

ARTICLE

How do journalists cope? Conspiracy in the everyday production of political news

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ABSTRACT

Journalism as we know it is said to be under existential threat brought about by a combination of corporatisation and technological change. This has led some scholars to ask whether it can survive. The dominant account is one of under-resourced newsrooms that are at best incapable of adapting and at worst guilty of cynically abandoning professional standards. This article challenges these empirical claims, but at the same time affirms the normative concern underpinning them. In our case – a conspiracy of high politics – journalists do not just report political news but they conspire in its outcome. So, by changing the mode of inquiry we also change the question; not can journalism survive, but how do journalists cope.



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An effective fourth estate is seen as an essential feature of democratic politics (see Habermas 2006 for an overview). The professional journalist has long been at the heart of this idea (Schudson 1978). Honed through vocational training and practical apprenticeship, the professional journalist draws on ingrained tools, practices and ethical codes to source, sort and produce political news. It is a figure relied upon to ‘speak truth to power’ and hold public officials and elected representatives to account. But it is also a figure whose authority is under increasing threat. In a new era of ‘communicative abundance’ (Keane 2013), scholars argue that new social media and rolling news coverage in particular present a powerful challenge to the journalistic profession and its established codes of conduct (see especially Fenton 2010). The question that has come to dominate debate, both within the academy and among practitioners themselves, is how this changing landscape alters the relationship between media and the institutions and processes of democratic governance. For some the implications of radical diversification remain exciting, but for the majority the answers that are emerging are ominous. One variant of this account, linked to a longstanding critical orientation in political communication (see Curran 2002; McChesney 1999; Meyer 2002; Tiffen 1989), sees the changing media landscape as fuelling journalistic cynicism and the widespread abandonment of the watchdog role (Coleman 2012). Another variant – encapsulated in Ryfe’s (2012) recent analysis

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of declining local newspapers in America's Mid-West – sees the changing landscape as incompatible with journalistic norms and practices, and thus undermining of the old media business model. Nevertheless, whether one favours the popular image of the cynical 'hack' or the more sympathetic account of the ill-equipped professional, the outlook for public interest journalism seems bleak.

This article considers these prominent narratives about the decline of professional journalism through the prism of the 2013 leadership spill, a key moment in Australian history. The spill saw Prime Minister Kevin Rudd return to power at the expense of then leader, Julia Gillard. Inspired by Ryfe's account, we focus on this event as a high-profile and dramatic case through which to understand whether, and how, journalists are coping with the shift to communicative abundance in practice. We do not pursue the archetypal ethnographic 'soak' – associated with long periods of unstructured immersion in the field and sustained interaction with research participants – but our approach shares affinities with Ryfe's focus on the experiences and reflections of journalists *in situ*.¹ We examine the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) coverage of this political drama across a range of platforms, and conduct in-depth interviews with the journalists who covered the story and are implicated in its outcome.

Though not optimistic, we also find that neither variant of the dominant decline narrative entirely fits our case. Indeed, we find that reports of journalistic decline are overstated, but their implications underplayed.

First, we offer an image of a dynamic and open-ended profession in which the traditions that govern conduct are renegotiated in the face of the dilemmas brought about by the changing media environment. Social media has become an integral part of journalistic practice, and 24-hour rolling news has become the norm, as updates reinforce and revise the story and inspire ever-more exhaustive analysis of its implications. These 'successes' show that journalists can reproduce their authoritative voice as actors with privileged access and influence.

Our account also shows that this process of translating the traditional practices and ethics of professional journalism into the current context is not seamless. As the story unfolds, its narrators wrestle with whether to prioritise being 'first' or being accurate; to report what is known to have happened or commentate on what is to come; or to give 'inside' information or maintain a critical distance from sources. None of these dilemmas is new but each is greatly accentuated in the new media environment and the time-pressured, highly public interpretation it demands. In each, the trend is an uncomfortable shift away from the objective, distanced figure of democratic folklore, as journalists become central drivers, and not just conduits, of the story. The consequence is a form of conspiracy or co-dependence that simultaneously reaffirms the authority of professional journalists while eroding their role as democratic watchdogs.

