley Griffin tomorrow, it would only prove what you’ve always thought -- that you’re divine -- and it might just win us the election.”

So the next morning, before a great assembly of reporters and a large collection of cameras, Whitlam stood on the shore of the lake. A great quiet fell over the crowd. He took a step ... and then another .. and lo, he walked across the lake.

Well, imagine the headlines. Imagine the stories. Everyone hailed Whitlam. Everyone, that is, except for Rupert Murdoch, one of my distinguished predecessors in this lectureship. The next day, on Murdoch’s orders, the headline in the Australian read: “Whitlam Can’t Swim, Fails in attempt at Lake Burley Griffin.”

And I noticed that Premier Mike Rann, whom I had the pleasure of talking with this week, has decided to seek the presidency of the Labor Party. There is the story of a paper in Adelaide so proud to be first with the news that it boasted one day: “We were the first paper in South Australia to report the news that Premier Rann was about to resign. Later, we were the first newspaper to report to its readers that this report was utterly without foundation.”

But we can be thankful we can tell jokes about our politicians and our media. The dictator of the old East Germany Walter Ulbricht was to said to have asked Chancellor Willy Brandt of West Germany if he had any hobbies.

“Yes,” Brandt replied, “I collect jokes that people tell about me. And what about you.”

“Well,” replied Ulbricht, “I collect the people who tell jokes about me.” And sure enough, when a man in East Germany discovered that his parrot had flown out the window,

he rushed to the offices of the secret police to say: "I want you to know that I absolutely do not share my parrot's political opinions."

I want to be clear tonight that I am not here tonight to ask anyone to share my political opinions, even though I do that all the time as an opinionated political columnist -- and even though I promise that interest rates will never go up if you elect me.

Rather, I'd like to discuss what are momentous changes in the media that are having huge effects on how politics is carried out in democratic countries. And while I hope that I might help shed light on developments in the media outside the United States, including here in Australia, I want to admit to telling a story that is heavily inflected with an American accent.

That journalists have trouble adjusting to change is obvious. Timothy Crouse's observed in his classic account of American campaign reporting, *The Boys on the Bus*, that "journalism is probably the slowest-moving, most tradition-bound profession in America. It refuses to budge until it is shoved into the future by some irresistible external force."

In fact, that politicians became aware of the huge transforming power of the broadcast media long before journalists did. This was demonstrated by Franklin Roosevelt with his mastery of radio and John Kennedy with his dominance of television. Early on, politicians and their advisers proved to be among the best media analysts and media critics, understanding that television especially had fundamentally altered the relations between politicians and voters. Consider this 1967 memo to Richard Nixon from Ray Price, one of his top advisers:

*We have to be very clear on this point... that the response is to the image, not to the man, since 99 percent of the voters have no contact with the man, it's not what's there that counts, it's what's projected-- and, carrying it one step further, it's not what he projects but rather what the voter receives. It's not the man we have to change but rather the received impression. And this impression often depends more on the medium and its use than it does on the candidate himself. (Price's emphasis.)*

What might be thought of as "Price's Law" has now become the received wisdom of political campaigns in all nations. Equally shrewd in his analysis of the media was Lyndon Johnson.

The writer David Halberstam recounts a casual conversation between Johnson and a television producer in 1971 during which the producer asked Johnson to describe the changes that had taken place in political life over the previous three decades. "You guys," Johnson replied. "All you guys in the media. All of politics has changed because of you. You've broken all the political machines and the ties between us in Congress and the city machines. You've given us a new kind of people."

Yet the influence of mainstream journalism is now being challenged by other sources of information and opinion, including talk radio and the blogosphere. LBJ's revenge may be that the new media world is creating new kinds of media people.

The independent media face unprecedented philosophical and financial challenges. The philosophical challenge is to the idea of independence itself. The increasingly popular view in the United States -- it is especially widespread among political conservatives but it exists along other parts of the political spectrum as well -- is that "independence" is a sham, that all news reports are inherently biased, that an openly partisan journalism is more "honest" because it is plain about its assumptions and purposes. Think of it as post-modernism of the right, the assumption is that the independent media are, in fact, biased toward a liberal modernist view, but a post-modernism that is especially popular on the right. On the left, there is a growing assumption that the "establishment media" are either cowed by right-wing pressure or openly biased in favor of a corporate point of view.

