

'IS QUICK, IS GOOD.' OR IS IT? PERILS OF THE 24/7 NEWS CYCLE

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(Refereed)

Abstract

The rise of 24 hour news channels, blogs, wikis, social media and twitter mean that today the news cycle is measured in seconds rather than days or even hours, and that it literally runs 24 hours a day seven days a week. Many benefits flow from this development, especially when compared to the impact of the slow pace of news dissemination in the nineteenth century, but this paper will focus on some of the potential negative consequences, whether they were foreseen or unintended. There is now a superabundance of information, opinion and entertainment available to the public on the broad range of political, economic, social and cultural issues that preoccupy any society. On the face of it, this suggests better informed policy-makers and a more engaged polity, but is this actually happening? To what extent are policy-makers influenced by the speed of the news cycle and the accompanying pressure, whether from journalists or opinion polls? To what extent is citizens' engagement with issues shaped and in important ways foreshortened by the speed of the news cycle? Is the space for more considered and detailed investigation and analysis of issues being squeezed out by the so-called 'need for speed', or is it being submerged amid the sheer volume of material available? These issues will be discussed by examining Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Labor government from 2007 to his shock resignation in June 2010 and its aftermath.

Role of the news media

The swift rise, short life and brutal demise of the Rudd Labor government appears certain, from the vantage point of just a few months perspective, to throw up important, knotty questions for any scholar of politics, democracy and the news media. I am deeply interested in politics and democracy, but by background and training as a journalism academic and journalist, most recently as Media and Communications Editor at *The Age*, I am most able to examine the role of the news media in the Rudd government. With that qualification, the performance of the news media does, as Geoffrey Craig reminds us, play a significant role in the nation's politics as the means by which the overwhelming majority of people gain the information and understanding on which they cast their vote (*The Media, Politics and Public Life*).

The arrival of the Cable News Network in 1980 and, a decade later, the 'live' broadcast of the first war in Iraq ushered in continuous news coverage around the clock and, with it, a 24 hour news cycle that, according to Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, means inexpensive, polarising argument is overwhelming basic reporting work to produce a new 'journalism of assertion' that is eroding the older 'journalism of verification' (*Warp Speed*). The rise of online news in the 1990s and of social media, most recently Twitter, is accelerating the trend identified by Kovach and Rosenstiel, according to Howard Rosenberg and Charles Feldman in their recent book, *No Time to Think*. Where once live news coverage was reserved for major breaking news, now it is constant, says NBC correspondent Pete Williams (*No Time to Think* 26). Rosenberg and Feldman acknowledge that the deadline-driven nature of journalism has always squeezed time for reflection, but that in 2010 there is dramatically less time for reflection than at any point in media history. The raw, messy process of gathering and verifying information used to happen behind closed newsroom doors but today it can happen on live television, on blogs or by Twitter. The result, argue Rosenberg and Feldman, is more errors. The ability to post news online instantly does offer the safety valve of instant corrections but the damage has been done, and it travels around the globe. Rosenberg and Feldman do not yearn to return to a slower world, as 'that launched spaceship is already circling the planet'; rather, they advocate all media consumers, beginning with children, develop critical literacies to 'cope with the blistering pace of new media' (211).

With this in mind, I want to begin by drawing attention to two salient and so far largely unexamined facts about the election that was called by Julia Gillard less than a month after she deposed Kevin Rudd as leader of the federal Labor Party on 23–24 June 2010. The first concerns the televised debate between the two leaders — Gillard and the Liberal Party’s Tony Abbott — on Sunday 25 July 2010. Nearly 3.4 million watched the debate as shown on the three main commercial networks, Seven, Nine and Ten, and the ABC, according to the ratings company, Oztam, as reported in *Crikey.com.au* the next day. This is an extraordinary figure, for several reasons. First, it is conventional wisdom in commercial media circles that politics does not make for interesting television. Second, a figure of more than one million viewers is considered a hit in prime time television in these times of fragmenting audiences. Third, the leaders’ debate had been pushed back by an hour from its original timeslot of 7.30pm because that would have clashed with the final of the *Masterchef* reality program. Glenn Dyer, a former commercial television current affairs producer who is one of several writers who covers the media for *Crikey*, commented: ‘With that figure, could we go another one or two? Australians were very interested in the debate and in the final of a cooking show. For all the tutt-tutting about bread and circuses with *Masterchef* forcing the debate to move to an earlier timeslot, I think the TV audience got it about right last night.’ Dyer was one of few in the mainstream media to remark on this figure; most commentary focussed on who won the debate, who the ‘worm’ said won the debate and on the constrictive nature of the format. The ‘worm’ is a continuous on-screen graphic drawn from a studio audience’s live reactions to the leaders’ performance. Certainly these questions were relevant, but the ratings figure signalled a genuine interest in the nation’s politics that not only ran counter to conventional media wisdom but was then disregarded by most in the media.