Communicative abundance and democratic government

Initially, scholars celebrated the changing media environment and the 'communicative abundance' it implied. The old news media were characterised as an extension of elite interests; the political economy of information under neo-liberalism had led to a neglect of journalism's watchdog duties (see Fenton 2011 for a discussion). Proponents argued that the emergence of new social media in particular would undermine the

traditional authority of professional journalists and allow the public as ‘citizen journalists’ more direct access and voice (for reviews, see Brants 2005; Bruns, Wilson and Saunders 2009; Chen 2013; Price 2013). Some influential scholars remain optimistic that new forms of digital communication are destabilising established power dynamics, redirecting power away from traditional political elites and towards increasingly critical and savvy media consumers, and unleashing radically democratic possibilities along the way (McNair 2006; 2012). For most, however, initial optimism has waned in the face of empirical research revealing a rather more moderate evolution in the media sphere, both globally and in Australia. In this view, despite widespread elite uptake of social media and an increasing commitment to public transparency online, communication between political figures and citizens remains decidedly asymmetrical (Davis 2010; Grant, Moon and Busby Grant 2010). ‘Successes’ in the uptake of citizen journalism have largely been ephemeral or limited to niche groups of the affluent and highly engaged (Flew 2009; Murthy 2011; Rebillard and Toubol 2010). Moreover, traditional news media organisations have maintained a privileged presence in political coverage (Chadwick and Collister 2014; Hindman 2009).

In the more sinister interpretations, the changing media environment has led to a hollowing out of the professional standards of journalistic practice. A key consequence of communicative abundance – former practitioners in particular claim (Anderson 2004; Davies 2008; Jones 2009) – is that journalists are increasingly sacrificing professional ethics and abandoning established norms and practices. Driven by economic incentives, journalists are seen to have become cynically detached from notions of the public interest in the pursuit of individual and organisational gain (see Coleman 2012; Fenton 2011).

The alternative characterisation of how ‘communicative abundance’ has altered journalistic standards is more nuanced, but the problem is the same. Professional journalists are not abandoning norms and ethics associated with the watchdog role; it is the role itself that is slowly being displaced. Here, the enemy is a failing business model. Jones (2009), for instance, shows how shrinking newsroom budgets leave few experienced journalists with inadequate resources to perform their job. Hirst (2011) argues that these same pressures of resourcing, coupled with growing volume of content online, have transformed journalism from a task of gathering the news to one more of filtering and organising it for a broader audience. In the Australian context, Flew and Swift (2013) highlight how continuing layoffs at mainstream media outlets undermine efforts to reaffirm journalistic ethics.

An extreme variation on this theme, and an important one given his influential work in linking the literatures on communication and democratic governance (Ryfe 2005), is Ryfe’s (2012) recent book *Can Journalism Survive?* Ryfe’s answer to this question is a resounding ‘no’. His analysis is based on a rich ethnographic account of journalism as practiced in independent newspapers in America’s Mid-West – cultural standard-bearers of journalistic ethics in the US context. He recounts the repeated failure of journalists to adapt to the demands of the 24/7, online era. He portrays a fixed professional identity. The journalists in his account cling to their long-held routines and practices; the worse things get, the harder they cling. In the process, they undermine adaptive efforts, and seem to be accelerating the decline of the ‘old media’ they represent.

Motivated by this debate, and inspired in particular by Ryfe’s poignant account, we ask a similar set of questions but in a different media context. Through the prism of Australia’s

dramatic 2013 leadership spill, we explore whether, and how, political journalists are coping in the new media landscape of ‘communicative abundance’.

Method and approach

Unlike Ryfe, our case material is not drawn from small local newsrooms, but from Australia’s Parliamentary press gallery and associated national network of political commentators. Our approach to this material is a consciously interpretive one. Interpretivism has been influential in several subfields of political science – and, we have argued elsewhere (Boswell and Corbett 2014), especially in Australian scholarship where it has affinities with long-held research traditions. Here we bring it to political communication, drawing particularly on the collective account of Bevir and Rhodes (2006; 2010). For Bevir and Rhodes, the study of politics ought to focus on the beliefs that political actors hold and the meanings they ascribe to political events rather than trying to uncover the ‘reality’ of any particular event. Political analysis therefore centres on uncovering the narratives that actors tell to make sense of the world around them. The narratives they tell are based on ‘traditions’: the social context in which actors exercise their agency, and which informs their practices and their beliefs about how things work. Their particular form comes in response to ‘dilemmas’, new ideas which challenge existing beliefs and practices and prompt reconsideration.

