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## A.N. Smith Lecture in Journalism, 2010

Delivered by **Annabel Crabb**, ABC Online's Chief Political Writer



“The end of journalism as we know it

—and other good news stories”

CENTRE FOR  
ADVANCED JOURNALISM

“The end of journalism as we know it – and other good news stories”

*The A.N. Smith Lecture in Journalism, delivered by Annabel Crabb on October 27, 2010 at the University of Melbourne.*

The internet nearly ruined my career.

And I don't mean in that hand-wringing, oh my God, what are we going to do without classifieds sort of way.

I mean the "Oh my *really* God. I just did something so stupid on the internet that I suspect I might actually be about to be sacked" way.

It was 2001. I was a Canberra-based political reporter who had just left the bureau of *The Advertiser* to work at *The Age* - it was a distance of about 20 steps from my old office to my new one, but it was a new paper and a new company, and hence a considerable move.

My old editor, Mel Mansell, who is still in charge of *The Advertiser* and is indeed now the longest-serving Murdoch daily editor in Australia, took my departure well.

That is to say, he rang me most days to inform me that my work for *The Age* was tripe and that, while he could not believe I had gone into harness for such a pathetic, drippy and - even worse - Melbourne-based paper, he was nonetheless thrilled to see the back of me.

On occasion, he'd simply send an email, identifying the deficiencies in a story I'd written or - even better - alerting me to a News Limited version that was superior to mine.

I decided to out-prank him.

A fellow reporter at *The Age* - I don't want to embarrass him, so perhaps we should just call him "Jason Koutsoukis" - showed me a truly diabolical website where you could compose an email that appeared to come from any email address you nominated.

All you did was type in the address of the recipient, and then the address you wanted it to look like it came from. You know: [bill.clinton@whitehouse.gov](mailto:bill.clinton@whitehouse.gov), or whatever.

So I typed in my old editor's address in the recipient field, then in the author's field I typed in an artfully altered, but nonetheless plausible email address for my new editor-in-chief at *The Age*.

And then, so help me God, I typed the message. "Mansell! Stop bothering my fine new Canberra recruit, whom I consider to be an ornament to journalism. Having rescued her from your two-bit, laughable excuse for a newspaper, I would now be much obliged if you would cease your grubby attempts to malign her work. She's out of your league, squire. You hear me, Mansell? Yours sincerely, Michael Gawenda. PS: If you see me coming, you'd better run."

And then I sent it.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, because you are cleverer than I, you will no doubt have recognised the recklessness of my enterprise.

Perhaps you have already twigged that Fairfax, even then, had an email system that would make an educated guess at redirecting a message in circumstances when the address was a little bit garbled.

And that this would make it possible for a former editor, having received an email that appeared to be from a current editor but was in fact assembled out of mischief in the twinkling and magical expanse of the still-novel World Wide Web, to hit "reply" and have that reply (along with its humiliating original) zing back, not - as planned - to that anonymous expanse, but with a horrible accuracy, right into the inbox of afore-mentioned present employer.

Ladies and gentlemen, I tell this story for a reason (and no, by the way, I didn't get the sack. My host's twinkly benevolence is not a disguise. He spared my miserable neck). I want to talk to you tonight about digital media and the future of journalism, and this is a subject area on which many smart people know lots of useful things. I don't want to be accused of giving myself airs. And I can't be, now that I have already told you the story of the dumbest thing I've ever done.

One year ago, I decided to leave newspapers and take up life as an online writer. It's not that I didn't love my job. I did. In fact, I firmly believe that my job at the *Sydney Morning Herald* was about the most fun job available in newspapers. I was not sick of my round - federal politics. I was not sick of my colleagues. I was not embezzling petty cash nor - indeed - was I about to be exposed publicly for my earlier experimentations with online identity fraud.

I am not a tech-head either (this is one of the special bonds I share with Tony Abbott, as well as being hopeless at ironing). My relationship with information technology hardware is one of intense mutual suspicion, flaring into occasional acts of violence. I once baked an Apple Powerbook in the oven. I am not joking about that. On the night that the coup against Kevin Rudd suddenly burst into flames, rushing to pile two sleeping children into the car to drive to Canberra, I dropped my new iPhone into a full bath of water. For the next two days, it worked, but only on speakerphone. Like many journalists, I really cannot be trusted around sophisticated equipment, and I still write stuff on my hand.

I left newspapers because all of a sudden it seemed like a good time to take a risk. At Fairfax, where internecine warfare still rages around the control of the websites, it felt as though an absurd structural roadblock was obstructing a great company's adaptation to the new media environment. At the ABC, a group of enthusiastic executives - Mark Scott, Kate Torney, Gaven Morris and others - was embracing the new terrain with vigour.

We are all - especially those of us who love newspapers - exhaustedly aware of the threats that exist. I want, in this speech, to talk about the opportunities. And the experience of making the leap.

I can remember when my newspaper first got the internet. It was 1998 and I was a cadet, and in the police rounds room, where I worked the 4:00pm till midnight shift, there in a corner was the brand spanking new desktop computer which had the internet on it. Just the one terminal, for the whole newspaper, and there it sat, like a freshly-ditched meteorite in a Kalahari camp. Not many of us touched this weird apparatus. Every now and again, senior journos would walk past it and wrinkle their noses. "I'd like to see it ever give me a story," and so on.

That was 12 years ago. We get so preoccupied with the threats of the internet that we forget how bizarrely object-dependent we used to be before its invention. When getting hold of a government report meant cycling across town to collect it. Often to pay for it, if you can imagine that. When working on a Sunday meant a total information blackout, with no access to public service information, and when foreign newspapers were inaccessible apart from the two-week-old *Guardian* which might turn up from time to time on the news floor.

These days, I write for *The Drum*, which is the comment and analysis portal on the ABC's website. It's been going for less than a year, but readership is growing fast: 4.5 million page views in the first quarter of this year for *The Drum/Unleashed*, 9 million in the third quarter.

Life is pretty different. I have two little kids (not because of the internet, I hasten to clarify. They happened anyway). I work from home much of the time, and now that I don't have a 7:00pm deadline any more I can write any time, often late at night. I file directly to my editor, Jonathan Green, and it can be posted in minutes. I don't even have a desk at the ABC; I just have an iPad with its little keyboard, and I set up wherever I happen to be working. I used to have a midden of a desk when I worked in newspapers; I find the abolition of the desk has really helped with the mess, though I must admit my home office is still a bit of a tip.

My word length is anywhere between three words and 3,000. I file when I feel like there's something to say. If it's short, I'll say it on Twitter; my main account, in my own name, has about 24,000 followers and I use it mainly for news, sharing links to stories, comments on news events as they happen, or pointers to especially delicious recipes. My other Twitter account, CrabbTwitsard, is the one I set up for live-tweeting Question Time. Mainly, I did this as a courtesy thing, because if I use the bigger account to churn out tweets every 20 seconds about how things are going down in the House of Representatives, I tend to get accused of spamming, and fair enough. So the CrabbTwitsard account is a special one strictly for the hardcore nerds. I use it as a sort of notebook. I send out the thoughts that first spring to mind, and later I might develop a column of it. The feedback I get during Question Time often gives me ideas I wouldn't have had by myself.

In between writing, I talk to ABC radio all over the country. I do *Insiders* every couple of weekends, spots on ABC News 24 when they need me, and of course our *Drum* TV show which is doing very well at 6:00pm on weekdays on News 24, with Steve Cannane. And during the election campaign, I was fortunate enough to be involved with another terrific program, *Gruen Nation*.

So what's different about working online? If you will excuse me briefly interrogating myself in the manner of a certain immediate past prime minister?