The second salient fact was revealed by Tim Colebatch, economics editor of *The Age* and the newspaper’s longtime expert on matters psephological. After the election, one of the closest in the nation’s history, Colebatch reported that ‘more voters refused to vote than at any election since 1925, the first election at which voting was made compulsory’ (‘The great turnoff’ *The Age* 21 September 2010). The informal vote rose from 3.7 per cent at the 2007 election to 5.2 per cent this year. The proportion of those who did not vote at all grew from 5.2 per cent in 2007 to 6.8 per cent this year. (Colebatch acknowledges the informal vote was higher at the 1984 election but says it should be ignored because it was widely attributed to a change in the senate voting system). He notes that the Labor Party’s primary vote declined 6.1 per cent from 39.5 per cent in 2007 to 33.4 per cent in 2010, but very little of that primary vote flowed across to the Liberal/National Party coalition. The 6.1 per cent was split evenly between the Greens and the informal/did not vote. As Colebatch concludes: ‘Election 2010 was a negative campaign, where the leaders stood for less than ever before, and insulted voters’ intelligence more than ever before ... And more than ever, voters — especially, but not only Labor voters — responded by refusing to give their vote to either side.’

Several conclusions could be drawn from the juxtaposition of these two salient facts. Interest in politics was initially heightened because of the uncommon, if not unprecedented, nature of Rudd’s ousting. The negative campaign was at least partly driven by circumstances. Apart from the swiftness of the coup, Rudd’s position had declined from well regarded leader to electoral liability in a matter of months. Abbott had also been leader for little more than six months when the election was called. Both major political parties scrambled to develop policies in a tumultuous environment. Against the background of these two largely undiscussed facts, what does the life and death of the Rudd Labor government tell us about the role of the news media, especially the 24/7 news cycle?

It is almost a truism today to say that the world of journalism is evolving rapidly. The internet and social media have changed how we consume media, how mainstream media organisations present journalism to us, and the extent to which we make our own media these days. News breaks are measured in seconds and the ‘spin cycle’ is faster than ever, and there is no sign of a slackening in even the rate of acceleration. This raises several questions: How do journalists find — or make — time for investigation and analysis? How do journalists combat ever more sophisticated spin and public relations? Or, to look at it from another perspective, how do politicians and parties combat

the usually negative nature of daily media coverage to communicate whatever it is they are trying to communicate?

It does appear the speed and unremitting pressure of the 24 hour news cycle play a part in the downfall of the former Prime Minister, just as you could argue that it played a part in the rapid turnover of two Liberal Party leaders that followed former Prime Minister John Howard's ousting at the 2007 election. The 24/7 Tweet-now, think-later media omniverse is not the sole or even the biggest contributor but it is surely part of the range of elements, along with Rudd's autocratic style, his disavowal of the ALP factions and his tendency to promise — and promise with religious fervour — more than he could deliver, that led to his demise.

Within the news cycle Rudd was captive to the suite of competing news organisations' opinion polls, which are reported and parsed in the kind of detail that literary critics have lavished on Shakespeare's sonnets. For many years after the introduction of opinion polling in Australia in 1941, politicians paid little attention to opinion polls in their public pronouncements (Mills 'Polling, politics and the press 1941–1996'). As polls proliferated beyond the Roy Morgan organisation to Newspoll and Irving Saulwick and became affiliated with news organisations, politicians *said* they paid little attention to opinion polls — 'The only poll that matters is the one held on election day' (Craig, *The Media, Politics and Public Life*, 166–9). Whatever truth this view expressed was worn so thin over thousands of media interviews that its deployment gradually became ironic in much the same way that stumble-tongued footballers whose teams have flogged their opponents by 10 goals say they are just 'taking it one week at a time'. Politicians and viewers alike knew it was not seriously meant but continued to say it nevertheless. During the Rudd years the 'only poll that counts' line was no longer used ironically. A number of senior government figures actually said a poor showing in the polls was the main reason for dumping a Prime Minister who had led the party to victory after four consecutive election defeats. As Neal Blewett, a minister in the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, told Mike Steketee of *The Australian*: 'I am surprised by how quickly the party panicked. We frequently had bad polls and Howard frequently had bad polls' ('Loyalty today is only to the polls').