Seen in these terms, professional journalists tell narratives to make sense of developments around them. They do so with reference to the traditions of professional journalistic practice and ethics. The dilemmas posed by a rapidly changing media environment invite them to reconsider or reimagine these traditions in everyday practice. Interpretivism, then, provides an analytical toolbox for unpacking our key research question: what meanings and beliefs, embedded within journalistic traditions, do professional journalists draw upon to cope with the changing demands of political reporting in real time? As such, our analysis recounts how professional journalists narrate the leadership challenge or ‘spill’, and how they cope with the dilemmas posed at each juncture in the narrative.

An interpretive orientation typically implies particular choices in research design and our study is no different in this regard. First, it seeks to elicit the experiences and beliefs as actors themselves enact and recount them, not to objectively assess the validity of their claims. The obvious concern is that this provides a platform for self-justification and misrepresentation. But ours is not a reductive recital of participants’ stories – they do not all agree with one another and, more fundamentally still, the conclusion we reach is hardly uncritical. Instead, adopting such an approach acknowledges that scholarly analysis can benefit from insights into actors’ self-perceptions and expressed motivations, in addition to assumptions based on perceived self-interest. Second, our interpretive orientation guides us towards a small-*n* design (indeed a single case) that makes use of qualitative data. The dataset is based on the synthesis of media documents (Tweets, online blog material, television footage and radio broadcasts), and semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of the most central ABC reporters and producers who worked on the event – selected from the press gallery, television, radio and online to gain the broadest possible understanding of the demands relevant to each platform – after the fact.² The narrow scope is what allows us to delve deeply and richly into the very immediacy of the contemporary media environment that we seek to unpack: we can recount the new

dilemmas of political journalism, and highlight the implications of how the actors involved tackle them in this case, in vivid, dramatic and illuminating detail that a more broad-brushed account would inevitably omit or gloss over. The drama of the moment, in this sense, throws into relief precisely the changes to everyday journalistic routines and practices that are our focus.³ And, though of course we make no claims to full generalisability, our sustained focus only on the ABC – a public broadcaster widely held to embody journalistic standards – can enable ‘plausible conjecture’ that our findings on the erosion of critical distance might apply even more strongly to actors working in commercial media under greater economic pressures.⁴

The narrative of the spill

It was almost like a feeling of resignation when this one happened. There had been so much build-up. I mean there was a lull. We thought [former Prime Minister] Rudd was really genuine about going and then there was the renewed build-up. And then that week before, you knew it was all back on again. (ABC journalist Latika Bourke)

There are a number of important contextual factors that are important to this story but the most significant is that this was the last in a succession of leadership challenges or ‘spills’ as the way previous spills were reported influenced how the spill we investigate here played out. The ABC’s Chris Uhlmann and Mark Simkin broke the first spill in 2010:

I actually do believe that had an effect on coverage ever after because essentially just about everyone in the gallery missed it [the 2010 spill] ... I reckon that made the rest of the gallery extremely jumpy after that – you know, that you could actually lose a prime minister and almost not notice it.

It did really badly affect the psyche of people up there [in the press gallery] and their news organisations ... [it] made both the press gallery and the government even more nervous than they otherwise would have been. I think that was exacerbated in the hung parliament. (ABC journalist Chris Uhlmann)

The last sentence alludes to the second important contextual factor. After toppling the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2010, Julia Gillard was not able to secure an outright majority at the subsequent election. Instead, she patched together a wafer-thin coalition made up of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), three key independents and one member of the Australian Greens, to form government. The 2013 spill was almost three years after the election, but leadership speculation had dogged her term. Rudd had resigned his cabinet post in February 2012 and was widely believed to be agitating, both publically and privately, for a return to the prime ministership. Earlier in 2013, former ALP leader Simon Crean unsuccessfully challenged Gillard. Speculation about when Rudd would initiate a new challenge continued. In the weeks leading up to the event, veteran ABC journalist Barrie Cassidy had reported on his TV program *Insiders* that a spill was inevitable and that Rudd would win. Later, he reflected:

Because I was always convinced it was going to happen, once the chatter started I knew that it was on and that it was serious and I also knew what the outcome would be and I had a very good sense of what the numbers would be. So the only thing that I was uncertain about was the timing. Once the chatter started I knew that it was real and so I was able to be a bit more assertive in some of my public comments on that day than perhaps some others were.

What follows is the story of the 24-hour period on 26 June 2013 in which the timing of this event was determined. The exposition unfolds over three phases or 'Acts'. Twitter is the medium of choice for fast facts by journalists in the initial Acts. Politicians, with some exceptions, prefer the controlled environment of media conferences and interviews (Grant, Moon and Busby Grant 2010). These are then re-reported on talkback shows, 24-hour news channels and blogs. The narrative moves back and forth across these media throughout the day until most live blogs cease late on 26 June. Some of the more substantive newspaper analysis is released online on the day but the majority appears in print in the early hours of 27 June.

Act I. The petition

I knew pretty much the moment I woke up that morning ... because I've got a text from one of Rudd's close supporters saying it will be today ... what was very difficult to distinguish was how much movement was the design and implementation of the Rudd camp or not ... because once it began it snowballed. (ABC journalist Latika Burke)

Given the context outlined above and the fact that most commentators believed that is was a matter of *when* not *if* the spill would happen, on 26 June the question on most journalists minds was: is this it? The problem, as the above quote alludes, was distinguishing fact from fiction in such an environment. The ALP was not just divided into Rudd and Gillard factions; there were factions within factions and each element was using the media to gather momentum for their agenda. In attempting to determine whether 'this is it' journalists are faced with a classic trade-off between speed and accuracy. This is not a new dilemma. What was new, however, was the way new social media fuelled the story in this early phase. In particular, Twitter was the medium that drove speculation about the existence of a petition being circulated within the ALP in order to bring on a spill. Here is Latika Bourke, a press-gallery journalist, on the day:

@latikambourke June 26 at 1:36 PM

I cannot find a single Labor MP who has seen or signed this petition. Very odd.
#Ruddmentum

@latikambourke June 26 at 1:51 PM

In March I was able to confirm with a few phone calls in the space of minutes that a petition had been signed. Today? 1 hr and no-one.

@latikambourke June 26 at 1:59 PM

Found one Labor MP willing to tell me they've seen the petition. I presume, as they are a Rudd supporter they signed it but wouldn't confirm.

Behind the scenes, press-gallery journalists were bulk texting and calling their contacts. This could be a team effort but the ABC is a large organisation and so those closest to the action – the parliamentary press gallery – were in a privileged position at this stage of the cycle. Twitter is the fastest way to get the information out, and one that reporters are increasingly turning to as part of their standard practice (Vis 2013). But it is also the easiest way for the organisation to speak to itself with the different component parts – radio, TV, online – in different cities around the country relying on Twitter for regular updates. The problem, journalists reflect, is how much faith to place on these sources:

There was confusion within Twitter. Was there really a petition? ... we confirmed that the petition was real from numerous and reliable sources. There was no doubt in our mind

that the petition was real, but because these conflicting views were happening on Twitter ... people start to doubt perhaps what you're saying because someone else on Twitter might be saying something else ... So we'd say, no this is definitely right. But they'll question us now because they're seeing someone else saying something different. We wouldn't normally have that sort of conjecture within a newsroom I don't think. (ABC journalist Samantha Hawley)

One of the ABC's most prominent journalists, Annabel Crabb, describes this phase as a 'social media Super Bowl':

They're a huge event. There is a certain amount of status in being one of the journos who's right on the button and breaking little insights as to who's meeting with whom and who's agreed to what and rumours are that so and so has shifted and so on. Now all of those rumours and weird little scoops always used to happen when there was a spill underway ... The difference now is that all of those crazy little titbits just go live to air. People just tweet it as they find it. A lot of those small developments turn out to be instantly reversed or they don't survive the application of oxygen. Some of these things, once ventilated, the subject gets terribly nervous and then changes their mind. Then leadership spills are by definition full of people who are changing their minds – sometimes very regularly over the course of a day – so it means that contemporaneously reported snippets about who's doing what often aren't true anymore by the end of the day. But they've been reported at the time, so they become a part of the tapestry.

As this quote alludes, 'being the first' is an important operational imperative in this environment. Journalists claim that the same standards of conduct apply across both new and old media sources but most also concede that verification is often a distributed or networked task (see Hermida 2012). In practice, caveats and intentional ambiguities like 'I am hearing' or 'my sources are telling me' enable them to capture the flavour of the moment while also responding rapidly in real time. One example of this is when, later in the day, Gillard scheduled a snap TV interview with Sky News' political reporter David Speers, as this retweet shows:

@latikambourke June 26 at 4:11 PM

RT @David_Speers: I'll be interviewing the Prime Minister shortly on Sky News

In the interview Gillard stated that the petition is the 'equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster' as 'Nobody has seen it'. But she also announced that she would bring the matter to a head, and called a vote on the ALP party leadership for 7:00 pm, on the basis that the loser agree to resign their seat in parliament.

