

Twitterising Journalism and J-Ed: An Australian Political Reporting Case Study

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Abstract

Twitter is transforming pockets of journalism practice 140 characters at a time (Posetti 2009f) and challenging core elements of traditional journalistic ethics and professionalism in the process. In Australia, professional journalists have invaded the Twittersphere en masse, using the very popular micro-blogging platform as a diving board into the Real Time Web and a new model for interactive journalism which could be called ‘New Journalism 2.0’. Twitter’s transformative effect results in the merger of opinion, observational journalism and real time reportage, while fostering interaction between competitors, greater transparency of the Fourth Estate’s processes and practices, and unprecedented audience engagement. This transformation is well demonstrated by a case study of the biggest crisis to afflict Australian conservative politics in decades – a leadership ‘coup’ which became synonymous with the crowd-sourced Twitter hashtag #Spill. That case study, featuring a qualitative survey of eight high profile tweeting Australian political journalists, conducted in the immediate aftermath of the story’s conclusion, is the subject of this paper.

Introduction

The transformation of journalistic practice and identity being effected via Twitter, involves the re-casting of journalists as individual reporter-brands with a focus on follower-engagement and the crowd-sourcing of research, verification and story dissemination (Posetti 2009b; Posetti 2009c; Posetti 2009d). This shift in journalists’ professional identities and practice is playing out against a backdrop of rapid technological change and failing industrial-era commercial models, along with demands for interaction with journalists and participation in the news production and distribution process by “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2006). Twitter is the logical platform to springboard this social media era transformation (a future foreshadowed by Gillmor 2004 and envisioned by Rosen 2009b): it’s both ‘cool’ in the pop-culture sense of the word, making it the beneficiary of novelty news value which made it a ‘hot’ 2009 story, and cool in the McLuhan (2001) sense of being a highly participatory (and interactive)

medium. This transformation builds on the tradition of participatory media built around talkback radio in Australia (cf Phillips 2007; Lee 2007; Griffin-Foley 2004) which I've identified as the original, albeit mediated, form of social media (ABC Radio 2008).

The clash of the personal and the professional in the Twittersphere is encouraging many participating journalists to remove their expressionless masks, challenging traditional notions of objectivity (Rosen 2009a; Posetti 2007) and gradually transplanting that 19th century Western journalistic ideal with the value of transparency (Weinberger 2009) and the popular appeal of personal character. Meanwhile, the speed imperative embedded in Twitter practice – which involves posting instant, publicly accessible, globally interconnected messages of 140 characters in length - is altering processes of verification, and re-framing the journalistic values of accuracy. Although the transformation is not without its pitfalls, journalism is becoming flatter as well as faster, with the barriers to participation in public story-telling and access to professional journalists breaking down, and democratic engagement is being enhanced in the process.

In Australia, these changes are most evident in the intersection of political reporting and Twitter. The #Spill story – the subject of the case study presented here - highlighted the emergence of a new form of political communication via Twitter: instant, multi-contributor, user-controlled information feeds which accommodated the transmission of breaking news, evaluation, critique and analysis, citizen reaction and interaction between citizenry, the Fourth Estate and politicians.

Methodology

This paper employs a case study approach, analysing the text of online interviews with professional political journalists who used Twitter in their coverage of the #Spill story. The journalists selected are attached to media outlets with offices in the Canberra Press Gallery, situated inside Australia's Parliament House. I am a former Press Gallery reporter with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and I

The Twitterisation of Australian Journalism: A Political Reporting Case Study - Posetti

actively participated in the Twitter coverage of the #Spill over a week-long period from November 24th to December 1st, 2009, acting as a real-time commentator, a content curator and a reporter of publicly available material such as live-streamed media conferences. I acknowledge the potential pitfalls of the ‘insider’s view’ but believe it offers an opportunity to merge experience and insight with academic analysis in the vein of Rosen’s rule: “If you want to inform the world of something, grok it before you rock it” (Rosen 2006).

In this capacity, I identified eight of the highest profile tweeting Press Gallery journalists who used the platform to report and commentate on the #Spill story as it unfolded between November 24th and December 1st, 2009. These journalists’ tweets from the period were archived for future analysis, but a decision was made to undertake a qualitative survey of the journalists (in the form of online text-based interviews) almost immediately, in order to capture their fresh impressions and experiences of their first engagement with Twitter in the context of a major breaking story. To that end, an email survey was prepared, targeting the journalists’ understanding of their role in tweeting the story; their experience of audience engagement via Twitter; their perceptions of Twitter’s role in the story – as a reporting platform and a character - and their views on its usefulness, drawbacks, risks and benefits. This survey was emailed to the journalists one week after the story ended and the return rate was 100%.

The coding of the text-based responses delivered via email was undertaken exclusively by me to maintain consistency. A discourse analysis employing the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1989) was then commenced.

The results of a detailed qualitative survey of 25 professional journalists using Twitter, undertaken by the author in April 2009 (Posetti 2009b; Posetti 2009c; Posetti 2009d) as an act of professional journalism, underpins this study.

The shifts in practice, and the challenges to traditional ethical and professional values stimulated by Twitter, as identified by the surveyed journalists, will be examined with a view to drawing conclusions about the implications for, and the usefulness of, Twitter for political reporting in the Australian context, but with global implications.

