

## **Don't let Twitter fool you, Derryn**

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The Age

April 23, 2012

Veteran Australian tabloid journalist and radio shock jock Derryn Hinch earlier this year described Twitter as "the biggest advance in journalism and news gathering in the 50 years I've been in the business". I've been working in online media for five years now, so you might expect me to be cheered by the fact that this old-school journalist, newsprint still flowing through his veins, is apparently bowing to the power of the new media.

Actually, I found the comment intensely frustrating, for a couple of reasons.

The first comes from the perspective of someone who works in an older online format, the blog. When The Interpreter, the Lowy Institute blog, which I edit, started in late 2007, it was with the ambition that it could be part of a belated rise of Australian political blogging. Belated because political blogging had taken off in the US in the early 2000s, to the point where prominent US bloggers were finding bigger audiences than some mainstream media outlets. But it has just never happened in Australia the way it did in the US. To borrow a phrase from a European observer who has similar frustrations about blogging on that continent, Australia has political blogs, but it doesn't have a political blogosphere.

What's the difference? Networks. On its own, a blog is a powerful instrument; a platform that allows anyone to post opinion, analysis and information that could conceivably be read by millions.

But blogging reaches its full promise when all those voices form a network (one which has come to acquire the unlovely term "blogosphere"). What blogs exploit is the internet's power for conversation. But that conversation can only be sustained by high numbers of bloggers and readers, and by their mutual desire to engage with one another.

That model of blogging has never quite caught on in Australia. Instead, we now see that conversational energy focused on Twitter, which has captured the imagination of the Australian political class. Senior Australian journalists, commentators and political figures (Annabel Crabb, Mark Colvin, Malcolm Turnbull and Kevin Rudd come to mind) are now enjoying the network effects of Twitter, getting a new distribution channel for their ideas, instant feedback and tips for new reading.

This emulates the effects of the blogosphere, but in a more feverish and less reflective environment. It was blogging pioneer Matt Drudge who observed that a blog is a broadcast, not a publication. That was only partly true of blogs, but it gets closer to the mark when applied to Twitter.

Which brings me to the second reason Hinch's comments were frustrating. Hinch sees Twitter as a new tool to improve an old model of journalism. Hinch checks Twitter daily, he says, "because any breaking story is going to be on Twitter".

Breaking stories and creating scoops are powerful forces in journalism. They are a commercial driver for news organisations and are an important marker of peer status for journalists. A scoop is essentially a revelation of hidden facts, and journalists get them by cultivating sources. This takes time, money and physical proximity. Credentials from a recognised media outlet also help.

Amateurs working on blogs have none of those advantages, so they rarely get news scoops. But where citizen journalists can make their mark is in creating conceptual scoops. If a traditional scoop is revealing hidden information, a conceptual scoop is finding revelatory meaning in facts that are in plain sight. This is turf where amateurs, who often specialise in niche areas, come into their own.

A small example comes from The Interpreter's archives. In late 2007 a Pakistani TV news report about a new cruise missile was posted online; the missile was designed to carry a nuclear warhead, and the footage showed the missile being carried aloft by a Pakistani Air Force jet for a test launch. The video had made its way on to online forums frequented by military enthusiasts, and that's where The Interpreter discovered it. What was significant about this footage was that the missile was being launched from a Mirage jet of the same type Australia had sold to Pakistan in 1990. Thus Australia was playing a small part in Pakistani nuclear proliferation.

This information was never hidden, but discovering its significance required a level of plane-spotting expertise unlikely to be found in a newsroom. The Age picked up The Interpreter's story and ran it on its front page.

The moral is that, by focusing on the speed of the Twitter, old-school hacks like Hinch are celebrating the least of the internet's virtues. And in taking up Twitter, Hinch and his contemporaries in the Australian political class have embraced a good tool at the expense of a better one. What sets the blogosphere apart is the way it can harness the power of networks, exploit previously hidden pockets of expertise, and encourage genuine conversation. The barrenness of Australia's political blogosphere means we're missing out on some of those strengths. Our political debate is weaker as a result.

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The theme in this article is explored in the May issue of *American Review*, the journal of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney.