

# Playing with politics

## Political fans and Twitter faking in post-broadcast democracy

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### Abstract

Mobile and social media are interwoven with emerging, fan-like forms of engagement with mediatised politics. In 'post-broadcast democracies', a minority of citizens are affectively drawn to the spectacle of mediated politics. Increasingly, these citizens use the texts and personae of mediatised politics as raw material for their own creativity, using social and mobile media and online self-publishing platforms. More specifically, the activity of 'Twitter 'faking' shows playful, performative and mobile dimensions which challenge scholars to rethink theories of play, performance, fandom and political engagement. Such activities challenge us to rethink mobile gaming in terms of the politics of mobile play.

### Keywords

fans, mobile media, Twitter, faking, mediatised politics, post-broadcast democracy, play, performance.

There was a point where I was impersonating Andrew Bolt, but at some point I can't determine we switched and I became the sensible one. (Fake Andrew Bolt, via Twitter, 13 March 2011)

## **Introduction**

This paper shows how mobile and social media are interwoven in playful forms of engagement with mediatised politics. As the politically engaged become an enthusiastic niche audience in post-broadcast democracies, the paper asks whether their 'affective play' (Hills, 1998) with political content in the 'elite public sphere' (Young 2011) can be usefully understood as a form of fandom. Further, it shows how mediatised politics – as conducted via mass media and subject to its 'rules, aims, production logics, and constraints' (Mazzoleni and Schultz, 1999: 249) – has become the raw material for a new kind of game for a proportion of the population. Current understandings of mobility, play, fandom and politics are each implicated and transformed in this shift. In particular, the involvement of mobile media and social media platforms in this kind of play challenges us to rethink mobile gaming. In exploring these phenomena, first I synthesise ways of understanding the minority audience which is affectively, fannishly and interactively engaged with mediated politics in Australia. I will show how this political fan audience can be approached within the theoretical framework of post-broadcast democracy (Prior, 2006), as a constellation of mobile, interactive publics that use the mass-produced texts of mediatised politics as the raw materials for new forms of cultural production. Second, I will consider

the activities of political ‘fakers’ in Australia, drawing lessons from email interviews I conducted with practitioners of satirical impersonation on Twitter. On this basis, I will offer an analysis of political faking that shows it to be mobile, attentive, performative and playful. I will then look at these playful forms of engagement with the aid of theories of play employed in game studies, fan studies and performance studies to consider the relationship might between playful political faking and citizenship.

### **Post-broadcast democracy**

Australia’s changing media environment, and emerging characteristics of its mediated political life mean that, like the USA and the UK, it can be viewed as a post-broadcast democracy (Prior, 2006) The ‘post-broadcast’ is a familiar category in media studies, and increasingly in policy discourse. It describes the way in which the proliferation of media technologies, media channels and viewing contexts, along with time-shifting and mobile media devices has led to a high degree of unpredictability among media audiences. The audience is no longer confined, as it was during the broadcast era, to a stable range of choices provided by highly regulated forms of television broadcasting. Nor is media content necessarily predominantly consumed in domestic environments. The ‘solid normativity’ of broadcast television, a result of this domesticity, its ‘[articulation] to the democratic state as part of its communications infrastructure’, and its central place in depicting the

post-war consumer society has unravelled (Turner and Tay, 2008: 2).

The concept of post-broadcast democracy is a way of understanding the impact of this unravelling on mediated Western democracies. Markus Prior (2006) developed this concept in outlining the first and most obvious characteristic defining post-broadcast democracies: a *fragmentation* of shared media consumption, which has led to sharp differences in levels of engagement with political content. In place of the normative national culture of broadcasting, in Australia as elsewhere we now see a fragmenting heterogeneity – in terms of both programming and audiences. As the range of delivery platforms has increased, so too has the range of information. This has been accompanied by a lowering of the barriers to entry in content production, ‘both in terms of required capital and specialized technical skills’, meaning that ‘an increasingly divided audience pool has led content producers to more narrowly craft their programming, seeking to appeal to more finely differentiated audience groups’ (Baym, 2003: 96). Since this applies equally to political content, it has affected the conduct of elections, the strategies of political actors, the dynamic between them and established media outlets, and the nature of the engagement of citizens with political life. In short, there is a ‘breakdown of broadly shared political and social experience’ (Bennett, 1998: 741).

A major cleavage in the audience and the citizenry which has emerged as a consequence is between those who are inclined to seek out political content and those who are not. (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Coleman, 2003; Norris, 2000; Prior, 2006; Young, 2011) Political actors

and media organisations now operate 'beyond the presumption of attention' (Couldry et al, 2010) that characterised an earlier period of mass-mediated democracy. This means no one can assume a universal, or even widespread attentiveness to political events or political content on the part of the national citizenry and broadcast audience. At the same time, it means that those with an intrinsic interest in politics are consuming more political content than ever. Prior (2006) notes that in the United States, the contemporary high choice media environment contrasts sharply with the high water mark of mass broadcasting during the 1970s and 1980s, when almost everyone absorbed at least some political information in a version of 'by-product learning'. This period was described by Blumler and Kavanagh as the 'second age' of political communication, where 'television enlarged the audience for political communication by penetrating a sector of the electorate that was previously more difficult to reach and less heavily exposed to message flows' (1999: 212). At this time, regulators strongly encouraged the production of news for the public benefit, and prosperous oligopoly television licensees saw news coverage as a marker of prestige. In the USA, a broadcast news 'road-block' evolved, where all stations carried news broadcasts simultaneously, and where the only choice was to either watch the news or turn off the set. This meant that all television viewers – even those least interested in politics – absorbed minimal amounts of political information (Prior, 2006).

Now, however, the amount of political information absorbed is far more contingent on the existing preferences of audience members:

‘To news junkies, politics has become a candy store. Others avoid news altogether. Political involvement has become more unequal, and elections more polarized as a result’ (2006: i). Cable television and the Internet have delivered a more ‘efficient’, high choice media environment where the variety of information sources mean that media diets can correspond more closely with preferences for entertainment or politics. The spread of mobile media devices and services have meant that on-demand digital content can be consumed in a range of contexts outside the home. And social media platforms work to distribute content and attention in new ways, according to new logics. For Prior, the segment of the public who still consume news are not simply a remnant still engaged with normative forms of democratic citizenship, but rather a part of the audience who actively seek political content, in the same way that others tend to seek entertainment content. This niche group tends to consume far beyond what might be regarded as the amount requisite to fulfilling the obligations of liberal-democratic citizenship.

Australian research mirrors international findings in showing sharp variations in political engagement and public connection with political media (Jones and Pusey, 2005; Young, 2011). Compulsory voting means that in Australia, voter turnout is never in question. But here, too, the news audience is fragmenting with the growth of media channels. An ‘attentive elite’ is attuned to an ‘elite public sphere’, featuring information-rich, ‘serious’ news sources (Young, 2011). This audience ‘able to choose from a range of media options and a plethora of news websites and sources’, and in the future will be ‘will be better-served by

the internet [sic.] and new media as media companies find ways to reach this lucrative and active news-seeking audience' (Young, 2008 np). On the other hand, a much larger 'popular public sphere' is attended to by the 'general news' audience, 'the majority of the population – who used to watch TV news but are now switching off ... may not necessarily replace this' with other forms of political content (Young, 2008). Just as in the USA and the UK, Australians now have the option of avoiding news altogether, let alone more rarefied 'elite', 'official' or 'serious' news and current affairs context. But those who are strongly motivated to consume news content also have more options than ever, with a growing range of pay television news and current affairs offerings joining the massive expansion of political news and commentary online.

### **Political Fans**

Prior's (2006) 'news junkies' – otherwise called 'political junkies' (Coleman, 2003), the 'elite audience' (Young, 2008) the 'attentive elite', 'political news junkies' (Young 2011), or simply 'political fans' (Wilson, 2010a; Burgess and Bruns, 2011) are the audience that attends closely to 'serious' or 'elite' (Young, 2011) news coverage.<sup>1</sup> Assessment of the size of this audience vary between countries and studies, and according to how they are defined. Prior (2007) estimates what he calls 'news junkies' to be just over half of the adult population of the US, but his study aims to measure the total audience that chooses to watch any kind of news at all on a regular basis. In the Australian context, Young specifies this audience in a more fine-grained way. While 'most Australians are

interested in news' (2011: 27), there is a minority who mostly select those news sources with a high level of political content, as opposed to 'general news' which includes a large amount of non-political material. This minority are avid consumers of such content across different media. They prefer broadsheet newspapers, public broadcasters, specialist news magazines, specialist political programming, and specialist political blogs and websites. This is in contrast to outlets with a relatively low amount of straight political content: tabloid newspapers, commercial broadcast news, non-political magazines or websites, and more generalised online news services. The 'most dedicated political junkies' – who watch live broadcasts of parliamentary hearings or Parliament Question Time, specialist Sunday morning political television, or read news magazines – comprise 0.5% to 1% of the population according to Young. Two to five percent listen to specialist political radio programming from public broadcasters, watch some late night current affairs, or read broadsheet newspapers. At the outer limit, Young estimates that around 10% watch news programming or major current affairs programmes on public broadcasters. In Australia as elsewhere, those who are attentive to serious political content cannot be considered as anything other than a niche audience.

As with other such media niches (Hills, 1999; Jenkins, 1992), the attachment of this audience to political content has been widely explained in terms of its *affective* attachment to political media content. Fiorina (1990) criticised 'rational choice' theories for why people seek out political information. At that time, well-established rational choice

theories in political science held that attending to political information was a way of gaining the maximum amount of information in order to make voting decisions which maximised one's own interests. The more information, the more likely individual voters were to make an advantageous choice.

Fiorina undermines this understanding of political learning significantly. He argues that the investment required for a voter to inform herself in relation to the decisiveness of her single vote did not add up from any rational standpoint:

The simple fact is that in a mass election, no rational citizen should be informed. From the standpoint of the economic conception of means-ends rationality, informed citizens are an anomaly. ... If one's vote has no discernible impact on the outcome of an election, why should one bear any cost in order to cast an informed vote? The answer is clear – one shouldn't.

(Fiorina, 1990: 335)

For him, the best explanation for the putatively 'irrational' decision to become interested in politics is fandom. He draws a parallel with sport, where people make financial and emotional investments in a particular 'team', but also necessarily gain knowledge and opinions about the broader contest, which they follow through the media, often at considerable personal expense. Sports fans gather these stores of knowledge about the team and the contest without believing it will influence the result. This behaviour is not irrational at all, then, so much

as it is one version of the affiliations people develop with sanctioned forms of mediated spectacle. From this perspective, it can be seen how instead of sport, some people choose politics as the object of their fan behaviours:

Is rooting on the Republicans inherently more puzzling or interesting than rooting on the Lakers? Notice that the spectator sport explanation does not suggest that the well-informed are either more or less rational than the uninformed. Some people are serious fans, some are not. (Fiorina, 1990: 337)

For Coleman also, 'Political participation is to a large extent driven by affective motives' (2004: 4). His empirical research turned up a stark difference between those he called 'BBs' – those who 'regularly watch *Big Brother* and participate in weekly 'eviction' votes, but have little or no interest in politics' (2003: 735) – and 'PJs' – the minority 'who are very interested in politics (as identified by regular viewing of political coverage on TV and/or regular political discussion with friends or family' (Ibid.) He emphasises that PJs are defined not only by their enthusiastic consumption of political content, but by the frequency of their discussions about politics in their social networks, pointing to the 'links between personal conversation or discussion networks and levels of political engagement' (Coleman, 2003: 749).