Key Findings

The #Spill story highlighted the emergence of a new form of political communication via Twitter: instant, multi-contributor, user-controlled information feeds which accommodated the transmission of breaking news; evaluation, critique and analysis; citizen reaction and interaction between citizenry, the Fourth Estate and politicians. These feeds, curated individually by users who identified tweeters to follow, and aggregated by the #Spill hashtag, became both platforms for broadcast and audience engagement, and new news sources for Press Gallery journalists.

My key findings based on the survey of eight tweeting Australian political journalists are:

- 1) Twitter is becoming a vehicle for participatory democracy in Australia via the interaction between political journalists, engaged citizens and politicians
- 2) In the race to tweet, journalists are knocking down the stable walls that historically segregated media outlets in the Press Gallery, through content-sharing and cross-pollination between traditionally fiercely competitive commercial and public broadcast networks, newspapers and wire services
- 3) Collegiality is being fostered between tweeting political journalists
- 4) Conversely, competitiveness has a new, sharper edge
- 5) Twitter is a new dissemination point for breaking political news
- 6) Twitter has broken through barriers that historically isolated political journalists from media consumers

7) While journalists continue to re-examine professional fundamentals as they negotiate their way through the Twitterverse, revealing pitfalls and echoing cautions, the benefits of the platform are seen as outweighing the risks by political reporters

8) The 2010 Australian Federal Election will be Twitterised (Posetti 2009e)

Twitter Evolution

Initially, Australian journalists used Twitter as just another broadcast channel, simply linking to the professional output they were producing for their employers. But breaking news - from the Mumbai Massacre in 2008 to deadly bushfires that devastated East Coast Australia in 2009 (Posetti 2009b) - transformed it, from a site on which news was being simply disseminated, to one on which news was both broken and sourced. Thereafter, many professional journalists (and, increasingly, the news organisations that employed them) also began to realise the value of engagement with audiences via Twitter, beyond their function as passive absorbers of content. Their role in generating content and assisting in building media brand-loyalty, while unearthing new followers of, and participants in, the discourses generated by media outlets' reportage, began to be recognised. This process involved the active interaction of individual journalists with their followers in an unprecedented manner, extending an unfiltered version of the audience engagement that occurs via talkback radio into journalism's main 'game': daily news reporting.

J-Students Tweeting on the hustings

One of the first known adoption of Twitter for political reporting purposes in Australia involved me assigning my final year radio journalism students at the University of Canberra (UC) to the Twitter coverage of the October 2008 Australian Capital Territory (ACT) regional election (Posetti 2009a). This Twitter election-reporting exercise involved students being given tally-room 'tweet-beats' on polling day. The method of tweeting adopted for the exercise reflected the earliest incarnation of Twitter-Journalism –

The Twitterisation of Australian Journalism: A Political Reporting Case Study - Posetti

using the platform simply as a broadcast device, with the students' tweets being aggregated via the Twitter account (identified with the handle @nowuc) connected to the UC student journalism website, without any attempt at interaction with other tweeters. Nevertheless, it proved to be a highly effective means of honing students' live-reporting abilities and demonstrating the skills required to write with accuracy, brevity and clarity at speed, while highlighting the ethical and legal pitfalls inherent in real-time/live reporting.

Students who participated in the exercise reported the election alongside seasoned Canberra political journalists – most of whom had never heard of Twitter and none of whom were using the platform for reporting purposes at the time. The exercise involved the students being rotated through roles as journalist-tweeters and producers of short form radio current affairs stories which were cross-promoted via the Twitter account dedicated to the exercise. The reporting experiment was so novel that it attracted the attention of mainstream political journalists who reported it as news.

Two of the student-Tweeters produced a radio current affairs package about the role of Twitter in reporting, and their experience of it, in the Canberra 'tally-room' on election night, highlighting the value of this experiment as a journalism training exercise. "Our mission was to tweet...as the politics played out around us we were sent into a tweeting frenzy. We were embarking on a new journalistic dawn, competing against the traditional media outlets to break the news first", they reported. (Posetti 2009a)

The Press Gallery Joins the Twittersphere

Professional political journalists in the Canberra Press Gallery eventually followed suit, with some moving into the space early in 2009. They began by live-tweeting parliamentary Question Time, using the hashtag #qt to aggregate tweets and interact with politically engaged 'citizen tweeters', while watching the daily TV broadcast of the interchange between the government and opposition parties which frequently sets the political reporting agenda during parliamentary sessions. Next, Annabel Crabb, then

The Twitterisation of Australian Journalism: A Political Reporting Case Study - Posetti

with the Sydney Morning Herald, set up a Twitter account dedicated to her Question Time tweets (@crabbtwitsard). This account attracted a significant following and Crabb became a pioneer in Australian political 'J-tweeting', actively engaging with her followers as the Question Time drama unfolded on the parliamentary floor.

It was this boom in political 'J-tweeting' that resulted in changes to regulations which had previously prevented the operation of mobile phones and laptops in the parliamentary chambers, hindering live reporting from the elevated journalists' galleries inside the chambers. After lobbying by Press Gallery representatives, parliamentary officials changed the rules in June 2009 (Posetti 2009c) to allow these devices to be operated throughout the chambers, enabling live reporting of proceedings from the floor of the parliament for the first time in Australian history. In the months that followed, some of the most senior and respected members of Canberra Press Gallery joined the innovators within their ranks, along with a number of politicians who began tweeting from their leather benches.