In their reflections on how they make these judgements about what to publish in these moments, journalists recall previous occasions where their colleagues have reported spill numbers but have later been proved wrong. In this, they compare themselves favourably with their main competition, the major commercial rolling news outlet Sky News, in terms of professional standards. Barrie Cassidy summarises:

I think it's reasonable to expect Sky to get a few things wrong along the way because they're constantly operating by the seat of their pants. So I think people will cut more slack for Sky than they would for anybody else and I think it shows, occasionally, that they do make mistakes.

I think if you work with a newspaper or a commercial network you can afford to get those things wrong occasionally provided you do get the big break often enough. But at the ABC I don't think you have that comfort level. You just need to be right every time.

In this view, different outlets have different roles and specific audiences, and the ABC, as the public broadcaster, has a particular duty to be accurate. These journalists are expected to be the watchdogs of Australian democracy. Moreover, many link the accuracy of ABC coverage with its position and authority in the market; they believe that viewers and listeners look to the ABC for the definitive word. Others, however, are less certain about the difference:

What I don't think I accept is that Sky's bar, if you like, is lower ... They are the house channel [in Parliament] ... So, if they get it wrong they're going to be pretty widely ridiculed within the Canberra bubble ...

I think they've got every bit as much incentive to hang on until they know what they're talking about, but equally, there's a lot of pressure on everybody to be first. So, I mean, that's the old dilemma. (*ABC Media Watch* host Jonathan Holmes)

In practice, journalists reflect that they operate on rules of thumb, common sense and intuition, as Katie Cassidy, a reporter with ABC online, reflects:

So Twitter's not really different in that way, if that makes sense ... I'm using it so often and it just becomes another source of information and if something feels a little bit odd or sounds a little bit odd or a picture doesn't look particularly right, your alarm bells kind of go off and you might say to someone else, I don't really know about that, I might just hold off. If you're watching so many people and basically the same trend is coming in, regardless of where they work, either for News Limited or Fairfax or ABC, if it's the same sort of information that's coming in then you feel relatively more confident about that.

In this view, Twitter has an established rhythm and routine. For those who know the norms and customs of the community of 'political tragics' who follow these events on this medium, sorting fact from fiction is no more difficult than any other source.

Act II. Calling the card

... we have a white board, the program of the day. Basically you just wipe the whole thing down and start again ... 'Okay, we have a new show' ... and then the question becomes: when will the result be known? (*ABC Drive* producer Beverley Wang)

Gillard's interview on Sky News effectively answers the question – is this it? – that dominated the coverage for much of the day. The next questions, which direct coverage from the conclusion of her interview until the result of the caucus ballot is announced, is: what will the result be and what are the implications? This raises a particularly sensitive set of issues for journalists, including whether they see their role as reporters or commentators:

... because the truth is that every medium is now live. There's no go and walk around and talk to people and then put something together at the end of the day anymore. That's the way it used to work. There were many advantages of the old system of working, because you would have a day in which you just went out and talked to people. You arrived at some decent conclusions about where everybody was. You sifted through what people were trying to tell you for a reason and what that reason was and weighting the stuff that they told you in accordance with what they were trying to achieve by telling you at all.

In 10 years, it's just changed beyond recognition ... it's all so immediate, as soon as something's even vaguely on, the phone doesn't stop ringing because it's radio stations, it's TV networks saying, can you talk to us live about what's happening? You have to work out

what's happening before you can communicate what's happening. That is a constant, constant strain. (ABC journalist Annabel Crabb)

How to 'make sense' of these new expectations is a considerable question for the profession (Barnhurst 2003). The extent to which the information recounted in this rolling format could be considered commentary, speculation, or even gossip was contentious among interviewees. Most of the journalists we spoke to preferred terms like hypothesising or analysis, all language they considered more appropriate to the professional standards of the ABC. At the same time, most were willing to concede that this was a blurry line made even murkier by the demands of rolling news coverage and social media. Similarly, most agreed that the reporter-commentator role Crabb and others fulfil is new, but others felt that it was only typical of a handful of very high-profile journalists. For the rest, older norms prevail:

My role on Twitter is the same as my role when I'm reporting anywhere else. That is not to engage in any sort of argument or disagreement or commentary particularly or banter about particular issues. My job is to report them and to provide analysis but not to provide personal views. (ABC journalist Samantha Hawley)