The first thing I noticed is the immediacy of the reader response, and the vigour. In the old days, readers who thought you were an idiot would probably curse, gesticulate with a soldier of toast, explain for the umpteenth time to their long-suffering spouse that that Crabb woman is an idiot, then move on to read something sensible by Peter Hartcher. Let's suppose that of the 40 per cent of readers who thought you were an idiot, 10 per cent got past the toast gesticulation and thought, "I'm going to tell that woman she's an idiot." And 10 per cent of them actually got round to finding your address. And 10 per cent of them ended up writing a letter. And 10 per cent of them found a stamp and made it to the postbox. So at the end, you'd maybe get one letter, usually identifiable by the trademark flourishes of the obsessive; the random underlining, the stern refusal to be silenced by the mere fact that the paper has run out. (A truly determined correspondent, in my experience, finding himself at the end of a page, will simply continue writing up the side).

Online, however, you get the kitchen table response. Straight away. Right in the kisser. "Make a comment!" suggests the tag at the end of the story. And ABC Online readers do. Oh yes, my word, they do. As do the denizens of the Twittersphere. One of the funniest moments I've had was on my first day back at work after the abrupt end to my maternity leave occasioned by the calling of the 2010 election. I raced into Ultimo on Saturday morning, doing my own hair and makeup with the skill and dexterity that only a print journalist can manage, and when I was finished with my live television cross, I found a fusillade of commentary awaiting me on Twitter. "You will never be taken seriously," wrote one correspondent in a direct message, "until you do something about your ridiculous hair." The correspondent's name, by the way, was @hairy\_ballsack. I wanted to reply, but struggled for appropriate words. "Dear Mr, er, Ball-sack. Thank you for your tweet of 10 minutes ago..." In the end, I maintained what I like to think was a dignified silence.

It can be quite maddening. Being publicly shellacked by people who have clearly only half-read your piece, or have never read anything else you've ever written, or who just hate you anyway, or who possibly are having a terrible day and have decided to take it out on you. And as a writer reading those comments, you feel terribly outraged and sinned-against. Until you take a tiny moment to reflect that this is how politicians feel every day, when we sort through their efforts with an equally jaundiced eye.

What is even worse is when you read the responses from the people who clearly have read the whole article, aren't mental, really quite seriously think you are a loser, and whose argument is so compelling that by the end of it you feel quite obliged to agree.

Both of these discomfiting instances are part and parcel of the new media landscape. It's what happens when the damn system is democratised. News journalism as we have known it in the past - a sort of daily feeding-time in which news is distributed to a passive audience at a designated hour and in the order selected by the zookeeper - is over, or well on its way to being so. Audiences are splintered, but demanding. They want new news, and if something complicated has happened, they want instant analysis. Commonly, they want an opportunity to express their own views - not only on the event itself, but on how it has been reported.

Once you yield up your content into this new matrix, it's not the end of the matter any more - time to pack up and go to the pub, while your work describes a brief arc of significance

before becoming home to an oily catch of flathead and chips. News is no longer about newspapers or journalists or radio bulletins delivering a chunk of news, and that being the end of it. It's more likely to be the beginning of something; something you can't much control after pressing "Send".

This loss of control is such a hallmark of the new media. And that's true for everybody it touches. Never before have public figures been obliged to grapple with such a wholesale loss of control over image, message and identity. Even presently anonymous citizens are now only one viral email away from global humiliation.

Public figures, having generated a public identity, find that the more they try to control it, the less successful they are in doing so. Andrew Bolt, upon discovering the existence of a fake Andrew Bolt on Twitter, issued forth such a howl of dismay that within days there were thirty of them. Among politicians, the situation is enough to induce the vapours in even the hardiest; any blooper, now, rather than being news for a day, can be replayed endlessly and on demand on YouTube, depending on how funny or weird or gross it is.

Kevin Rudd eating his own earwax continues to be a curiosity, a phenomenon he could not possibly have imagined all those years ago when peckishness overcame him without warning during a quiet moment in the House of Representatives.