Highlighting the traction that Twitter had gained within Australian politics as a recognised political reporting platform, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd [cited the tweets](#) (Sky News 2009) of [Sky TV News](#) political editor, [David Speers](#) while taunting the opposition on the floor of the House of Representatives in August, 2009. "Twitter is a welcome addition to the political landscape in my view," Speers said. "It's encouraging journalists to be faster, wittier and more collegiate." (Posetti 2009h)

Anatomy of a #Spill

However, the capacity for Twitter to effect change in political reporting wasn't fully realised until November, 2009 – when the scene was set for the demise of the leader of the Liberal National Coalition (Australia's national conservative party), Malcolm Turnbull. Twitter became the platform of choice for breaking stories and crowd-sourcing commentary during what some commentators described as the biggest political crisis to hit Australia since the dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1972. Turnbull's attempts to offer bi-partisan support for the passage of a controversial [Emissions Trading Scheme](#) (ETS)

resulted in an historic schism within the party and an ugly week-long leadership meltdown that unfolded in real-time on Twitter, ultimately shunting Australian conservative politics sharply back towards the Right. It was a riveting story.

On November 24th 2009, rumblings began on the floor of the parliament during Question Time, as rumours circulated within the Press Gallery about a revolt within the Coalition Party Room over Turnbull's support for the Rudd Labor Government's ETS legislation. Climate Change deniers within Coalition ranks threatened to block the passage of the legislation, but Turnbull refused to countenance the rebellion and staked his leadership on the passage of the deal on a tight timeline.

The ructions overflowed into Question Time with journalist live-tweeters who were watching the action beginning to reference "thunderous expressions", talking behind hands and movements on the Coalition benches as evidence of the discontent. Annabel Crabb tweeted about the action, suggesting the crisis behind the scenes was starting to bubble over and I replied, asking if the seasoned commentator suspected a Leadership Spill was fomenting. A Leadership Spill in Australian politics involves the party leader vacating the post, or his/her colleagues voting to forcibly empty the chair, and declaring the position open, enabling challengers to test their support through a secret ballot, changing the leadership if they are successful.

At the end of that Question Time, I tweeted the following message to approximately 2500 followers:

"Bold Prediction I may regret: there'll be a new Oz Opposition Leader by this time 2morrow. I smell blood on the Coalition Party Room floor." (Posetti 2009g)

Later that afternoon the Twitter backchannel birthed the #Spill hashtag which would ultimately unite more than 2,647 tweeters and 7,678 tweets on the theme (Posetti 2009e). The following day, a Leadership Spill was suggested by Turnbull as the challengers started circling, but none was prepared to nominate.

However, over the next six days numbers were crunched, deals struck, allegiances sacrificed and new alliances formed, as tweeters chanted “#Spill!” and the mainstream media speculated endlessly about the Coalition leadership. It was a sensational political story that played out live on Twitter where Press Gallery insiders’ tweets mingled with external observers’ and those of the politicians at the centre of the drama, including Turnbull himself. (Turnbull 2009)



Ultimately, after an avalanche of Coalition MPs and senators deserted Turnbull, the progressive leader was defeated by one vote in a three-way contest (on December 1st) which was won by the arch conservative, Tony Abbott MP. Many tweeting Press Gallery journalists shared the news with their Twitter followers before they filed it to their media employers’ websites, signalling a fundamental shift in filing practice.

The #Spill Effect

As the drama of the #Spill unfolded live on Twitter, the characteristic derision and resistance towards “joining the conversation” on Twitter within mainstream political journalism began to crumble. Politicians embroiled in the saga side-stepped the Fourth Estate, going direct to their Twitter followers to canvas opinion on political machinations and policies on a number of occasions (cf Hockey 2009), meaning journalists could no longer afford to ignore the site. And many chose to break news on Twitter, providing balance and building accuracy in real time, reflecting the new protocols for an emerging form

of information dissemination described as ‘ambient journalism’ by Hermida (2009, 2010). It also raised questions about who owns the knowledge a journalist gains ‘on the job’ - the individual reporter or their employer? As the week proceeded, Twitter appeared to be altering the nature of Australian political reporting before observers’ eyes.



Journalists interacted with one another and citizen commentators as they reported the news instantaneously via Twitter – interchanges which influenced the framing of the news and laid bare the processes of story construction.

But Twitter also featured as an element of the story’s narrative (Speers 2009) as journalists on the platform began breaking down the barriers between competitors, and those that had previously separated audiences from content producers. The journalists also reflected on the change in practice and the implications of Twitter, on the platform, as they processed their experiences...in public and in real time.

As Bernard Keane, the political editor of the news website *Crikey* observed the day after the #Spill story began: “Now when it comes to politics, there’s virtually no difference between journalists camped outside the party room and voters in Sydney, Perth or on the other side of the world. Instantaneous live coverage is just a tweet away. Sometimes all that rubbish we go on with about media revolutions is actually true...” (Keane 2009)

How Journalists Used Twitter During the Spill

The journalists participating in the survey analysed here used Twitter for a wide range of activities. These included:

- 1) Tweeting breaking news
- 2) Live-tweeting from media conferences
- 3) Posting pictures to [illustrate the atmospherics](#) (Bourke 2009)
- 4) Offering opinions
- 5) Monitoring key political players' Twitter feeds
- 6) Linking to long-form stories on their media outlets' websites and, critically, to those of their competitors
- 7) [Discussing story updates](#) and journalistic processes with their colleagues, competitors and followers (Massola 2009)
- 8) [Interacting with the public](#), posing questions to politicians, or passing comments directed at them via the medium (Shubert 2009)

How significant was the role of Twitter in the reporting of 'the #Spill'?

I have concluded that Twitter is having a transformative effect on Australian political reporting -- but not all Press Gallery journalists agree. While acknowledging the emergence of journalistic audience engagement via Twitter, [Samantha Maiden](#), at the time the chief online political correspondent for Rupert Murdoch's *The Australian*, described it as just another reporting platform. She downplayed the impact of the #Spill story on political reporting. "Ultimately, Twitter is just a means...of delivering the news. In that sense it is silly to suggest [the #Spill] reinvented the wheel in some way," she said. (Posetti 2009h)

Nevertheless, [Latika Bourke](#), at the time a Press Gallery correspondent for syndicated commercial radio, who watched her Twitter followers double during the week-long story (to more than 2,000), said Twitter's role in the coverage proved it's here to stay as a journalistic tool. "For many of us, Twitter was the aside,

or extra-curricular part of our job; but now there will be the expectation that when the big stories are on, we'll be there, tweeting as a priority," Bourke said. (Posetti 2009h)

Sky TV's [David Speers](#) - who demonstrated the central role of Twitter in the coverage of the story by [tweeting live to air](#) (Speers 2009) in the middle of an interview and using his Smartphone to [read the tweet of a competitor mid-commentary](#) (Posetti 2009i) - said Twitter adds to the value of coverage and the reporting experience, rather than detracting from them. "Obviously speeches, debates and essays will always be important," he said. "And they will always be there. Twitter isn't taking anything away from traditional political discourse. It's adding something new. And it's fun." (Posetti 2009h)

Within twenty-four hours of the story breaking, [Crikey's Bernard Keane](#) reflected on the impact Twitter had already made. "Now it's a vast combination of news outlet, rumour mill and commentary chamber, and it's virtually instant. Media in its purest form, with all the flaws and benefits of media similarly magnified," he wrote (Keane 2009). According to Latika Bourke, Twitter was at the heart of the coverage. "I can't tell you how many times I heard journos admit they 'better get into this Twitter thing,' that fortnight ... It was the only service providing minute-by-minute updates of the very fluid situation," Bourke said. (Posetti 2009h)

The journalists surveyed also spoke of colleagues overcoming their apprehensions about the time-sapping effect of Twitter as the story unfolded. [ABC Radio](#) chief political correspondent [Lyndal Curtis](#) made efficient use of her Twitter account during the week-long crisis. "I used Twitter mainly as a content aggregator - I didn't have time to monitor Sky [TV], other radios or the newspaper websites because I was constantly on the phone or on the air," she said. "So Twitter was my RSS feed." (Posetti 2009h)

[Sandra O'Malley](#), at the time an experienced political correspondent with Australia's main wire service, Australian Associated Press, said she found timely tweeting difficult given the significant deadline pressure involved in reporting for a news wire. "Twitter was a secondary consideration for me in such a frantic environment," she said "Interesting how competitive it can be, though. [I] found myself quite put

out when I broke a story on the wire but only managed to get it to Twitter late, or not at all, and saw others getting it out there first." (ibid)

The ABC's Chief Online political writer, [Annabel Crabb](#) (formerly of the Sydney Morning Herald) said the #Spill story was quite well-suited to Twitter, "...it was fast-moving, anarchic, and constantly changing." (ibid) She outlined how the story highlighted the real-time news value of Twitter and its capacity to offer a more detailed picture over time: "A story filed for a newspaper at the end of the day would, of necessity, be obliged to edit out some of the stranger twists and turns that occurred during the day; the deals that fell over, the partnerships that formed and disintegrated all within the space of an orthodox news cycle." (ibid)

While some said Twitter was the star of the #spill story, Keane, said it was actually part of the bigger (and more permanent) story "of the demolition of the old media model of media outlets and their journalists and editors acting as filters on what information is passed on to consumers." (ibid)

Watching the Watchdogs on Twitter

A politically aware 'Twitter electorate' was taken directly into the eye of the storm by journalists live-tweeting every twist and turn within the halls of power. Political watchers were glued to journalists' Twitter streams and sought to interact with them via the platform. Prominent political players in the crisis, [including the deposed leader](#) and one of his [key challengers](#), also used Twitter to engage directly with voters and canvas public opinion. [The Australian's](#) chief online correspondent, [Samantha Maiden](#), said that while the politicians were tweeting less actively than journalists, they were watching the journalists' feeds. "I certainly know they were keeping their eye on what was emerging on twitter," she said (ibid). Radio 2UE's [Latika Bourke](#) said that many politicians were obsessive about tracking the updates from journalists. "Some MPs I know were glued to the coverage, although they'll never admit it publicly," she said (ibid). Other journalists mentioned the fact that scores of political staffers were closely watching the feeds and phoning reporters, asking them to elaborate on tweets. The staffers also forwarded tweets to the

politicians themselves, according to Latika Bourke. This confirms the legitimacy Twitter obtained during the #spill as a political reporting platform.

The Need for Speed & Colour

Speed was the most commonly described effect of Twitter on the political reporting process. It even out-paced frenetic radio news reporters. "I thought working in radio [that] I knew what 'instant' meant, but that's been completely redefined now that I've covered the spill via Twitter," Latika Bourke observed.

The Age newspaper's political correspondent, [Misha Schubert](#), agreed that Twitter-speed was a factor in the #Spill coverage. "It accelerated the pace of coverage, that's for sure," she said. "Where once a lot of details would have been hoarded for the next day's newspapers, colour that wouldn't hold was broadcast instantly in tweets and on [media organisations'] websites." (ibid)

The benefits of value-adding tweets with "colour" was also highlighted by others. "If you took a straw poll on which journalists were the most popular - and this was debated by Twitter users - journalists breaking news with a mix of colour and telling observation were always in the top three," Samantha Maiden said. "Users aren't that interested in someone who just tweets a couple of lines from a doorstep or the Senate debates." (ibid)

But some political news reporters are "colouring" outside the lines on Twitter. Australian Associated Press' (AAP) Sandra O'Malley said opinion and commentary are seeping into news reporters' tweets. "There was...much more opining on the political players than during 'normal,' straight reporting," O'Malley said of the #Spill coverage (ibid). She highlighted the impact of the clash of the personal and the professional in the space, and the challenge it poses to traditional journalistic values like objectivity, as I've [previously reported](#). (Posetti 2009c)

However, [Lyndal Curtis](#), at the time the chief political correspondent of ABC Radio's current affairs programs, insisted the act of tweeting political news had not altered her reporting habits, such as an unbending commitment to fact-checking. But she said she was pleased to have "another audience to speak

The Twitterisation of Australian Journalism: A Political Reporting Case Study - Posetti

to," and she acknowledged the humanizing effect of tweeting. "It allows me some more latitude to be a person, and an outlet for some humour," she said (Posetti 2009h). The amusement value of Twitter - and Press Gallery journalists' tendency to merge satire and reportage in the interests of entertaining one another and their new, individual audiences - was mentioned by several of the survey respondents.

The need for even greater multi-tasking by journalists in the age of the 'realtime' web was also noted.

"One observation that amazed me was watching a few people - @sarahwiley8 @latikambourke @bennpackham - standing at doorstops with their digital recorder in one hand and single-handedly tweeting with the other!" O'Malley said (Posetti 2009h)

A number of the journalists commented on the fact that Twitter, with its live reporting capacity and its aggregated news feeds, enabled them to be less tethered to their desks. They could roam to gather information face-to-face and more accurately assess atmospherics, all while staying informed.



This, in turn, encouraged the journalists to practice what I've [observed elsewhere](#) (Posetti 2009j) is the tendency to lay bare reporting the process on Twitter by discussing journalistic strategies, dilemmas and difficulties. In the case of the #spill, this was demonstrated by the [journalists complaining](#) about efforts to keep them away from the Coalition Party Room, where Malcolm Turnbull's fate was ultimately sealed. (Posetti 2009k)

Twitter Collegiality

One of the strongest themes to emerge from my survey of the eight tweeting Press Gallery reporters who covered the #Spill was a deepening of relationships between journalists from different media organizations. They spoke of the increased camaraderie and collegiality fostered through the sharing of skills and information. "We all shared information, respected each other's scoops by re-tweeting them, and [as a result] the relationships and trust between journalists deepened," Latika Bourke said. (Posetti 2009h) [Annabel Crabb](#) agreed, noting that, "It brings competitors closer together, in that we read each other's updates. I certainly was glued to @samanthamaiden, @latikambourke and @David_Speers as well as talking to my own colleagues." (Posetti 2009h)

Instead of having to finagle details of their competitors' reporting progress and framing of the story, they just watched their tweet streams. This was particularly beneficial to junior Press Gallery reporters like Latika Bourke, who said she was able to break news of the leadership ballot's likely outcome as a direct result of following the very connected David Speers' Twitter feed. "It was like suddenly having all the pieces to a puzzle that I only needed to put together, instead of having just a few, and trying to paint in the blanks," she said (Posetti 2009h). While some fiercely competitive journalists might balk at offering such an advantage to a reporter from another media outlet, David Speers was unconcerned by this development. "Journalists usually save any information they have for the stories they're writing," he said. "But on Twitter, political journalists share what they know. I think this is mostly driven by the competitive urge of journalists to be the first to break news, even if it's only a minor development." (Posetti 2009h)

Collaborative Storytelling

This collaborative storytelling between journalists from competing outlets is one of the most significant changes in political reporting to emerge via Twitter. As Annabel Crabb said:

The fracturing media market means that we now assume our readers are shopping around. I think the healthy aspect of this -- and it's a great outcome for consumers -- is that journalists are dropping the traditional and childish approach of pretending that their competitors do not exist -- ignoring a rival's scoop, and so on. I will happily retweet a competitor's update if I think my readers will find it interesting. I think this is an emerging and refreshing trend. (Posetti 2009h)

But, as much as Twitter is breaking down old modes of competitiveness in political reporting, it's also fostering a new, sharper edged form of competition for news-breaking, as David Speers indicated and Annabel Crabb confirmed: "Already, newspapers are racing to bring online updates to their websites ahead of their competitors, but Twitter brings a second-by-second competitiveness that is even more challenging." (Posetti 2009h)