As these quotes illustrate, Act II also sees rolling TV and radio coverage begin to take over from Twitter as the main story-telling medium. As we shall see, it is not that Twitter is silent, but rather 140 characters is not enough space to provide the type of content that the watching public, who are tuning into the radio on their way home from work, or watching in their lounge rooms, now requires. What makes this part of the exposition especially hard for journalists to narrate, they argue, is that the event is significant, and, as the above 'wipe the white board' image conveys, activity in newsrooms is frenetic, but not that much is actually happening:

I think consequence is what drives the rhythm. So what you have in this moment is the intersection of two completely contradictory forces. One is impending consequential event, a real movement in the political landscape, and the experience of nothing happening. So there's urgency and the urgency comes from the consequence of what's about to happen. I mean, if I tell you something colossal will happen in an hour, that hour becomes frantic, even though there's nothing that might actually be happening in that hour, because you're ... going through this process of trying to grasp the scope of what's about to come, but nothing's happening in the moment. (ABC *Drive* host Waleed Aly)

In this view, analysis is undertaken in a vacuum but the expectation is that by the end of the day the substance and consequence of the story will be revealed. On the one hand, this state of affairs is determined by the gravity of the journalist's role as democratic watchdog, but on the other, the need to 'fill space' in practice risks undermining the norms and practices associated with that role. Indeed, some argue that reporting standards suffer:

... they're writing their analysis sooner and faster than ever before and therefore it can't be as well considered. They're not making the same number of phone calls and doing the checks and having the conversations they would've once had before they wrote their pieces. The pressure now is even on newspaper journalists to get their commentary up online and that carries over to the next day's newspaper whereas previously they might've taken six or eight hours to write the same commentary. So everybody's falling into that cycle. Of course, what's happened almost parallel with the advent of 24-hour news is that the newspapers are cutting back. They're cutting back on staff, they're putting less emphasis on the

printed copy and therefore you've got so many people competing now in that same rushed environment and you just haven't got the reporters with the capabilities and the freedom to spend the time researching. (ABC *Insiders* host Barrie Cassidy)

Variations on this line emphasise that publics expect less from journalists as a result, as Holmes reflects:

So, I think it's a different expectation on the part of viewers, and the same is true of radio too, and indeed, all the blogs that people are writing on their websites. If you're doing a running blog on *The Guardian* [Australia] website or something when events are happening, as happens all the time now, again, what you're telling people is the latest rumour rather than established fact, and people accept that.

A more radical view is that the reporting-commentary dichotomy is actually of little relevance in the rolling news age, and that these events need to be considered in a fundamentally different light, with journalists provided with a new role altogether:

The way I would look at this is not as a news report ... I know as a broadcaster, I actually feel in those moments, like, we're just all in this together ... you kind of have an authority position because you're disseminating information and all of that, but there's not that much information to disseminate, really, and what you're really doing is just leading the experience ... It's kind of a social event in a way. (ABC *Drive* host Waleed Aly)

Within this paradoxical period of fluidity and stasis, two major events do occur based on the decisions of the other two key actors in this drama: former Prime Minister and challenger Rudd, and then ALP factional powerbroker Bill Shorten. The question for Rudd was would he stand (in the previous spill he declined to challenge, leaving Crean to reluctantly oppose Gillard). He quickly announced that he would. The second was which side Shorten, a prominent member of the ALP cabinet who had been a key figure in switching support from Rudd to Gillard in the first spill in 2010, would take. Earlier in the day, it was reported that Shorten would stay with Gillard:

ABC Journalist Simon Cullen: @Simon_Cullen June 26 at 1:45 PM:

Shorten's spokesperson: The Minister's position has not changed & he will not be adding to the media speculation ... (via @_JustinStevens)

At 6.30 pm he called a press conference. He was late, but it became clear he had not stopped by to reconfirm his earlier position.

@latikambourke June 26 at 6:35 PM

Second source says Bill Shorten has switched to Kevin Rudd. #Ruddmentum

From here, the outcome of the 7:00 pm caucus vote was seen as all but a forgone conclusion with most commentators convinced that Rudd would prevail. Shortly afterward, while the caucus meeting was still in progress, Barrie Cassidy told the host of the 7.30 *Report* Leigh Sales that:

At quarter to six tonight I got a message from a minister who is very much a Gillard supporter [who] said, despite reports to the contrary, it is close.

Ten minutes before the meeting, the same person text me and said it has shifted against us.