If political fans are drawn by affective motives to the consumption of political content, perhaps we can connect this mode of consuming political media with the long interest in fan cultures within cultural studies. Hills's (1999) understanding of fans as engaging in

‘affective play’ can be extended to explain how a proportion of political fans use the output of the elite public sphere as raw material for their own creative output and social ties. Web-based and mobile tools of social networking, self-publication and content sharing mean that like any fan community, political fans can extend their networks of discussion and conversation. Fans transcend the traditional dichotomy of producers and audiences by using online tools and platforms to repurpose, reuse, improve on and build on existing content produced in the elite public sphere. Though they employ contemporary platforms political ‘producers’ (Bruns, 2008) are descended from and linked with Jenkins’s image of fans, who, while

[p]articipating in a larger social and cultural community ... [a]ssert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions. In the process, fans cease simply to be an audience for popular texts. Instead they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meaning. (Jenkins, 1992: 22-24)

Just as Jenkins’s *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* fans used those texts as the raw material for their own creativity, so contemporary political fans use the texts produced by journalists and politicians in the elite public sphere as material for their own creative appropriation. As the following section will elaborate, mediatised politics is spawning:

expansive, self-organising groups focused around the collective

production, debate and circulation of meanings, interpretations and fantasies in response to the various artifacts of contemporary popular culture. (Jenkins, 2006: 137)

### **Spaces and practices of political fandom**

Such political fan activity is visible internationally in a range of online and mobile spaces, platforms and activities. The wide range of politically-focussed, amateur and semi-professional blogs has been subject to extensive transdisciplinary discussion (Bruns and Jacobs, 2006; Pole, 2010; Rettberg, Srebeny and Khiabani, 2010) Political blogs often use the output of the so-called 'mainstream media' or MSM as a raw material in producing further politically-focussed commentary, criticism and debate. Apart from content, some blogs visibly enhance social ties by provoking wider discussion and debate among communities of commenters, and also build networks of discussion by linking to other blogs, whether contextually or in their blogrolls. Similarly, interaction on social news services such as Reddit, where communities of political interest vet, recommend and discuss news items to one another (Bruns, 2005), spreads content to wider audiences, and is productive of stronger social ties as a result of discussion on and around news items. (What has yet to be considered the same level of detail at the time of writing is membership of and contribution to political fan pages or communities mediated by other social networking tools such as Facebook.) This more banal, less specialised activity is one of a host of more playful forms of political fan activity such as the production of politically-focussed

photographic memes, performative commentary on Twitter during live political broadcasts, and political faking, and it is these phenomena that warrant further attention.<sup>2</sup>

Mobile technologies are extensively interwoven with the cultural participation of contemporary political fans that repurposes and reuses political broadcasting. Mobile devices feature prominently among the contemporary the 'tools and technologies [that] enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate' (Jenkins, 2002) political media content. Political conversation, debate and humour on Twitter employs a platform whose access and use is explicitly open to the use of mobile technologies like smartphones, tablets and notebook computers. Twitter-based smartphone and tablet applications ('apps') allow the direct upload of pictures, video and audio to the Twitter stream, as well as tweeting from a mobile phone. Political journalists have made use of these affordances when reporting on politics in Australia. For example, successive leadership ballots or 'spills' involving the Leader of the Opposition and then the Prime Minister were reported on and discussed with the hashtag #spill, and the journalist who broke the story of Malcolm Turnbull being replaced as Opposition Leader did so via mobile phone on Twitter, after being informed of the result via text message from the locked Liberal Party Room. Similarly, political fans have adopted mobile technologies as a way of connecting with mobile publics, contributing to political discussion, and circulating commentary, and reworked or original content away from what were formerly the normative contexts of receiving mediated political information. The

combination of mobile technologies and apps has lowered the threshold of skill required in order to publish commentary or other forms of content to a real-time live stream.

In these contexts, user-originated practices like hashtagging enable self-constituting, mobile publics to emerge. Twitter hashtags – which are words or phrases preceded with a hash (#) mark – began as a form of ‘folksonomy’, allowing users to classify their tweets as contributions to conversations, or to advertise the topic of their tweets. Eventually they were incorporated as highly visible and searchable element of Twitter’s architecture. Quickly, politically-attuned tweeters began using them to convene more or less durable conversations. For Burgess and Bruns, the use of hashtags makes it possible for Twitter to act as a ‘site for the emergence of politically-engaged publics, including ordinary citizens, political actors and professional journalists’ (2011: 4). In their study of the use of the #ausvotes hashtag during Australia’s 2010 Federal election, they argue that:

by choosing to include the #ausvotes hashtag in their tweets, these participants make a conscious choice to make themselves visible as discussing election-related topics; the #ausvotes community, in other words, is a self-selecting subset of all Australian Twitter users. (Ibid)

Choosing publics and making oneself visible within them using hashtags is a move that passes the constitution of publics over to their members. Although #ausvotes was a hashtag used over some months for the

discussion of an election campaign, other hashtags – indicating memes, jokes, and TV programs for example – can constitute fleeting, intermittent publics, far smaller than the relatively large group of Twitter users engaged with #ausvotes. In Australia, some long-standing hashtags in use by political fans include #qt (for real-time commentary on Question Time broadcasts), #insiders (for live commentary on Sunday morning political television program *Insiders*) and the more general #auspol, which marks discussion of Australian politics in general.

Such activity is beginning to be reincorporated into mainstream political broadcasting. In Australia, for example, from April 2010, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's political chat show *Q & A* started televising political dialogue in a new way. The show had commenced in May 2008 as a live panel-and-audience political talk show in the mould of the BBC's *Question Time*. Panelists were generally politicians, senior Press Gallery journalists, or others who had attained some prominence in Australian public life. But the program also promoted itself from the beginning as 'interactive'. Besides questions from the live audience, from the start *Q & A* allowed viewers to submit pre-recorded video questions, or humorous political video 'mash-ups' which vied to be selected to run over the programme's closing credits.

Two years after it began, though, *Q & A* publicly incorporated spontaneous grassroots activity developing on Twitter. It opened itself up to a stream of political commentary that had grown up in symbiosis with the live broadcast. Producers began selecting and broadcasting tweets from audience members. At the bottom of the screen, audience

tweets would be featured which passed comment on the issues under discussion on the program, or even about the character and performance of specific panellists. The Twitter user community gathered around the Twitter hashtag #qanda over the previous two years began seeing itself reflected back in the broadcasts. Before being run on the program, the #qanda stream had offered a parallel, but unacknowledged stream of often-acerbic commentary, argument, mockery and support of positions and panellists on the program. On the whole, the stream was far more playful than the kind of serious commentary to be found on Australia's 'A List' political blogs. Hitherto it had only been accessible to those watching the ABC's broadcast and the #qanda Twitter stream together, keeping one eye on the television and another on their 3G mobile devices and internet-connected computers. But the ABC suddenly deemed selected highlights of that stream as worth featuring along with the pronouncements of the luminaries in the panellists' chairs. This was no short-term experiment. The broadcasting of tweets persisted, and has remained as an established element of *Q & A*'s broadcasts.<sup>3</sup> Though this is political broadcasting, it is a stunningly clear example of Jenkins's arguments concerning 'convergence culture', in that we can see mainstream media industries reincorporating and using fan creativity which bounces off broadcast and other kinds of content (Jenkins, 2006).

This combination of media, platforms and practices allows political fans to provide new forms of live commentary on political broadcasting. Jenkins's argument (1992), drawing on De Certeau, that it was possible to 'scribble in the margins' of broadcast television can now

be reconsidered in the light of mobile screens which allow real-time commentary on unfolding broadcasts. Even Hills's (1999) later argument about the impact of the Internet on fandom seems to need updating:

The practices of fandom have become increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting, so that fans now go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episode's transmission time or even during ad breaks perhaps in order to demonstrate the 'timeliness' and responsiveness of their devotion. (Hills, 1999: 16)

Due in part to the affordances of real-time social media, fan commentary is even more rapid-fire. On Twitter, during Australian political broadcasts, political fans are in conversation *throughout* the screening, offering a supplementary real-time annotation to events as they unfold. Commentary on political broadcasting mixes political argument, the performance of political knowledge and humour. Rather than merely demonstrating timeliness or responsiveness, we could argue that such users are engaged in a performative co-production of a simultaneous and parallel political conversation. Drawing on Hermida's (2010) description of Twitter as promoting a form of 'ambient journalism', we could call this development 'ambient fandom'. We may even wish to consider that, when it comes to political conversation occurring simultaneously with broadcasting, we may be looking at an emerging form of "ambient citizenship".

These examples illustrate that there is a recognisable interactive

audience of political fans, whose activities are being reincorporated into mainstream political broadcasting. In the context of post-broadcast democracy, it should be acknowledged that these are the minority of the audience who continue to choose to consume political content. They are affectively invested in mediatised politics, and they use the tools of social media and online self-publishing platforms to rework the raw materials provided by politically-focussed media for the purpose of affective play with the outputs of mediatised democracy, and for enhancing social ties between political fans.

### **Political fakes in Australia**

A notable example of political fandom relevant to this discussion is the emerging genre of political twitter fakes. With growing regularity, fans are using the affordances of Twitter to set up parodic accounts in the names of politicians, pundits, journalists and other prominent figures in Australias public life. In this section I use interviews with prominent Australian political fakers to define it as an *attentive, performative, playful* and *mobile* practice. Faking online has a history that stretches further back than the launch of Twitter. Well-known fakes before Twitter's mass uptake include Fake Steve Jobs, targeted at the Apple founder and CEO, and started by writer Daniel Lyons on a blog in 2006. Other fake blogs (also known as 'flogs' or 'flack blogs') have been run in the name of celebrities and politicians, and a range of fake political blogs were aggregated at the site newsgroper.com until late 2009. Fake social media accounts set up in the name of corporations – so-called 'brandjacking'

accounts – appeared on YouTube from 2006 (targeting, for example, Starbucks and Nestle) and Twitter, where fakes targeted Exxon-Mobil and BP. The latter’s faker – @BPGlobalPR, – offered fake spin with an appropriately desperate tone in response to the Deep Horizon oil spill, and for a time had more followers than BP’s official account. In Australia, an early influential prominent political fake was the now-defunct Fake Stephen Conroy account (@StephenConroy). This was set up in the name of the Labor senator and Communications Minister in the Labor government then led by Kevin Rudd, who trod on the toes of Internet users by proposing the introduction of an ISP level filter to block certain kinds of content from being viewed in Australia. The account mocked the Senator’s censorious proposals and his image as a back room political heavy. It soon gained many followers including journalists, politicians and anti-filter campaigners. In March 2009, when Fake Stephen Conroy’s identity was the subject of a guessing game on Twitter, the author, technology consultant Leslie Nassar, chose to out himself. Australia’s technology media gave the story intense coverage after Nassar consequently fell out with his then employers, telecommunications company Telstra, and engaged in an on-Twitter spat with one of his superiors using the @StephenConroy account (see ZDNet, 2009). Although Nassar eventually gave up the account, the moniker and the profile helped to define the possibilities of Twitter for satirical faking in the context of Australian politics, and some of the fakers I interviewed for this paper cited it as a direct inspiration.

@StephenConroy marked a turning point. In 2009 I interviewed

several fakers who cited Conroy as an inspiration, and whose responses to question I use to explore the practice of faking. The first interviewee is the author of Fake Andrew Bolt, (@andrewbolt). Andrew Bolt is an arch-conservative Australian newspaper columnist, one of the highest-paid and most prominent print journalists in Australia, and the most prominent voice in the country's Murdoch-owned News Limited tabloids. He posts several times a day to the website he touts as 'Australia's most-read political blog', which is hosted on the website of his home paper, Melbourne's *Herald-Sun*. Across these outlets – as well as in his regular television and radio appearances - he spruiks his favoured hard-right political positions.<sup>4</sup> The second interviewee was the author of Fake Steve Fielding (@FakeFielding). The real Steve Fielding is a Senator from the minority Family First party, whose policies and campaigns are premised on the value of Pentecostal Christianity. Senator Fielding was elected to the Senate in 2004 on only 0.8% of the primary vote in Victoria, through a quirk of Australia's preferential and proportional Senate voting system. A further twist of fate in the 2007 election gave him national prominence when he became one of two Senators, along with Independent Nick Xenophon, to hold the balance of power in the upper house. He lost his seat in the 2010 election after only one term, and left the parliament in July 2011. The third faker interviewed is Fake Penny Wong (@Fake\_Penny\_Wong). The real Penny Wong was Australia's first openly gay cabinet Minister from 2007, when she was appointed as Minister for Climate Change and Water, at a time when the new Labor Government was attempting to design and implement an

Emissions Trading Scheme to combat climate change. From 2010 Senator Wong has been Minister for Finance.<sup>5</sup>

The interviewees were selected first for prominence. All three have significant followings – at the time of writing @andrewbolt had some 8600 followers, @Fake\_Penny\_Wong had some 4000 and @FakeFielding had around 4300. Second, interviewees were selected for receiving wider recognition as skilful fakes. All have appeared in their fake guises beyond Twitter in media outlets who have paid for their work as humourous writing – @andrewbolt and @fakefielding in Crikey and @Fake\_Penny\_Wong in Australian online journalism outlet New Matilda. Fake Penny Wong has published an ebook (a fake ‘election diary’), and the author of Fake Steve Fielding is working on one at the time of writing. All three interviewees asked not to be identified by name, but rather by their handles.

I found a large degree of common ground in the answers of these fakers to my questions about their practice. All talked about the desirability of being attentive to routine elements of the spectacle of mediated democracy – press conferences, appearances on talk shows, and blog posts. These were seen as raw materials for satirical performances. For Fake Penny Wong, the real-life Minister’s public appearances and special events present a unique opportunity to tweet in character. As she noted:

Where there’s a high profile new appearance I’ll try to put an angle to it. ... Some of the more fun times are had when a show like the ABC’s Q and A is on and ‘Penny’ live tweets proceedings.

Similarly, for Fake Fielding, public appearances provide useful material: ‘Sometimes I react to what’s going on in the news, and I especially try to make FakeFielding’s tweets match any of his appearances in the media.’ For Fake Andrew Bolt, reading the real Bolt’s blog provides fodder for parody: ‘Probably the easiest way of writing a tweet is to read Andrew Bolt’s blog, as much as I loathe it, and exaggerate his response to a story.’

The fakers share a sense that their audience is similarly highly engaged with the minutiae of mediated politics. Fake Fielding comments, ‘From the replies I’ve received to my tweets I sense that my followers are generally politically active. I guess they’d need to be to have an interest in following a fake politician.’ Penny Wong similarly senses that ‘most [followers] seem to be politically engaged.’ Fake Andrew Bolt says that a significant part of his audience are those who love to hate Bolt – politically-engaged people on the left and even some of Bolt’s journalistic colleagues. The fakers sense that their attentiveness to mediatised politics is shared by their audience. This is indicative of the kinds of shared affective investments that characterise fan cultures. Fakers assume that their audience are lavishing similar amounts of attention on their chosen texts, and that they will appreciate the real-time performance the fakers build on it. Faking here is conceived of as an activity by and for political fans.

