

## You say 'elite media', I say real journalism. And now more than ever we must fight to keep it

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What critics call the 'elite media' is actually journalism that serves the public interest. Shutterstock

A word, if I may, on this nasty new term of abuse “elite media” – they who perpetrate “elite journalism”.

This is the journalism said by those who use the term to be out of touch with so-called “ordinary people” and their everyday concerns.

It is the journalism said to be done by people living inside the “goat’s cheese curtain”, in the chic inner suburbs of our cities, who are dismissed as having no idea what it is like to live in the outer suburbs, much less in regional or remote areas.

The phrase was invoked recently by Liberal Democratic senator David Leyonhjelm in his irrational proposition that he could generate a “freedom offset” against the impositions of the Australian Building and Construction Commission legislation by forcing the ABC to conduct community forums after its board meetings.

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This, he argued, would force its people to receive knowledge from those who lived beyond the “curtain” and so help broaden the ABC’s collective mind.

A variant on the theme is the phrase “black skivvy”, to denote people who likewise live in the inner city.

Malcolm Turnbull used the term “elite media” with a curl of the lip during an interview a fortnight ago with Leigh Sales on ABC TV’s 7.30 program, when she asked him about his government’s preoccupation with amending Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act.

Was this, Sales asked, really the main everyday concern of the voting population and, if it wasn’t, why was his government spending so much time and energy on it?

Turnbull replied that she would have to put that question to her colleagues in the “elite media”, specifying the ABC but neglecting to mention The Australian, which is the media outlet that has been pushing the hardest on 18C.

His use of “elite media” was a piece of copycat rhetoric that had suddenly become the height of fashion in the immediate aftermath of Donald Trump winning the US presidential election. The “elite media” had got it all wrong. They were so out of touch that they had failed to see what was really going on in the minds of the American people.

That seems to be true. The US media did seem to miss the story comprehensively, but, in the process of debating why this happened, the word “elite” came to be used to describe a professional media that had lost democratic legitimacy.

In the US, at least, there has developed a so-called “alt media” – meaning an alternative media. It is derived from the term “alt right”, the alternative or extreme right wing of American politics.

Using online platforms – basically Facebook – the “alt media” proclaims that it will tell you information the mainstream media – the professional journalists – won’t tell you, because they are part of The Establishment and not to be trusted.

On this assertion, then, rests the “alt media’s” claim to democratic legitimacy.

It is a dangerous development because the “alt media” gives the impression of doing journalism when what it really does is a melange of gossip, propaganda and hate. It is part of the “fake news” phenomenon. It has nothing to do with the fourth-estate function of the media on which democratic politics depend.

Yet it is a development for which professional journalists in some parts of the mainstream media – and more especially their employers – have to share the blame.

When the internet burst into everyday life in 2006, big newspaper companies and their journalists became hooked on it as a source of cheap thrills and easy access to information. They republished material from the internet without doing anything like enough to verify it beforehand.

I know this because journalists I interviewed after the Black Saturday bushfires told me about it. That was seven years ago. They told me that they had this mantra: “If it’s wrong, it won’t be wrong for long.” The readers would see the mistakes, tell the newspaper and then it might be fixed.

As a result, professional journalism became cheapened, and the distinctions between professional journalism and online *ersatz* journalism became blurred.

Australia’s two biggest newspaper companies either didn’t see the risks or chose to ignore them.

Now we have reached the situation where real journalism is being dismissed as “elite”.

Real journalism involves collecting and verifying facts before publishing them. It involves adherence to legal and ethical standards concerning due process at law, avoidance of wrongful harm, and respect for public taste.

It involves the unfashionable function of gatekeeping – call it editing.

It involves shining a light in dark places to reveal things that people in power want concealed. That is how we know, for instance, about sexual abuse of children by clergy, and about bad behaviour by the insurance arm of the Commonwealth Bank.

Journalism like this involves accumulating evidence to a standard of proof commensurate with the gravity of the wrongdoing. It is a complex exercise demanding skill and experience.

Yes, professional journalism has many flaws and neither the practitioners nor the media industry they work for are as accountable as they should be for the way they use their power. But there is some accountability, including some serious legal consequences.

Moreover, they operate in the open, with no cloak of anonymity to hide behind.

This is the kind of journalism that serves the public interest.

It follows that it is in the public interest that professional journalism and the media industry respond effectively to the current challenge to their institutional legitimacy. Basically, that means doing journalism to high ethical standards and putting the need to be right ahead of the need to be first.

This is not about elite journalism versus alternative journalism. It is about real journalism versus non-journalism.

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*Denis will be online for an Author Q&A between 10:30 and 11:30am AEDT on Friday, 9 December, 2016. Post any questions you have in the comments below.*

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