The vote itself was, however, agonisingly prolonged for those filling time on rolling news stations. This in itself brings to the fore all of the tensions discussed thus far. Sky

reported almost as soon as the doors of the caucus room had closed that Rudd had won despite the vote not yet having been taken. This presented a dilemma for ABC journalists. Here is *ABC Drive* producer Beverley Wang:

... so someone is watching tweets ... [and] came around and said Sky's already reporting that Kevin Rudd has won. But, you know, those are sources contacting the reporter and they may or may not be reliable ... how do you check how many sources they have? Who says that's fine to go out? I don't know.

As we have seen, Twitter is changing the nature of news gathering practices (Small 2011: 873) and in doing so is raising questions about authenticity and credibility (Wilson 2011). In this case, what *Drive* did was report that Sky was saying Rudd had won. This type of 'I can report that they are reporting' solution lacks authority – indeed it reluctantly cedes it to a rival outlet in a competitive media environment – but is widely seen to be better than broadcasting an error. The shift towards such 'distributed verification' of facts via Twitter (Hermida 2010) clearly remains uncomfortable for some journalists, reimagining but also weakening their identity as 'speaking truth to power' in the name of democratic accountability – a point to which we return.

Finally, at 7:48 pm, ALP returning officer Chris Hayes addressed the waiting media pack and confirmed that Rudd had won 57–45, bringing Act II to a close.

Act III. The fallout

Discussion about the implications of the result had been occurring throughout the day but, now that the decision was clear, dissecting why the spill had occurred, and what the policy and electoral implications might be, dominated the remainder of this 24-hour period of coverage. Key questions dominate the first phase of this discussion: when will an election be called, who will be in Rudd's ministry, and who will stand for Gillard's seat. Twitter keeps up a running commentary on resignations with a series of ministers announcing their decisions:

@PGarrettMP (ALP Cabinet Minister Peter Garrett) 26 June 2013 at 9:51 PM
Thanks for all the support, no regrets here as I resign as Minister and rejoin my dear family with good things done for our nation. PG

Commentators replay the events that brought Gillard to office, discuss her legacy as Prime Minister, consider the impact her gender had on her popularity, and question where it all went wrong for her leadership. For Rudd, the meaning is less clear as the final verdict is dependent on the forthcoming election result. All of these discussions swirl across radio and TV. They are repeated in newspaper columns, which begin to appear online ahead of the evening print run for the next day's news. It is the type of conversation that these platforms thrive on, as there is more time and space for analysis and opinion.

Among the dialogue, what comes through in this phase is the extent of interlocking networks and relationships that exist between politicians and journalists; a proximity forged in part by their co-location in Parliament House – the press gallery occupies a wing of the building – but also the tightknit nature of the Canberra-based political community. Latika Bourke sums up this aspect of the final scenes neatly:

There was a lot of sadness in the corridor obviously you know. I remember coming out of Julia Gillard's final press conference and all the government staff were crying. And that were all very, very sad ... it was one of the first times I've seen all those people who – some of them are very good friends of mine – be so sad, but it was also a feeling of relief that finally they had got this sorted.

Similarly, Crabb tweeted:

@annabelcrabb (ABC journalist Annabel Crabb)

And spare a thought for all the Labor staffers who have lost their jobs tonight. Hard work with perilous job security + lonely families

No doubt this human side of the drama is genuine but it also points to the extent to which the two exist in a co-dependent relationship. Journalists depicted this as a system of exchange in which stories were swapped for column inches and favourable commentary. This mutual affinity, they contend, has always existed but new social media and rolling news coverage has increased the pressure on this bartering process to produce even more immediate news. As a result, journalists worry about the extent to which politicians in search of strategic advantage are manipulating them or their colleagues:

I think certain journalists are considered spokespeople for certain politicians ... [the rumour about the petition] was designed to trigger Julia Gillard into pushing the button and she did and they got what they wanted ... we were played or the media was played or used to try and intimidate Gillard into pushing that button. (ABC journalist Latika Bourke)

Moreover, there is also a sense that in reporting the story journalists are ensuring that the events themselves will come to pass:

The press by and large folded themselves uncritically into the Rudd strategy. That's my great criticism of what went on in the run-on up to that [spill] ... I think the journalists themselves probably suspected it was and yet nevertheless because they valued the story and they love leadership challenges, they were only too happy to run this material ... what happens, of course, is that you do write this stuff and you write that the Rudd challenge will happen, then you lock yourself into that position and you sustain it forever. You just keep running with it because you don't want to be wrong and so it almost becomes a self-perpetuating outcome. (*Insiders* host Barrie Cassidy)

Curtain call: how do journalists cope?

