

I had some airtime on 2UE the other night, to talk about why we blame the media for everything. 'We' being [politicians angry that their messages are not - as they see it – getting across](#). Journalists – who are, of course, a big part of the media - blame the media too, as in Bernard Keane's recent [Crikey piece](#).

From his perspective as one of Australia's most respected political correspondents Keane articulated a very familiar and long running narrative of decline, a species of cultural pessimism that says essentially: there was a time when the political media did a much better job than they do today. A time when the relationship between the democratic triad of politician-media-public was more honest, more authentic, and fitter for democratic purpose than now. When citizens enjoyed access to more serious, informed coverage of the political process, and thus were enabled to hold politicians to account much more effectively.

What's gone wrong, then?

First, argues Keane, Australian politics has been professionalized to the point where what we call for convenience 'spin' has largely replaced authentic political discourse. Politicians are trained by communication specialists on how to perform, and coerced into staying on message across all the media platforms by party advisers such as Lynton Crosby (now doing his thing for the British Conservatives) and John McTernan (former spin doctor to Julia Gillard). Political substance is hollowed out, and we are left with empty, repetitive rhetoric substituting for useful information.

Second, the media have been starved of resources under the pressure of digital transformation. Newspapers are in rapid, perhaps terminal decline, and experienced journalists are being shown the door in favour of bright (and cheap) young things who know how to google a topic and operate an iphone. As politicians get more evasive and slick in their dealings with the media, the media get less capable of responding with rigorous critical scrutiny of the political class. The result, for Bernard? ["Changes in our politics, and in the media itself, increasingly make political coverage more a ritual re-enactment of what used to be than real accountability"](#)

Welcome to the Wild West of political media

Written by The Conversation

In Australia today, as Keane observes, the ABC and Sky News (subscription only, alas) are, with one or two exceptions (Andrew Bolt's show on Channel Ten, for example, though aggressively opinionated and deliberately divisive, is a rare commercial broadcast space where big political ideas get aired on a regular basis) the only locations where a curious and engaged citizen can expect to find well-resourced current affairs in the TV sector.

Keane is right on his two key points. The changes he identifies are real. But his conclusion is debatable. There is another, more optimistic narrative to be told about our political culture. One which says that there are, notwithstanding the problems identified by Keane, more news and journalistic-type media around in 2015 than there have ever been, at any time in Australian history; that these media are more diverse, decentralized and democratic in their reach than the old print behemoths ever were or could be, controlled as most of them were by barons like Rupert and his overseas equivalents, and consumed passively by mass audiences who had little or no opportunity to feedback.

Moreover, these new media are able and willing to exercise greater critical scrutiny of our elites in every walk of life than has ever been true of what was, until quite recently, a deferential political culture of insiders based largely in Canberra, and an elite media class in Sydney and Melbourne, who have depended for their status on privileged access to the politicians and reported accordingly.

I refer of course to the Wild West of political culture that is the global internet, comprising not just proliferating online-only publications such as Crikey, The New Daily, and The Conversation itself, but the Twittersphere, where millions access, share and comment on political matters free of mainstream media agenda setting and control, and all those social media platforms and networks where ordinary people talk to each other, and to the mainstream media, and sometimes to their politicians, about the full range of current affairs.

And because of the internet, Australian citizens have virtually unlimited access to a vast array of overseas titles, such as the UK's Mail and Guardian, the New York Times, and the Huffington Post, many of them tailored for the aussie market. Our access as a society to quality foreign news and current affairs has expanded exponentially.

And then we have the likes of WikiLeaks and Ed Snowden, who make available to the public information that in past times would have stayed secret, even although there was often no good reason for that except the egos and reputations of our governors.

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Julian Assange released the Collateral Murder video and the entire world gasped at the brutality of modern warfare. He sparked a global political debate about US military policy, or rather – gave an existing debate important new material to work with.

This anarchic communication environment is one in which politicians must be more on their toes than ever before. Pre-digital presumptions that elite status justified media deference no longer apply in quite the same way, as Tony Abbott discovered just a few short weeks ago, Julia Gillard frequently did in her time as premier, and as political leaders all around the world must now do.

Contradictions and hypocrisy in political statements are uncovered by reference to digital archives, or through leaked emails, or shared tweets. Sure, there were always political scandals such as that which brought down the former NSW premier caught with his hands in the cookie jar (or wine cask), but never were politicians so vulnerable to exposure for ethical transgression, or just plain lying. Never did the news of political bad behaviour travel so fast, so far, as to make old-fashioned strategies of procrastination or referral to committee increasingly untenable.

So the political media are changing, yes. But for the worse? That depends on where you're looking for your news and current affairs in 2015.

Disclosure

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