From this assumption has arisen an increasingly powerful network of alternative media that I've mentioned: an impressive array of conservative talk radio outlets that, indirectly, gave birth to outlets such as Fox News. New technologies lowered the cost of entry for ideologically oriented opinion and information outlets on the web representing a wide range of points of view. The reaction to the right's successes brought forth innovation on the left which began to challenge the right's dominance of talk radio and built an impressive presence on the web. There is an urgent discussion on the American left of the need for cable outlets to

challenge Fox News – and that challenge has arisen in part through the brilliant humor of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

Supporters of the new media have a point when they say that these outlets have broadened the nature of the political discussion. But in the process, they have created an increasingly balkanized information world in which partisans get more and more information from sources that reinforce rather than challenge their own commitments. Some of the new media blur the line between “fact” and “opinion.” They consciously challenge the very ideas of “objectivity” and “fair-mindedness.” Whether one welcomes or bemoans these efforts, they are clearly changing the context in which political battles are fought and in which citizens make their decisions.

Reinforcing these changes is an economic challenge confronting the older media forms. Many of the new media are largely parasitic on the news gathering capabilities of the older media. Parasitic is used here in a descriptive, not judgmental, sense. With rare exceptions, the new media do not finance news gathering or reporting. They largely rely on the older institutions to support the reporting. They either use this work themselves, or criticize it – or both. At the same time, the new media challenge the financial base of the old news organizations. The older media themselves have been forced to challenge their own financial base. They have set up internet operations which have yet to create revenue streams comparable to what these organizations earn from their older products, such as newspapers and network broadcasts. Yet these competing outlets within the same organizations can undercut the readership and viewership of their flagship enterprises.

The crisis of what we in the United States sometimes call “the mainstream media” is thus both financial and ideological. Financial, because the traditional media that invested substantial sums in seeing to it that the news was reported are now seeing challenges to their profit margins and are undergoing the strain of adaptation to a great technological revolution. Ideological, because the idea of independence is under attack from politicians and political movements and often, even, from citizens.

Now I believe that while the media’s financial problems are driven by technology, public disaffection with the media has a different source. I believe that disaffection with politics -- a kind of democratic distemper -- has evolved into dissatisfaction with the media. I believe the causal arrow goes primarily from political disaffection to media disaffection, not the other way around.

This has happened before. In the United States, the current structure of the media is the product of the last great overturning of political institutions during the Progressive Era. We are now in the middle of a new revolt against the journalistic order.

To understand how we got here, it's worth examining the last great revolt against the media order at the turn of the century, and I want to focus here on the American story.

From the 1830s until the turn of the century, American newspapers were, for the most part, the organs of political parties. There was no ideal of "objectivity." On the contrary, the purpose of the newspapers was to mobilize support for parties all year round. But during the Gilded Age, as the historian Christopher Lasch pointed out, parties got a bad name. Reformers who looked for "professionalism" (as against "bossism") in politics eventually turned to seeking "professionalism" in journalism. Walter Lippmann, one of the most influential journalists in American history (think, perhaps, of Paul Kelly and add steroids) led the way to a redefinition of journalism's role and the journalist's responsibilities. The notion that newspapers should be "objective" rather than partisan was the product of Lippman's admiration for the scientific method, his skepticism of ideology -- and, his critics would argue, his less than full-hearted faith in democracy.

Could democracy survive, Lippman asked, when "the manufacture of consent is an unregulated private enterprise"? He argued that "the quack, the charlatan, the jingo and the terrorist can flourish only when the audience is deprived of independent access to information." Lippman scolded journalism this way:

The cynicism of the trade needs to be abandoned, for the true patterns of journalistic practice are not the slick persons who scoop the news, but the patient and fearless men of science who have labored to see what the world really is. It does not matter that the news is not susceptible of mathematical statement. In fact, just because the news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of the scientific virtues.