This heightened competitiveness, in combination with the concurrent breaching of barriers between media outlets, has resulted in the mashing up of competitors' content by media outlets like the ABC which now runs an aggregated tweet-stream (via Twitter lists) of Press Gallery journalists' Twitter feeds, including those from rival outlets, [on the ABC website](#) (ABC 2009b). This caused concern within some sections of the ABC News and Current Affairs department, because journalists from competing networks are not bound by the same editorial policies and standards as ABC reporters. There was a feeling that this aggregation threatened the independence and credibility of ABC News' website content. Legal risks associated with carrying competitors' unchecked and unfiltered tweets were also raised. Nevertheless, this practice has now become entrenched at the ABC and it is starting to spread – particularly in the realm of breaking stories.

Consequences of Kicking Down Stable Walls

There's a potentially significant downside to what Crikey's [Bernard Keane](#) identified as Twitter's "flattening effect" for commercial media. He fears it will further undermine traditional media business models. "What's the point of a newspaper site, or even Sky News, if you can get a direct feed virtually from inside the party room?" he said. "It's true that quality political coverage remains one of the few

The Twitterisation of Australian Journalism: A Political Reporting Case Study - Posetti

competitive advantages old media has over new media." (Posetti 2009h) In other words, political reporting may be one of the niche beats that is able to justify pay wall protection - but the unrestrained sharing of information across media stable walls by competing journalists via Twitter may make that unsustainable.

This was also an issue raised by Lyndal Curtis, ABC Radio's chief political correspondent. "I think it's my responsibility to write and file first for the organization that pays me ... and that audience," she said. "So I didn't put anything up of an exclusive scoop nature on Twitter that I hadn't already filed." (Posetti 2009h)

But Sky's David Speers disagreed.

It's not like journalists are simply giving away their work," he said. "Their tweets often point to a story they've just posted on a website or broadcast on radio or TV. So it can still direct traffic to the outlet paying their salary. (Posetti 2009h)

It is also true that, in the social media age where the 'realtime' web reigns supreme and mashing up information from myriad sources seems like an irreversible trend, news organizations will have to come to terms with this sort of content aggregation and amalgamation in a way which best serves their audiences *and* their bottom lines.

In fact, in the aftermath of the publication of a piece of my journalism on this theme at PBS MediaShift, AAP, the employer of one of the respondents Sandra O'Malley, [issued an edict](#) (ABC Online 2009c) requiring Press Gallery reporters to get permission prior to tweeting about their work - even from their personal Twitter accounts. The fear was that the wire service's journalistic brand and competitive edge would be eroded by reporters' realtime tweeting and cross-stable collaboration. The AAP crackdown foreshadows the likely development of anachronistic [Reuters-style](#) (Reuters 2010) guidelines for tweeting reporters. Censoring journalists' tweets when they've been at it for many months smacks of trying to re-stable a horse that's bolted, and it also raises questions about the rights of journalists to free speech.

However, while some Press Gallery journalists' [coverage of the Twitter effect on political reporting highlights residual pockets of change-resistance](#) (Carrabine 2010), proof of its impact came early in 2010 in the form of one of the country's most celebrated political reporters, the 9 Network's [Laurie Oakes](#). He became an active tweeter and filed an insightful [mainstream TV news report on the "Twitterisation" of Australian politics](#). (Oakes 2010)

The Risks and Downsides of Political J-Tweeting

The journalists who participated in this survey acknowledged downsides associated with tweeting political news, and two out of eight mentioned the problem (or perception) of inaccuracy often associated with the medium. One was the ABC's chief online political correspondent, Annabel Crabb. "There is no doubt that Twitter updates, being of the moment, can be incomplete. They are sometimes inaccurate. They are easily superseded," she said. But she went on to highlight the benefits of realtime reporting of political news, particularly fast-paced stories like the #Spill, tweet-by-tweet "...they give an insight into the minute-by-minute business of politics, and in times like the last fortnight, I think such an insight is definitely worth while," she said. (Posetti 2009h)

But ABC Radio's Lyndal Curtis pointed to the internal editorial impact of Twitter on her capacity to cover the #Spill accurately from her Canberra Press Gallery front row seat: "I had to spend some time talking to my colleagues in Sydney and telling them that what they were seeing on Twitter was wrong," she said. Her colleagues based in Sydney (the home of the programs Curtis files for) partly formed their reading of events on the basis of Twitter feeds from journalists attached to competing media outlets. "Sometimes it's not the fault of the journalists – in a fast moving and bizarre story as this one was...things have to be checked with more than one person...something you may believe to be right can be wrong the next minute," Curtis explained. (Posetti 2009h)

However, what Curtis is highlighting here is not necessarily inaccuracy – but the affect of realtime reporting where facts change rapidly, creating the impression of inaccuracy when a story shifts. This is a common peril of live broadcasting, which compels journalists to go to air with what they know, when they know it. It's also a reality of print journalism – when a newspaper is bedded down at night, the front page may accurately reflect a changing story, but appear inaccurate in the morning against facts which emerged overnight. This is not to diminish the importance of fact-checking (either individually, collectively or via crowd-sourcing) but to point to the nature (and perils) of rolling reporting. As Samantha Maiden noted “...I suspect you would find in such a chaotic, fast-moving environment that mistakes were made in old and new media alike.” (Posetti 2009h)