How could Hillary Clinton possibly have foreseen, accepting a welcoming kiss from a young girl after disembarking her aircraft in Bosnia in 1996, that the absence of sniper fire from the footage of her arrival would prove an intense political embarrassment to her 12 years later? And that YouTube would brand her a liar?

For journalists, the loss of control is about the loss of centrality. We are - belatedly, and for reasons entirely unassociated with Government-led deregulation or any of the other usual reasons - contestable. The community of news and commentary is getting stronger and more populous. We are just not necessarily, automatically at the core of it any more. And we are open to criticism - some of it savage, some of it worryingly accurate - like never before.

Our passive, profitable audience is disappearing. In newspapers, which is where I come from, the panic is about advertising, of course. And how to monetise content online.

Here we are in part victims of our own excitement and impulsiveness. At the end of the last century, when newspaper editors and executives began to recognise the potential of the internet, the race was on to win eyeballs online. We piled everything we could onto the net. Over the years, we accustomed ourselves to the idea of breaking news stories online, rather than holding them back from the print edition. Build an audience, the theory went, and later on we'll figure out a way to charge them. And 10 years later, what do we have? Leading news websites, and an audience which has been trained to expect this stuff for free.

In the past, you always paid for journalism. You used to pay for it by stumping up tuppence, then later 25 cents, then much later a dollar or two, for your paper, and you've always paid for the ABC through your taxes. But you also paid through advertising; a ghostly and magical implicit subsidy calculated from the tiny increment by which, after reading the lifestyle section, you felt more inclined to purchase a jumper from David Jones. What a fabulous and random calculation that is. And how odd it is now to witness the garment-rending among

some sectors of the media industry about the dislocation of this funny old system, and the fear that we shall never find another way of funding content.

As I said, we've trained readers to expect news online for free. Which has had the unintended effect, to some extent, of devaluing the actual product - and I use this bald term intentionally. Thanks to the expectation - inculcated by us - in readers that they should enjoy unmetered access to the work of most major newspapers, we journalists are in rather a novel industrial position.

Six-and-a-half million people will pay between 99c and \$4.99 to download the iPhone app Angry Birds, in which the player assists a group of enraged avian characters to revenge themselves upon some animated green pigs for the crime of egg theft. No one seems to have a problem with this tariff.

Games designers have to eat, and so on. Yet mention the prospect of a charge to read an article on the Times of London's website, and it's an entirely different matter.

Why does this disparity exist?

Why is my intellectual property suddenly worthless, while the guy who invents hilarious ring-tones is still entitled to the customary presumption that his day's work warrants some kind of commensurate recompense? The answer is that journalists have already ceded the field. We've already given our stuff away. I can still remember when I got my cheque from News Limited for the copyright to my articles when published online. What was it? Four hundred dollars? Something like that?

All of this is changing, but let's take a nostalgic moment to discuss the market proposition that is journalism. What are you buying? I don't mean indirectly, under the old system of cross-subsidisation, with its hilariously accidental premise. I mean in direct terms. If you had to pay for each article. What would you be paying for?

When you buy the work of a journalist, you are buying the time and the research and the writing. But there's more than that. You're buying a fraction of the 10 hours that that journo spent hanging around on the night that Kevin Rudd was knocked over, talking to people when you were asleep. You are taking out a time share on all the stuff that journo remembers, an infinitesimal slice of the mistakes they've made, and what they learned. You are buying a tiny shred of the moment when Laurie Oakes leaked the whole Budget, or a millionth of a sesame seed on the bread roll of the lunch that Laurie deserted on the day of the Whitlam dismissal, to sprint back to Old Parliament House.

You are compensating that journo, to a tiny degree, for the 10-minute bollocking she just copped from Paul Keating. Or Malcolm Turnbull. Or the CEO of some company. And in the case of the very best and most fearless journos, you are insuring them against the fact that they will never work in this town again.