Who knew we journalists, we ink-stained wretches, were like physicists, biologists and chemists?

But more was going on in journalism than a shift in philosophy. As Paul Weaver points out in his provocative book *News and the Culture of Lying*, Joseph Pulitzer, the great American press lord after whom our most prestigious journalistic prizes are named, revolutionized journalism by fully understanding its commercial potential. He not only helped move journalism away from political parties, but more generally away from public affairs as defined by the major public institutions of his day. "Pulitzer was taking events out of their official context and framing them in stories with sharp dramatic focus that suggested intense public interest ... He achieved this effect by incorporating into journalism the elements of drama. . . . character, action and plot." That sounds pretty good, but as Weaver points out, Pulitzerian journalism moved the craft away from politics.

"[I] addressed, not the citizen and constitutionalist and partisan, but the private pre-political human being. Where the old journalism had invited its readers to step into, and renew their commitment to, constitutional and political processes, the new Pulitzerian journalism was inviting people to turn away from formal institutions and focus instead on the community evoked by the storytellers of the newsroom."

One of the main effects of this change, Weaver concludes, was to transform newspapers from a "reader-focused, reader-driven business into an advertiser-focused, advertiser-driven business." As Michael Schudson notes in his excellent history of American newspapers, "Most leading newspaper proprietors of the late 19th century were businessmen rather than political thinkers, managers more than essayists or activists." By being nonpartisan and "objective," newspapers did not offend half or more of their potential audience. Historian Michael McGerr cites Whitelaw Reid's loving description of independent journalism as "passionless ether," which inadvertently also suggested the problems caused by the decline of the partisan press. It was not much noted at the time that a decline in the press's partisan passions might also have *negative* effects on democratic politics.

However contested "objectivity" might have been as a philosophical principle, it did not come under sharp practical challenge until the 1960s. Journalism was no less susceptible

than other institutions to the dissenting currents of that time. The critique of allegedly "apolitical" journalism that arose then is summarized nicely by Schudson. Journalists, in this view, were inevitably "political," even if "unwittingly or even unwillingly." He goes on:

Their political impact lay not in what they openly advocated but in the unexamined assumptions on which they based their professional practice and, most of all, in their conformity to the conventions of objective reporting. In this view, objectivity was not an ideal but a mystification. The slant of journalism lay not in explicit bias but in the social structure of news gathering which reinforced official viewpoints....

As Schudson points out, the concern with "news management" took on considerable urgency during the Vietnam War. It became more important still during Watergate when the officialdom's "covering up" of important facts was a matter not simply of journalistic inconvenience but of criminal behavior. Challenging official versions of events meant that reporters began to produce their own. The scandals unearthed by reporters became the matters that government officials had to deal with, whether they liked it or not. It should surprise no one that politicians hated this -- and so did their supporters.

My hunch, however, is that most citizens wouldn't be as upset as they are with journalism if they were not as dissatisfied as they are with the political conversation. Individuals are increasingly seeing their relationship to government as defined not by citizenship and its joys and obligations, but by something more like a consumer and client relationship. For many in both of our countries, the notion of a common good is not as credible as it once was. A belief in the value of public things and not just of private goods is less powerful than it once was, and is seen as naïve. If I'm right in seeing journalism as first and foremost a public enterprise, then the decline of a belief in public things is a serious

challenge to journalism. Widespread criticism of the media grows from a sense that there is something deeply defective in the public debate itself and that the press is not taking on a role that it ought to embrace: to make that debate more accessible, coherent and honest.

I believe the media can take on that responsibility, that it can fulfill its obligations to democracy.

The first step must be to end the confusion between fact and opinion that is so powerful in so much of the media. In a powerful 1994 essay in *The New York Times*, the paper's brilliant book critic Michiko Kakutani wrote: "Throughout our culture, the old notions of 'truth' and 'knowledge' are in danger of being replaced by the new ones of 'opinion,' 'perception,' and 'credibility.'" She argued that "as reality comes to seem increasingly artificial, complex and manipulable, people tend to grow increasingly cynical, increasingly convinced of the authenticity of their own emotions and increasingly inclined to trust their ideological reflexes...." In such a situation there are no arguments in the sense of an engagement over ideas and evidence but simply a clash of assertions. In this climate, said Kakutani, "the democratic idea of consensus is futile." We are witness to the creation of "a universe in which truths are replaced by opinions."