The speed with which mistakes can be spread via the ‘retweet’ (RT) function of Twitter and the associated need for quicker correction was also noted by three of the journalists. Radio 2UE correspondent, Latika Bourke also pointed to the sharper-edged competitiveness between journalists on Twitter as a factor: “There is even greater pressure to be first and the pitfalls of being wrong are greater, because of the ability to 'retweet', which can send your mistake farther than you can imagine, before you've even had time to correct, or delete.” And as more than one journalist has already discovered, you can never really delete an inaccurate tweet, and doing so can create the impression of dishonest reporting. (Posetti 2009h)

However, journalists' Twitter slip-ups were limited during the #Spill coverage by an informal peer-review process that also ensured necessary corrections were made almost immediately, according to *Crikey's* Bernard Keane: “Given that journalists on Twitter knew they were being monitored and relied on by their peers, I suspect that played a role in keeping the tendency to report poorly-sourced information or rumours down – there were only a couple of occasions when outright wrong info was circulated, and it was retracted by those who had done so once they realised it was wrong.” Nevertheless, Keane acknowledged the prevalence of rumour-reported-as-fact by journalists on Twitter “...there

appears to be rather looser standards for “reporting” on Twitter – the ever-reliable ‘there’s a rumour that...’ appeared to suffice on a number of occasions,” he said. (Posetti 2009h)

While all of the journalists I surveyed said the benefits of Twitter significantly outweighed the detractions, and dismissed critics’ claims that Twitter was “dodgy” because of its brevity, or too time-consuming, questions were raised by one reporter about the potential impact of the commitment to live-tweeting breaking stories on deep, concentrated thought.

Participatory Democracy by Tweet

The aggregation of #Spill tweets under the hashtag that became synonymous with the conservative leadership crisis had a levelling effect: the tweets of Press-Gallery journalists intermingled with those of political scientists, politicians, bloggers and ordinary citizens using Twitter as a platform for democratic participation. This was a point acknowledged by Bernard Keane, who described the effect as a “flattener...ironing out the differences between members of the public, even on the other side of the world, and veteran insiders in Parliament House...Instantaneous live coverage is just a tweet away” (Posetti 2009h). The collapsing of boundaries between political journalists and media consumers has also been noted by Australian media consultant Bronwen Clune who re-purposed Rosen’s oft-quoted definition of contemporary audiences, saying “Journalists are the audience formerly known as the media” (Posetti 2009k). During the coverage of the #Spill it became clear that tweeting Australian political journalists were fulfilling a new role: as audience members – consumers of citizen-generated political observation and commentary.

The process also facilitated engagement – predominantly between external commentators and observers (professional and amateur) of the crisis and Press Gallery journalists. And while talk show hosts are used to having direct contact with audiences, professional journalists – particularly those occupying well-insulated senior positions inside large news organisations – have been historically shielded from direct engagement with their audiences and, to an extent, the reactions of people on whom they report. The

breaking down of the barriers between the professional journalist and the media consumer is a significant change being facilitated by Twitter more broadly and swiftly than traditional blogging.

Critiquing the Critics in Realtime

One of the most interesting aspects of the transformative affect of Twitter on professional journalism is the impact of realtime feedback on those used to being in control of the message: the subjection of the critics to instant critique. As *The Age*'s Misha Schubert observed: "... once upon a time newspaper readers would call us or write lovely long letters in spidery handwriting suggesting directions for a story, or relating great anecdotes. Now that process also happens instantly on Twitter." (Posetti 2009h)

But how do the journalists feel about receiving instant feedback? While some privately express resentment at being subjected to harsh criticism from consumers of their work, those I surveyed said they enjoyed the experience. "I like the direct audience feedback. I like that people can get a sense of what it is like to be a journalist in the eye of a storm like a leadership challenge. I think it is worthwhile for people outside the bubble to see it," ABC Radio's chief political correspondent Lyndal Curtis said (ibid). I would suggest that it's possibly even more useful for the *journalists* inside the bubble to see outside of it, and Twitter's use as a vehicle for real-time audience engagement offers that potential. AAP's Sandra O'Malley described political J-tweeting as an "insightful way to engage with 'readers'" (ibid). This insight is accessed via the contacts and alternative perspectives shared by tweeters 'outside the bubble', which Bernard Keane says offer a "wisdom of crowds effect... better than what even the best connected journalist could provide given the multiple sources." (ibid) And Misha Schubert observed that by tweeting, journalists "get at least as much as (they) give, including from non-journalists who often have a nifty take from further afield." (ibid)

But while some #Spill commentators used Twitter as a tool for correcting the record – pointing out mistakes and misperceptions to journalists, for example – and complaining about story framing, there was

The Twitterisation of Australian Journalism: A Political Reporting Case Study - Posetti

a common theme of gratitude towards tweeting journalists from participating citizens. Stephen Murray a politically engaged Australian tweeter wrote: “Thanks to @latikambourke @annabelcrabb @samanthamaiden @David_Speers for letting us tweeters in on the 1st draft of history”. (Murray 2009) What Murray and others really appreciated was getting front row interactive seats to view the drafting process.