I can understand the argument that information, in an ideal world, should be free. But I'm also familiar with free information. Free information is usually free for a reason. Mostly, it's free because it's a press release, or an ad, or it's been nicked from TMZ.com, or because it's so incredibly banal that even its creator can't bear to look you in the eye and shake you down for cash. Free information, ladies and gentlemen, tends to be crappy information.

Good information is expensive. And it's expensive because someone who knows what they're doing has put some serious time into finding it out for you, or put themselves in harm's way, or is sticking his or her neck out in some way to get it to you. Good information is usually expensive because there is someone, somewhere, who really doesn't want you to have it. Good information, in newspapers, is additionally expensive because it is weighed down with the pricey accessories of the print game. All those trucks. All those highly-strung German printing presses.

So here we are. It's a rather hairy little equation, on the whole. We generate a commodity that is expensive to produce, but we've talked people out of paying for it. It's no use mooning about and fantasising about how the clock can be turned back, or how readers can somehow be tricked into coughing up for what they now read at no charge. Having put the cart before the horse in the first instance, it seems that newspapers often make the same mistake again in trying to get out of the mess. Trying to work out how to charge for the content before working out how you make the content worth charging for? Sounds like we're hitching our horse right back up to the arse end of the cart again. There is such a panic on about how to make money that the larger questions - how will we be relevant? How can we be useful? - often are overlooked.

The only way is to offer something new. Something worth paying for. Apps for mobile and tablet devices are the obvious vehicle, but it's no good just dumping the copy from the newspaper on some cigarette-packet-sized mega-computer and holding out your hand.

Here's a good rule of thumb, I reckon, for paid content: If you're already doing it, don't charge for it. If it's something new, make it worth charging for.

The erosion of the old system's predictability, and in particular the gathered audiences that made advertising a piece of cake to sell, do tend to inspire a rather apocalyptic feel among some sections of what they call the legacy media. But I take a cheerier view. What lies ahead is not a blasted heath. It's a building site, that's all. And technology gives us everything we need to build something extraordinary to replace what we used to do. So long as we're prepared for it to look totally different. And so long as we no longer assume ourselves to be the only people qualified to create content.

There are incredible opportunities in place:

For one, we are officially no longer running out of readers. For decades in the print game, we've fretted about our ageing readership, scrambling to keep them alive with healthy-liver liftouts and guides to sensible exercise while silently resenting their flighty offspring, who we could not induce to buy the paper no matter how many desperate "Yo! Yoof In Da House!" sections we commissioned. But online is where they all are. They will self-select themselves on the basis of their interests. Sure, they aren't gathered passively in one place any more, but they are online and handily traceable through their interests and consumption patterns, thanks to the rank outrages against personal privacy occasioned by the social media giants of our age.

Two: There's a workforce of young journalists and writers who have been trained to think laterally - not by cadet coaches and shorthand teachers, as of yore - but by the sheer Darwinian demands of the jobs market.

Three: There's an abundance of space for experimentation. No longer will news and advertising struggle for space on the same page, in that strange fight to the death between content and its own lifeline that has been such a feature of newspaper publishing. This is great news for journalists, because it means no longer being bumped for ads.

Four: There's an exponential improvement in the ease of online transactions. Micropayments, in which paying five cents for a story does not involve fumbling about for your credit card or exposing your vital details to some lurking online fraudster, are becoming easier and easier.

Five: There's an incredible potential for using different techniques to beckon audiences into news. Let's take politics, and the example of Jon Stewart's Daily Show in the United States. Stewart, a satirist, deconstructs US politics nightly on Comedy Central and offers a sharply-observed analysis in the form of an opening routine, followed by an interview with an author, policy maker or politician - often the sort of person who would struggle to win the attention of an orthodox chat show. The Daily Show is seen by an estimated US daily audience of 3.5 million. Time Magazine's online poll last year identified Stewart, stunningly, as America's most trusted news identity.