At least partly this had to do with Rudd, who assiduously courted public approval to the point where it was not the ALP but he and his avatar 'Kevin 07' that most Australians thought they were voting for (or against) at the 2007 election. As several commentators have remarked, Rudd's high standing in the opinion polls may have emboldened him to dismiss the party's factions, but once the polls dipped he was vulnerable, both as an electoral asset and within his party (Megalogenis 'Misjudging voters can be hazardous to your prospects', Murphy 'Chemistry and hand-to-hand combat', Steketee 'Loyalty today is only to the polls'). Rudd's particular political personality informs some of our understanding of the importance of the polls, then, but not all. Rudd's prime ministership has intensified and cemented a habit of relying on polls — of doing government by focus groups — rather than engage in the dark and intricate dance of both leading and following the electorate, which is where you might turn for genuine political leadership.

This habit, combined with the relentlessness of the news cycle, is having a poisonous affect on the relationship between politicians and voters as played out through the news media, as George Megalogenis noted in *The Weekend Australian* on 26 June 2010:

It frustrates Labor people that the electorate gave the government no credit for its handling of the global financial crisis, and for the relatively speedy return to fiscal balance three years from now. Other countries would kill for our modest government debt. But in the public mind, Rudd spent more than he should have to beat a world recession that wasn't our fault, and wasn't our turn to suffer. The signs were there in the focus groups in late 2008. Voters thought the first cash splash of \$900 per household, announced in October 2008, would have been better spent on services. But public opinion can be as slippery as the most cynical politician. When Rudd switched the storyline to school buildings and home insulation with the second stimulus package in February 2009, voters recoiled at abuse of taxpayer funds, both real and imagined. For Gillard, the second prime minister

of this Labor government, and Abbott, the third Liberal leader of this opposition, the electorate's apparent hypocrisy must be bewildering. How do you appease a mob that doesn't seem to know what it really wants?

How indeed. What could be added to these valuable insights from one of the nation's leading commentators is an awareness of the role played by both public relations practitioners and journalists in miring communication between governments and the public in spin as sticky and toxic as the oil that was leaking uncontrollably in the Gulf of Mexico at the time. It is as common for journalists to lament the clamps placed on their access to newsmakers and the pervasiveness of political doublespeak as it is for public relations officers to lament journalists' laziness or to deny the existence of spin.

The problem is that both parties are locked in a crocodile's death-roll. The more journalists dig beneath the PR surface, the more cement PR practitioners pour on the surface, which in turn prompts more digging, or, worse, an ingrained cynicism. Journalists assume governments are always trying to hide a scandal of Watergate proportions. Governments assume no matter what they do daily media coverage will be negative. Usually, the truth is somewhere in between but harder to find. It is for this reason that in my view the political interview is, if not dying, then sinking in formaldehyde. As Professor Graeme Turner has memorably written: 'Watching Kerry O'Brien interview Peter Costello on budget night is like watching two cats attempt to play with the same mouse' (*Ending the affair* 2005).

It is for this reason, too, that programs like *Australian Story* and until its demise Andrew Denton's *Enough Rope* have found a large and loyal audience. Both these programs have often garnered audiences above one million. People are hungry for genuine human stories and the producers of these ABC programs tell them exceptionally well. Neither program is conventional current affairs in the sense that the *7.30 Report* on the ABC, *Dateline* on SBS and *Sunday Night* on Channel Seven are understood to be. Both programs do cover current issues, but they approach their topics not through what is known in the news media industry as a 'hard news' format. *Australian Story* tells the story of one person in its allotted 30 minutes; usually it is an ordinary person who has had an extraordinary experience but sometimes the program offers a new or different perspective on a famous Australian. There is no interviewer present on screen, which has the effect of showing a person telling their own story even though the program makers engage in much the same interviewing work as their counterparts on conventional current affairs programs, according to the program's executive producer Deb Fleming (*Australian Story: Behind the Scenes*, 11–25). *Enough Rope* took the conventional talk show format and extended it in two important ways: first, Denton, came to the program not from a journalistic background but from comedy yet he showed himself to be more versatile, better prepared and more flexible than most conventional current affairs interviewers. This was confirmed when he won Australian journalism's most prestigious award — a Walkley — for broadcast interviewing, in 2003. Second, he, like the producers of *Australian Story*, gave a considerable amount of air time to the experiences of people suffering, say, mental illness, who are often overlooked or presented through a narrow prism on conventional current affairs programs.