We have provided a vivid account of how the journalists involved in reporting a leadership challenge or spill responded in real time to the professional dilemmas they faced. The particular details embedded in our analysis are context-specific, but we hold that they have important implications for broader scholarly ideas about the journalistic decline and democratic accountability.

First, our account calls for nuanced reappraisal of pessimism about the survival of professional journalism. Contra Ryfe, our analysis shows that professional journalists *can* successfully reproduce their authoritative position in democratic politics. It shows that new forms of social media, and Twitter in particular, are no longer necessarily perceived as threatening. Indeed, consistent with emerging research on communication and journalism studies (Hermida 2010; Vis 2013), many of our interview participants see the old–new dichotomy as a myth that glosses over how essential tools such as Twitter have become

in the armoury of the professional journalist. Likewise, the pervasiveness of rolling news is, by now, an accepted element of any breaking political drama. Indeed, it is something which is actively prepared for in a scripted crisis of this nature, and which the actors involved have adjusted to in their practice. Our analysis suggests that 'successful' adaptation has required active, and not entirely settled, reinterpretation of journalistic traditions in practice.

The orthodox accounts of journalistic decline have little basis here, but the normative concerns that underpin them, regarding the impact on democratic accountability in an age of 'communicative abundance', remain well-founded. To be clear, all of our participants have been quick to assert that journalistic practices, informed by journalistic ethics, remain alive and well. Under the pressures brought about by changes in the media environment, however, journalists' reinterpretation of these norms in an urgent context of unfolding political drama can accentuate their dependence on the elites they are meant to hold to account. They need to drive the story forward, and they depend on access to do that accurately and quickly.

Such dependence is, of course, hardly a new phenomenon: journalists and political actors have always been co-dependent in making the news. Yet a number of our participants, particularly those with more experience in the field, reflected that the balance in this relationship has tipped as the demands of the new media environment have taken hold. They suggest that the objectivity required of the watchdog role is becoming more difficult to attain as journalists increasingly drive the story, not out of any cynical agenda on the part of journalists themselves or supposed political masters, but simply as a wilfully ordinary response to changing everyday practices which place such a premium on immediacy. One of Australia's most venerable broadcast journalists, Barrie Cassidy, reflected on this dynamic:

[Then Deputy Prime Minister] Wayne Swan said to me when I said what I did on *Insiders*, he said look ... the problem with it is, whether it was accurate or not, it will probably now happen because of what you've done. I thought that was an interesting comment. It'd have to be a pretty fragile situation for that outcome to occur because of what I said but that does go to that issue that it is a self-perpetuating event.

The general point is that all journalists, in working to gain access and provide the instant updates and prescient analysis that their everyday practice now demands, must inevitably forfeit critical distance, both from the immediacy of the event itself and from the actors involved. They are, in the process, working not just to report on conspiracies like the spill, but often, consciously or unconsciously, to conspire in it themselves.

Ultimately, we show that the new 'communicative abundance' can have significant consequences for the capacity of the fourth estate, and the journalists who comprise it, to maintain critical distance in holding power to account. As such, the manner in which journalists cope with the new demands, and the price at which that 'success' comes, may present a more insidious threat still to the role of the fourth estate in ensuring democratic accountability. The adaptation required in everyday practice reinforces the popular (and, for the most part, self-) image of journalists as democratic watchdogs, while at the same time subtly undermining their capacity to actually play any such role.

Notes

1. Popular imagination sees ethnography as synonymous with the lengthy 'soak', but it is now well accepted that there are alternative ways of doing ethnography. For a similarly broadened

‘ethnographic’ approach to studies of journalism and media politics, see many of the contributions to Fenton (2010), and particularly the work of Davis (2010; 2013).

2. In total we conducted 10 interviews. The number is small, but it represents the key figures in the drama and thus constitutes an impressive sample in this instance. A small number of actors (three) declined or did not respond to the invitation, but most – across different levels of the organisation – were happy to take part. Full replication data is available from the authors on request.
3. For a lengthier justification of favouring a deeper micro rather than broader macro approach to conducting and conveying meaning-focused political research, especially that which like ours is focused on capturing the experience of crisis and drama, see Hajer and Uitermark (2008).
4. See Rhodes (2014) for a conceptual account of how rich single case research can enable ‘plausible conjectures’ about broader categories.

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