And finally, when we ask ourselves what is important to news and current affairs consumers, I suspect we'll find that the factor which is currently freaking us out so much - this proliferation of content, this Babel of chatter, this splintering of audiences - is exactly where we can prove useful in the future. There is a market in making sense of things. The problem for the hungry online consumer has become, with vertiginous speed, not "Where can I find news?" but "How do I hack my way through all this stuff to find what I want?"

When I worked at *The Advertiser*, I remember meeting a dear old lady who actually said to me: Isn't it amazing the way there's always just exactly enough news to fill the paper every day?" And I guess it looked like that, to the casual observer. News journalism has always, if we're honest with ourselves, had two roles; breaking news is one, sorting news is the other. And analysis comes in after that. We tend to go on and on about breaking news because it's the exciting bit, the bit that we bignote ourselves about down at the pub. But what if the sorting bit turns out to be just as important to the consumer? What if the greatest service we can offer to a reader is a reliable pointer to what's worth a look, both in our own mastheads and others? Reliability and trust become more important, the greater the proliferation of information sources.

John Hartigan, CEO of News Limited and a man who has spent more time than most grappling with this situation, made quite an epochal speech earlier this year on the subject. "First we have to get over ourselves and recognise that this is an opportunity, not a threat," he declared. "Our job will be to create and edit content. But equally, to curate content. By this I mean that we will need to become adept and adroit at producing and harvesting content in surprising and interesting ways, that are best suited to the platform it is on - web, print, tabloid or mobile. User experience is everything."

Well, thank God for that. And I know we at the ABC are generally supposed to be having a little skirmish with Team Rupert at the moment but please permit me to boot a footy into no-man's land for a minute to observe that Mr Hartigan is a valuable leadership figure, and an optimist about journalism's capacity to reinvent itself in an exciting way. The industry needs more media executives like him, who are prepared to lead publicly and relish change rather than glumly await the fate of the existing medium.

The ABC is presently run by another great optimist, Mark Scott, whose changes to the broadcaster would never have been imaginable 10 years ago. The creation of News 24, the creation of ABC Open - which is an amazing site, by the way - the delivery of ABC content through apps, iView and endless social networking sites; all these are the work of an organisation that it's a thrill to work for.

If you want to gauge the managing director's attitude to his own outfit, follow him on Twitter: the unmistakable enthusiasm for ABC television, radio and online content sends a powerful message: here's a media executive who consumes his own stuff, and loves it. It sounds simple, but I mention these things because leadership - in public comments, in private behaviour, in decisiveness and enthusiasm - can make such a difference to people working under stress and uncertainty.

Life's too short not to work with enthusiasts. And I've been lucky enough to have them around me all through my career, friends and colleagues whose energy and imagination is contagious: Jim Middleton, who showed me that a fascination with political reporting can be for life. Sam Maiden, who made online daily reporting of politics into a competitive field. Photographers like Mike Bowers and the irrepressible Andrew Meares, who never stop thinking of amazing new things to do with images. Or senior colleagues like Laurie Oakes, who demonstrate that you're never too important to tweet. I could mention dozens of people. Lots of them are my new workmates at the ABC, which at times seems to run on enthusiasm.

Here's another secret about working online. It's fun. The great joy and fulfillment about working online is a very human one. The thrill of calling out and hearing an answering voice. Of getting in touch with the funny, smart people out there who think of things that you didn't. Who read your analysis, and come back with an idea or a criticism that sends you off down another line of inquiry. Who send you jokes that are funnier than your own and that, after a decent period has elapsed, you can pass off as your own.

Who make criticisms of your work that cause you to think about what you've got wrong, and try harder to get it right. For such a long time now, the critique of journalism has been a closed shop. We have been each other's adjudicators. So and so missed the story. That yarn's old. I broke that last year. When an outsider - be it a reader, a politician, the subject of a story - criticised us, we often circled the wagons. Arguments about journalism were only open to practitioners and journalism academics - a cosy circle of reinforcement.