It should not surprise that in recent years fears have arisen that *Australian Story* program is susceptible to being gamed by clever PR operators; likewise, some journalists dismiss *Australian Story* as 'soft' without asking themselves why the program attracts healthy audience numbers. In any case the habit of taking your direction from polls and the spin cycle can be as hard to dislodge, as the rise in the numbers of political staffers in ministers' offices and the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on government advertising show.

It is useful, then, to ask what do we citizens gain and what do we lose by the pervasiveness of the 24/7 news cycle. First and foremost, news today is delivered to readers, viewers, listeners and tweeters by the second. The days of waiting for the 6 o'clock television news bulletin, let alone the next day's newspaper, are long gone. It is now commonplace — and you could see it live on the

morning of Gillard's challenge at parliament house — for journalists to file material to online news websites almost as events happened. You could read an instant analysis of events online within minutes, you could watch television journalists reporting and analysing live and you could follow the twitter feeds from various reporters who scurried through the corridors telling you who was arriving, how they looked and what they were wearing.

For the next day's newspapers, though, editors were still demanding that their journalists 'value add' by 'throwing the story forward' (Personal communication Katharine Murphy). With this mass of live to air reporting and analysing where, you might ask, is the time to verify the information? Where is the time to make the phone calls, to read the documents, check your facts on past events — to do the job of a journalist in short? Part of the answer is that the job of a journalist is changing. So much information is so widely available online that if you are organised you can assemble much more material much more quickly than you could in the past, and you can send it out to the world instantly.

Craig and Simons, among others, have written that the capaciousness of the new parliament house has had a chilling effect on political journalism because its size worked against the casual meetings in corridors and at the members' bar that characterised news gathering life in the old parliament house (*The Media, Politics and Public Life* 83, Simons *Fit to Print*). Perhaps that was true, but where in the past journalists could get stories by assiduously tracking down their contacts throughout the building, today's journalist can, to a degree, gather at least some of the same material by plugging into twitter and following others, both politicians and journalists. The material may not yet be verified but it gives you a starting point. That is, if someone tweets that they've seen one minister going into another's office, then you can work on that lead. And others will be adding to the first tweet within minutes. Journalists have long relied on various informal networks of contacts; the difference with twitter in this context is that it functions in public as a conversation.

There are obvious dangers in journalists and others treating tweets as reported information that has been checked, and as with any new media form, it takes some time for people to work out its parameters and its guiding principles. It can also be particularly confusing when journalists move between the various forms, between, say, tweeting, a live cross, a pre-recorded news item for TV or radio or a newspaper opinion piece.

How does the viewer/reader/tweetee know the status of what they are being offered, especially as the journalist whose face they have been familiar with for years on television, and whose appearance they associate with a long-established news organisation and standards of conduct — however these may be defined — is now tweeting everything from unsubstantiated rumour to fact to personal observations. Added to this are the differing registers in which journalists tweet. Some tweet only about issues they are reporting on, some season the mix by offering slices of their autobiography, while others offer slabs of autobiography and move freely from one voice to another.

None of this is inherently good or bad; the standard register and tone of voice of the professional journalist allows for little individuality and can be something of a straitjacket, but if you are interested in a particular running issue it can become wearying watching someone holding the lint from their navel up to the light for their own edification, if not for yours. I would not want to be misconstrued as an opponent of new media technologies. I enjoy the way that blogs and Facebook and Twitter, among others, have tilted the lopsided relationship between the media and the audience from the 'voice of God, we-talk-you-listen' model that predominated for most of the past century to one where the people formerly known as the audience, as Jay Rosen of New York University dubbed us all some years ago now, have more of a voice in the media and where people create their own media. The active involvement of the community in the media is a powerful democratising force and one that the mainstream media ignores at its peril.

Nor do I want to be misconstrued as an unblinking critic of the Canberra press gallery. Apart from the live coverage of events during the leadership challenge and throughout the election campaign and its aftermath, if you read the weekend newspapers there was a lot of informed reporting and insightful commentary that had been put together under extreme pressure. These journalists faced the usual deadline pressure but added to that was the myriad of competing demands to file other stories for other media as well as pressure to make some sense of events that were extraordinary and unlike many leadership challenges had taken most by surprise.

I've already cited the work of Mike Steketee and George Megalogenis at *The Australian* but at the time of the challenge to Rudd there were others such as their colleague, Patricia Karvelas, who deftly sketched Julia Gillard's both commanding and consultative political style. Katharine Murphy, national affairs correspondent for *The Age*, showed the importance of a political leader's style in their contest with their opposite number. Abbott had been making headway against Kevin Rudd, she wrote, because:

He could contrast his colourful knockabout style with a person who appeared bloodless, high-handed and increasingly removed from not only his own colleagues, but the people who put him in The Lodge in 2007. Gillard can match Abbott for earthiness and 'ordinariness'. She is his equal in the pithy political communication stakes. She is significantly steadier under high pressure. She shows little inclination towards indulgences. There are no examples to rival Abbott's spontaneous 'confessions' — although her capacity to say nothing while sounding like she's saying something could wear thin as her incumbency lengthens ('Chemistry and hand-to-hand combat').

But it would be naïve to believe that the increasing demands on journalists to produce more material more quickly across more platforms is an entirely benign force, especially when it is knits in so closely with the heartbeat of journalism — the need for speed.

The dynamic of news suggests that in weighing up the demand to get the story first with getting the story right, the former usually gets the nod. Historically, as a journalist you go with what you have by the end of the day and the next day you chase down more leads and over time, incremental news story by incremental news story, you gain on the truth. That's the idea, in any case, and while daily journalism in Australia undoubtedly has flaws its practice is still preferable to the kind of silence and absences that occurs in authoritarian regimes such as Burma.

The new media technologies have drastically compressed the daily news gathering and distributing time frame. It is clearly necessary to ask questions about how journalists today can continue practicing the discipline of verifying information and assertions but it is equally, if not more, important to challenge the reflex assumption that a faster news service is automatically a better news service. Many issues facing society bend themselves neither to quick solutions nor 140 characters. Some problems, whether it is corruption in our police forces or the treatment of mental illness or improving the lot of indigenous Australians, are deep-rooted and complicated and need sustained and careful attention on the part of policy-makers.

Perhaps the starkest example of this problem is climate change. The Howard government's surly resistance over many years to accepting the threat posed by climate change, coupled with the promises made by Rudd that his government would deliver real action on the issue, was one of the main reasons he won office in 2007 (Brett *Exit Right*). Similarly, the remarkable public support for Rudd dropped sharply after he abandoned his emissions trading scheme in April 2010 (Marr *Power Trip*). As already mentioned, the drop in Labor's primary vote at the election in August flowed evenly to the Greens and to the informal/did not vote in what appeared a protest vote made in the knowledge that such votes could materially affect whether the Labor government could retain power. If voters were trying to communicate anxiety about inaction over an urgent, global issue, there is little indication in subsequent media coverage that journalists are taking them seriously. Instead, much media energy has been devoted to denouncing the 'new paradigm' for a 'kinder, gentler politics' that was trumpeted by Bob Katter, Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor, the three

independent MPs whose votes were crucial to both major parties wanting to form government. Few in the news media appear to have paused to ask why the 'old paradigm' of backroom double-dealing and public doublespeak was preferable.

What is most at risk of being squeezed out by the cacophony of media product is the kind of investigative reporting and narrative storytelling that takes time and resources to do. Many journalistic skills are simple to acquire and likewise many have been replaced or made easily available by the new media technologies. The ability to find out things that by definition those in positions of power and authority do not want you to find out is a rare skill. So, too, is the ability to craft a compelling narrative. Slow food is gaining appeal but the idea of slow news sounds to many in the news business like an oxymoron. And yet earlier this year two striking examples of the power and value of this kind of journalism have been published. The first came from overseas, and from a monthly magazine — *Rolling Stone*. Michael Hastings' 6000-word piece of immersive reporting on the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, led directly to his dismissal by the President of the United States, Barack Obama.

The second example is local. In June the 38th *Quarterly Essay* was published and immediately prompted week and weeks of discussion and debate for politicians, pundits, bloggers and twitterers. The essay's author, David Marr, did the best part of 20 promotional interviews, including two appearances on ABC Radio National's Breakfast show and joined the *Q and A* panel on ABC television where he was chastised by a professor of psychiatry, Jayashri Kulkarni, for an ill-informed reading of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's character in his essay entitled 'Power Trip'. Some tweets streamed on the bottom of the TV screen enjoyed watching Marr taken to task while many in the studio audience applauded when he returned fire by asking whether it was only psychiatrists who could comment on personality.