Kakutani points to a crucial aspect of the media's problem. In abandoning standards of "objectivity" or "fairness" and embracing a certain style of controversy, the press and television may have produced livelier formats without actually enlivening the public debate. The liveliness is, in some sense, artificial.

Thus the second goal of a new journalism: To promote genuine argument. But what is that? In real argument, as Christopher Lasch has nicely put it, "we have to enter imaginatively into our opponents' arguments, if only for the purpose of refuting them, and we may end up being persuaded by those we sought to persuade. Argument is risky and unpredictable and therefore educational." Arguments are not won, Lasch noted, "by shouting down opponents." Rather, "they are won by changing opponents' minds-something that can happen only if we give opposing arguments a respectful hearing and still persuade their advocates that there is something wrong with those arguments-"

Lasch referred back to debates during the 1920s between Walter Lippmann and the philosopher John Dewey. Dewey insisted, against Lippmann's skepticism, that democracy

was a practical as well as a noble system of government. Dewey did so in part because he had enormous faith in the educational functions of free and open debate in a democracy. Where Lippmann believed that facts and information were more important than argument, Dewey believed, as Lasch put it, "that our search for reliable information is itself guided by the questions that arise during arguments about a given course of action."

The problem for the media in the current day is that they may be losing the benefits of old-style journalism, designed mostly to convey information, without actually gaining the advantage of a journalism of controversy, which would seek to propose a genuine reasoned and engaging debate. Without either information or reasoned debate, there is, well, cynicism.

The real issue confronting modern journalism is thus a paradoxical one. There is a need to resurrect a concern for what's true---to draw clearer distinctions between fact and opinion, between information and mere assertion. At the same time, there is an urgent requirement that the media take seriously their obligation to draw people, as citizens, into the public debate, to demonstrate that the debate is accessible and that it matters. What is needed, in other words, is both a strengthening of the older professional ethic involving accuracy and balance and a new engagement with the obligations of journalists to democracy.

For all of its shortcomings, the success of opinionated journalism on the radio, cable television and the blogs reflects a public thirst for debate and argument that goes beyond the confines usually imposed by conventional definitions of news. The lesson is not that all should copy their style of argument, but that argument itself is much in demand. For the established media, this will mean going back to the original debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. The objective should be to salvage Lippmann's devotion to accuracy and fairness by putting these virtues to the service of the democratic debate that Dewey so valued.

In broad terms, the media need to help us recover what Lasch called "the lost art of argument." What is needed is what might be called an investigative reporting of ideas. What is true of a style of history well described by Robert Wiebe should also be true of journalism: that it should be "situated at the intersection between beliefs and actions."

Lasch brings together nicely how journalism, in promoting the goal of authentic argument, could serve the best purposes of democracy.

“If we insist on argument as the essence of education,” Lasch has written, “we will defend democracy not as the most efficient but as the most educational form of government, one that extends the circle of debate as widely as possible and thus forces all citizens to articulate their views, to put their views at risk, and to cultivate the virtues of eloquence, clarity of thought and expression, and sound judgment.”

Lasch, of course, is describing an ideal to which democracy should strive, not the day-to-day workings of democracy in the United States or Australia. But if the media don't nurture the educational spirit that ought to lie at the heart of democracy, what exactly is the point of what we journalists do? Journalism is more deeply rooted and dependent upon the democratic idea than almost any other trade or profession because we actually believe that people care enough about their society, their nation, their world to take the time to understand what is going on around them. We do not believe that knowledge or the right to make decisions on the basis of that knowledge ought to be confined to an elite.

It was once said that “status quo” is Latin for “the mess we're in.” The media are in a bit of a mess in significant part because our democratic systems are in a bit of a mess. But I prefer to end on a hopeful note: Let those of us in traditional journalism not shrink from the challenges of the new technologies, of the blogs and of the new opinionated journalism. Let us welcome those challenges and their potential contributions. If a dry or detached or apolitical press threatened to demobilize citizens, the world of opinionated journalism might offer new opportunities to encourage citizens to engagement, to action -- yes, to good citizenship. The blogs in particular have developed an audience because there is a demand, as John Dewey would understand, for a journalism of commitment and engagement. That there is such a thirst for this may bother those who worry about excessive partisanship, but engagement is indispensable to democratic politics. And the proliferation of new outlets -- the rebirth of what my friend Tom Rosensteel has called the “pamphleteering” tradition --

could democratize both politics and the media.

But there is also an obligation not to confuse partisan media with independent media. There is an enormous need for information that is developed outside the confines of political struggles. Honest debate requires at least some consensus on what the facts are -- and honesty, not obfuscation, where there is genuine confusion over the nature of the facts.

What we need, in other words, is to welcome the newly partisan and participatory outlets while finding ways to preserve what is best in independent journalism. The two are very different forms. They need not be enemies, even though they should and will correct and criticize each other. If we see one as an alternative to the other, we will be wrong analytically, and we will miss a great opportunity. If we see them as complements to each other, we arrive closer to answering Christopher Lasch's demand that democracy should live up to its vocation of being the most educational form of government.

The impatience with the nature of political talk and with journalism itself embodies a longing for what the political philosopher Glenn Tinder has called "the attentive society." The attentive society as he conceives it is a place that sees freedom as being of infinite value. But freedom is understood by Tinder "as a pathway, not a destination." Understanding freedom in this way explains much of the impatience with so much of public speech-in journalism, in advertising, on television and in politics. "One reason freedom is degraded today," writes Tinder, "is that serious speech, which is speech in search of truth, is relatively rare. Freedom of speech is most energetically and conspicuously used for advertising and electioneering--for activities based on the assumption that speech is an expedient in the service of profits and power and that truth is an extreme outer limit rather than central purpose."

Applying Tinder's rigorous test -- speech in search of truth -- to day-to-day talk and writing in politics and journalism would have a revolutionary impact. Tinder, like Lasch and Dewey, sees public life not simply as a realm of combat but also as the ground on which citizens can engage in a common search for understanding. "A society in which people listen seriously to those with whom they fundamentally disagree -- an attentive society -- is the proper setting for freedom," Tinder believes. "An attentive society would provide room for

strong convictions, but its defining characteristic would be a widespread willingness to give and receive assistance on the road to truth."

Politics, in the Tinder formulation, is not simply about struggles for power and the defeat of adversaries. It is, in democratic countries at least, a continuous and ongoing effort to balance worthy but competing values, to mediate conflicts, to resolve disputes, to solve problems. For good or ill, politics shapes the context in which individuals must make choices. It establishes the rules under which people will work and compete, raise their families and help their neighbors. If politics goes well, it engages citizens in the kind of debate that Tinder has in mind. It thus establishes rules that are seen broadly as fair and reasonable, partly because they have arisen out of an open dialogue, and partly because they are always subject to challenge and change. The result is a dynamic society. But if politics goes badly, the rules under which citizens must live come to be seen as unjust and distant from the values the society claims to espouse. Citizens come to doubt the legitimacy of political and economic systems that preach one thing and reward another.

Journalism, all by itself, is ill suited to creating a new society or, for that matter, any kind of society. But good journalism, thoughtful commentary, engaging argument are all essential to the attentive society Tinder has in mind.

Perhaps this idea is too hopeful, too optimistic, a trifle naïve. But I have always loved a thought once offered by Jesse Jackson, the American progressive leader who is also a preacher. Jackson, when offering an apology for something he had said, declared: "God isn't finished with me yet." Whether you are a believer or not, consider the magnificent idea behind that line: that we are all capable, at any time, of reform, renewal and redemption. I like to recast the line as: God isn't finished with us yet. Our societies are also capable of reform, renewal and redemption -- even that part of society that includes those of us in the media.

The political philosopher Michael Sandel has said that when politics goes well, "we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone." Journalism just might help us discover that good we can know in common. Failing that, it can at least invite us to begin the

quest.