Now, they're open to everybody. This was strikingly demonstrated by this year's federal election campaign, in which the news-consuming public were let in on more of the news process than ever before. ABC News 24 and Sky brought you press conferences live, so that you could watch the whole thing - questions included. I've been to a million of those press conferences. But to watch them live on television, as an anonymous member of a broad TV audience, was at times an uncomfortable experience that caused me to question my own approaches, my own news judgment.

When the celebrated Mr Grog's Gamut tapped out his protest, it was picked up, circulated and heard in a way that an anonymous blogger would never have been even five years ago. Otto von Bismarck gave us the warning about the advisability of watching sausages or laws being made. We have traditionally been protective about letting people into our methods. But I think that's yesterday's caution. Why shouldn't people watch how journalists work?

Why shouldn't they see how a story develops? Why shouldn't they be permitted a view on whether our methods are reasonable or not?

To start out as a journalist in this roiling time of change must be a bracing experience. Thirteen years ago, when I started out, it was a question of finding a job and then getting published. These days, the situation is kind of reversed. It's not just a matter of sitting tests for cadetships, or jobbing at a regional paper or radio station until you've earned your stripes. The way into journalism is harder in that respect. But in other respects, it's more exciting. Young writers are rewarded for their talent, imagination and intrepidity in a way that the old structures rarely allowed.

When I helped to judge the Walkley Young Journalist of the Year online category a few months back, the evidence was all there. One young journo had taken himself off to Iran to report on the elections. One had assembled an incredibly moving narrative map of the Victorian bushfires, incorporating beautiful visuals and design, first person interviews and a completely new approach to disaster reporting. One had taken some research on how a parent's hard living as a youth affects the health of future progeny, and turned it into a multi-part television comedy. The breadth of ideas present in this cohort was incredible.

And the woman who was named Young Journalist of the Year is a case in point. Latika Bourke is in many ways a classic young Canberra journalist. Hungry, obsessed with politics, pushy, keen, seemingly at work 24 hours a day. But she has taken her radio platform and pushed it further, providing a reliable Twitter feed of events in Canberra, building a Twitter following of nearly 10,000 and interacting with that audience. Fortune favours the brave - and the energetic.

As I said earlier, I am quite an enthusiast for Twitter. I like Facebook, and I am aware that it is a massively significant social network, but I find it too demanding to keep up and have now succumbed to Facebook Fear; I can't visit my Facebook page because of the weight of unanswered messages there.

Twitter, however, is less demanding of time. There's a lovely generosity about it; millions of people, pushing little thoughts and fragments into the world, most of which disappear without trace, and some of which whip up into quite significant moments of community. Of all the new social networking phenomena, none is so routinely disparaged as the House of the 140 Characters. Before I started using it regularly, I felt exactly the same way: What, a medium invented so that someone I barely know can acquaint me with the details of what they had for lunch? Spare me. But 18 months into my relationship with this new toy, I now realise that declaring Twitter to be fatuous is as nonsensical as to swear off pencils or paper.

Like any medium, it just depends what you do with it. Of the 70 per cent of tweets that disappear without trace, most are the "what I had for lunch" kind. But according to Twitter founder Evan Williams, of the 90 million tweets sent daily around the globe by Twitter's 145 million users, 25 per cent contain links. And it's the links, whether on Twitter or Facebook or MySpace or any other platform where people congregate in these new communities, which provide the pollination for news content. For these communities, it doesn't make a lick of difference whether the article being shared is on abc.net.au or Salon.com or clubtrollo.com.au - what matters is whether it's worth reading.

And if someone you trust tells you it's worth reading, and if you happen to have the time, then maybe you'll click through and have a look. At their best, these social networks can

function like a newspaper put together by your friends, full of stuff they know you'll like. One of the highlights of Fridays is Leigh Sales's Well-readhead column, a list of 10 things she's read in the last week which she publishes both at *The Drum* and at *The Punch*, in a nicely bipartisan gesture. I always look at it, because I know she and I often like the same stuff. Reading her column is like having a chat with her, only I can do it anytime.

But social media can work as a fast-track source of news, tips and research too.

I have a moment I treasure from the 2010 election campaign. I was out at the Rooty Hill public question and answer session with Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott, which was being broadcast live on Sky News. I was sending out a live call of the event on Twitter. A young man stepped up to the microphone and asked Tony Abbott a question. Several seconds later, a Twitter user in Adelaide messaged me to say she thought she recognised the young man as the son of a former Liberal state politician. She couldn't remember his name. Hang on, she told me. I'll phone my friend and ask. Thirty seconds later, she came back to me with the name, and the further information that the young man had been an early Big Brother candidate. Within about two-and-a-half minutes of the young man's arrival at the microphone, we knew who he was, where he came from and the fact that he had once dressed as a priest to pick up girls.

You're right - it's hardly Watergate. But it's a demonstration of how fast the information pool can form. And pooling information is what we've always done, isn't it? Collecting bits from here and there, whacking them together, and using judgment and experience to create the most accurate story possible.

In the week before election day, I put out a call to any Twitter users who were planning to staff polling booths or work as scrutineers at local booth counts. I asked them to supply their real names, electorates, and phone numbers to me. We called them the Scrooty Army, in a tribute to the Rooty Hill alumni. And on election day and well into the night, they kept up a constant feed of tales from the front; photos of Liberal and Labor canvassers dressed as Greens (there was a lot of that), running accounts of stuff-ups and progressive counts from marginal seats, and the odd amusing detail about ornate donkey votes discovered in the piles.

There was an extremely strong response to our ancillary call for Twitter pictures of election-themed cakes. And I am proud to say that the baker of the best cake, a young lady I met through Twitter called Sabine Wolff, is here tonight. Her cake, a House of Reps chamber complete with jelly baby MPs updated through the night, was a total triumph.

Human contact is still the key, as it always was. It's through talking to people that you get the ideas, the tipoffs, the good steers. None of these devices will give you everything you need to be a good journalist. No device ever did. But great journalism starts with knowing your community. And smart journalism will change with it.

Speaking of communities, I would like to close with a few dreams of my own for this new paradigm before us.

My first dream is that we could put an end to the old media - new media wars. Seriously, everybody could calm down a bit and the world wouldn't end. By the second week of the Grog's Gamut skirmish (*Grog-gate*? Really?) it felt like the crucial scene from *Spartacus*. Do we not have anything more actually outrageous to fight about? Does everything have to

turn into World of Warcraft, with paragons of evil and of saintliness at either end, and nothing in between? To my colleagues in the mainstream media, on the subject of online journalism, I would say: Don't knock it till you've tried it. To the blogosphere, I would say: Don't knock us when we try it. That's all.

My second dream, and I'll make this quick even though my actual dream is quite elaborate, with all sorts of occasional features like Bob Katter riding a water buffalo (oh no hang on that's my other dream) is that we keep in mind how draining the 24-hour news cycle can be to the political process. That we use all this extra space for a proper examination of the ideas on offer. That we give the polling a rest occasionally, for instance: honestly, how can we expect politicians to lessen their dependence on polling when we are just as addicted? There's another whole speech to be written about this stuff. But if we want politicians to be courageous, then we need to reward political courage, not excavate it.

I've said enough. This has been a big enough chunk of the 24-hour news cycle already. Thank you to Michael Gawenda for not sacking me nine years ago. Thank you to the University of Melbourne for inviting me to speak tonight. After the big game fish who have occupied this podium before me, it's good of you to solicit the thoughts of a minnow. And because online never sleeps, this speech will be up at [abc.net.au/thedrum](http://abc.net.au/thedrum) in minutes. I'd like to hear what you think.

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