It's worth underscoring that all this attention was devoted to an essay, that apparently quaint literary form normally associated with nineteenth century men of letters. It helps that Marr is a nationally known commentator and author, but more to the point he deployed journalistic skills of a kind that are all too often squeezed out of newsrooms today. He did do research and he did make an argument about the prime minister's performance in office, but first Marr grabbed our attention with an irresistible lead sentence: "Those Chinese fuckers are trying to rat-fuck us," declared Kevin Rudd'. It was only eleven words but they were impossible to ignore, not just because of the swearing but because of who was swearing — our then publicly pussy-bummed PM — and about whom — our Mandarin-speaking PM's apparently most favoured nation.

The *Quarterly Essay* finished with a scene in which Marr describes walking with Rudd barefoot on a weed-strewn beach in Mackay, Queensland, before dining together. Out of the blue the prime minister asked Marr what he intended arguing in the essay. It was a question Marr says very few politicians before had asked him but he answered, truthfully. Rudd was hurt — and furious. He did not yell but the dressing down occupies the next 20 minutes during which two boys who came over wanting their photo taken with the PM were told, politely, later.

What he says in these angry twenty minutes informs every corner of this essay. But more revealing than the information is the transformation of the man. In his anger Rudd becomes astonishingly eloquent. This is the most vivid version of himself I've encountered. At last he is speaking from the heart, an angry heart (86).

Some commentators thought Marr's analysis of Rudd's anger as a key explanatory tool reductive and negative while others found it both tough-minded and alive to the former prime minister's political and personal strengths ('Correspondence' in *Quarterly Essay*, 39, 75–102). What needs to be highlighted here is the power and value of storytelling, and how journalism is a far more supple form than is commonly thought.

Many of the 38 *Quarterly Essays* that Black Inc have published since 2001 have been essays in the conventional sense; over 20,000 words they have made an argument about a topic and they were

read primarily for their argument about, say, the Stolen Generation, or climate change or the demise of John Howard's coalition government. *Quarterly Essays* by Marr or, last year, by Annabel Crabb (No. 34) on the then Liberal Party leader, Malcolm Turnbull, envelop their argument in first hand observation of their subjects at work and play and in vivid, zestful writing. They tell us a story, then, but as journalists they are habitually attuned to the news currents. Just as Marr's essay seemed to crystallise a gnawing disappointment with Kevin Rudd in the first half of 2010, so Crabb's essay managed to both anticipate and make sense of Turnbull's demise through the so-called 'Utegate' affair.

It has long been a trope of media studies that political journalism favours treating politics as a horse race or when leaders are challenged as a blood sport (Broh 'Horse-Race Journalism' 1980; Blood and Lee 'Public Opinion at Risk' 1997; Littlewood *Calling Elections* 1999). It may be there was never a time when journalists focussed on issues rather than conflict, but the news media's apparently endemic negativity and the distrust of it by many ordinary people was one of the driving forces behind the rise of the public journalism movement in the United States in the 1990s which asked news organisations to report not just on society's problems but on potential solutions to those problems.

Public or civic journalism as it was known made only limited inroads in the US and never really caught on in Australia. Jay Rosen, one of its advocates, abandoned it a decade ago in favour of new communication technologies such as the internet and social media that have had a greater influence in forcing news organisations to take seriously their readers and listeners and viewers' needs because these technologies enable them either to do without news organisations or to get what they want without paying them for it.

Our seemingly unquenchable thirst for speed of news delivery runs the very real risk of decoupling the news cycle from the world it seeks to report on, and of entrenching the idea that journalists somehow stand apart from the society in which they live and are citizens. To offer just one example: earlier in June at the height of the standoff between the mining industry and the government over the proposed Resource Super Profits Tax, a panel of commentators gathered on ABC Radio National's Breakfast program to dissect the week's events.

At one point David Marr began questioning the mining industry's campaign in the light of the industry's handsome profit levels and Peter Van Onselen of *The Australian* responded by defending it at which point Fran Kelly butted in and said: 'Let's not debate the actual mining tax ... our time is going to slip away' ('Friday panel: Resources and Rudd' ABC Radio National 11 June 2010). Well, why not? It's a complicated issue as even those who have read the government's shortish explanatory booklet about it know, and if not now, when exactly would you debate it? I imagine Kelly was worried that debate on the tax would crowd out the all-important question of who had won and who had lost the political week but this was on Radio National, the network charged with analysing issues and ideas.

Journalism plays many roles in Australia, from providing straightforward service information to entertaining us with tales of the wacky and the weird, but if the idea of a free media is to carry any weight at all, we need to understand that flitting from one issue to the next without ever pausing to plumb their depths becomes a way of avoiding rather than engaging in the society that journalism can and should serve.

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