Misha Schubert alluded to the 3-D effect of Press Gallery journalists’ tweets: “I think (they) drew readers into the parliament, giving them a chance to follow events as if they were cantering down the halls along with those of us lucky enough to do this for a living.” (Posetti 2009h) Bernard Keane sees particular value in this shift for political news ‘junkies’: “You now have up-to-the-second political coverage served in a way you can control, bringing you basically right into the action in Parliament House. That’s a major development, like subscription news channels were in the early 1990s, but going much further into the weeds of political activity,” he said. (ibid)

Tweet-by-Tweet News Framing

While none of the journalists conceded their framing of their stories on the #Spill was affected or influenced by this exposure to, and interaction with, tweeters (other than via the tweets of fellow journalists), it was clear from their responses that there was such an impact, even if it only registered unconsciously. *The Australian’s* Samantha Maiden said she enjoyed the direct interaction with her ‘readers’ via Twitter and often got “interesting ideas” through in the process. This was particularly

valuable in the coverage of the #Spill story which was triggered by the conservative leader's offer of bi-partisan support for the Rudd Government's complex Emissions Trading Scheme. As Maiden acknowledged: "One issue it reinforced strongly for me was that not all opponents of an Emissions Trading Scheme are climate change sceptics." (Posetti 2009h)

Journalists as Media Brands

The #Spill story also highlighted the emergence of Twitter as a stand alone news source and the tweeting-journalist as an individual news brand, with Twitter users commenting: "I reckon all journos should (ditch) their old jobs and just tweet, they are funnier on here and more insightful #spill" (Ripple 2009). And "I haven't watched TV or listened to radio since [#spill](#) but am still being informed thanx to Twitter!" (Clancy 2009)

Apart from the potential risk of individual journalists' live Twitter feeds, being viewed as a replacement for a media outlet's official programs and publications, the ABC's Lyndal Curtis says Twitter news consumers should avoid relying on a single journalist's Twitter feed: "I think it's an important lesson for those following Twitter to understand – that they should follow more than one journo... because then they can see what more than one journo is saying and if they're hearing/seeing stuff often, then it's probably right." This can be achieved through following multiple journalists and commentators from a range of media outlets and organisations while also monitoring hashtag conversation aggregators like #Spill. What Curtis is suggesting points to the capacity for Twitter users to pluralise their media inputs and curate mashups of competing media house's and individual journalists' feeds. It also reflects the broadening of journalists' own feedback and information channels to include alternative voices and perspectives which are crowd-sourced via their followers on Twitter.

Political Engagement

The third essential prong (other than citizens and journalists) for democratic engagement is the politicians themselves, and they're also interacting with citizens on Twitter as one of the conservative leadership

contenders, Joe Hockey MP, did during the #Spill. Although too many Australian political tweeters use Twitter like an old telex service for distributing mini media releases.



One of tweeting politicians' objectives in using the medium (as they do with talkback radio cf Lee 2007) is to bypass the political journalist gate-keepers but, ironically, instead they find themselves entwined with journalists in a three-way political communication process which is ultimately controlled by the voters. Instead of being held to account only by professional journalists, they're also being questioned, corrected and challenged (in an unmediated way) by social-media active citizens. The premier of the biggest Australian state (New South Wales), Kristina Keneally, discovered this recently when she responded to Twitter questions from journalists and constituents challenging her excuse for being absent from parliament during a vote on gay marriage (ABC Online 2010a)

Conclusion

This case study of Australian political journalists' use of Twitter as a reporting tool applied to the coverage of the #Spill has highlighted the transformative effect that the micro-blogging platform is having on journalism practice: sharpening competitiveness; collectivising reporting efforts – through

crowd-sourcing and cross-media collaboration; facilitating unprecedented interaction between Canberra Press Gallery journalists and audiences; and rendering news gathering processes transparent. It's also demonstrated the 'Twitterisation' of political news consumption - real-time access to the corridors of power, the politicians who dwell within them and the journalists who report them, with democracy-enhancing engagement between the three camps being a pivotal component of the change.

But is the change permanent, or is this just a fleeting shift in times of great industry upheaval? I contend that the lessons being learned and the change being wrought are likely to have a permanent affect. But Crikey's Bernard Keane suspects the transparency Twitter has rendered will ultimately prove short-lived: "What I suspect will happen more and more is that journalists will treat Twitter the same as other media – they'll start hoarding info for commercial advantage... We're in an unusual spot on Twitter... but more traditional media practices will kick in soon enough." (Posetti 2009h) Nevertheless, he concedes Twitter will continue to be front and centre in fast-paced stories like the dramatic leadership challenge that was the #Spill, "where a certain competitiveness overtakes everyone to see who can report via Twitter whatever they've found ASAP". (ibid)

The very popular political J-tweeter Latika Bourke certainly thinks Twitter, or something like it, is here to stay. "Maybe the platform will change over time, but having seen the hunger for coverage of the #Spill (my followers doubled to more than 2200 in a week), I don't think Twitter, or it's equivalent, will ever disappear," she said (Posetti 2009h). This highlights the need for journalists to be adequately trained in realtime social media like Twitter – to assist in the navigation of professional and ethical issues thrown up in these new spaces and maximise the potential of journalistic engagement with such platforms. To that end, embedding Twitter-Journalism exercises and assessments, like the one referenced earlier in this paper involving University of Canberra journalism students covering a regional election via Twitter, is recommended to tertiary journalism educators and industry trainers.

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