All three also noted the strongly performative aspects of their faking. They emphasised the need to build and stay within an exaggerated version of their chosen target’s persona. The need to create

a fake ‘backstage’ narrative of their character’s life (Goffman, 1958) was as important in this sense as providing exaggerated versions of public pronouncements. For Fake Steve Fielding, the real Fielding’s speech and behaviour patterns are part of the basis for the character, but a significant part of the performance is a creative embellishment of that personality. As he noted,

I think the only aspect of the real Fielding that I play up is his tendency to screw up his speech by mixing metaphors, mangling clauses, or putting the completely wrong words in sentences. Oh, that and his relentlessly and embarrassingly self-aggrandising ways. The rest of FakeFielding is based on the popular caricature of real Fielding: bumbling, simple, a bit stupid. Those qualities I play up mercilessly. Then there are characteristics that are unique to the Fake Steve such as his childlike manner and desires. Even though this stuff exists only in my head (I’m sure that real Steve doesn’t call his wife in tears when he can’t open the tomato sauce bottle) it’s plausible because ... well, it just is.

The creative practice involved in sustaining Fake Fielding is part of the author’s daily routine, but a special effort must be made in order to achieve this daily performance:

I generally update my personal Twitter account and then switch over to the FakeFielding account with no idea about what I’m going to write. I’ll then jump into character and see if I can think of something funny to write.

Aspects of the real Penny Wong's persona contributed to the decision of the author of Fake Penny Wong to start the account, but here also, the author made additions and modifications in order to arrive at a character which could be performed:

I chose Penny for a couple of reasons. Firstly, after the 2007 election quite a bit was made of her election as one of the new guard and she seemed a different sort of politician. Then, when the wooden approach of her delivery and refusal to budge off her prepared lines for the day set in, I thought she'd make a good subject...

Penny would have to be one of the less dynamic political speakers. She always looks quite grave and serious and her vocal tone matches that. My tweets are juxtaposed against that, to show that behind the grave persona there's a diehard ALP head kicker who holds grudges.

The discipline of staying in character combines with the invention of 'Penny's' backstage life:

I do always stay in character – there's not a single tweet that alludes to anything but the thoughts of 'Penny Wong'. ... The remainder tends to be creations based on an imagined reality of the real Penny Wong's political life.

All of this requires significant writing craft and polish:

There is quite a bit of thought that goes into most tweets. It's not uncommon for me to have 2 or 3 drafts before tweeting the final version. [During live media events] there's less time to craft the tweets so it can be more hit and miss, but it does get some good conversation going as well.

Fake Andrew Bolt gets mileage from exaggerating the positions and persona offered by Bolt, and by trying to inhabit Bolt's mindset:

I just exaggerate his [blog] posts themselves. One of Bolt's tricks is to hint at something and let the commenters do the adding for him so he can't be accused of saying it himself, for instance, this post in which he hints that people at a global warming rally are nazis. Of course, he won't come right out and say it. That would be silly. @AndrewBolt says it though ... I might also take a news story and tweet what I imagine to be his view of things. More often than not, when I check his blog I find I am right.

Fake Andrew Bolt also constructs a significantly complex backstage narrative for his character to enliven the account, involving interactions with colleagues at the *Herald-Sun* and boozy chess games with right-wing intellectuals. As he puts it, 'Other times I will continue with the *Herald Weekly Times* narrative I have created, which depicts Andrew Bolt as the Adrian Mole of the office.'

Though playful, fakers can have significant real-life interactions with their

targets, and the possibility of real-life repercussions. Fake Andrew Bolt did enough to get under the real Andrew Bolt's skin, and brought about a fleeting national discussion of Twitter faking. On the third of August 2010, Bolt published an outraged blog post calling out the faker. Initially, he appeared to think that the person behind it was from a rival media organisation, since public broadcasters, liberal newspapers and online news sites are major antagonists:

It shouldn't need saying, but I do not have a Twitter account and the fake one seems to be the work of people whose employer will be very embarrassed to find its staff once more engaging in deceitful slurs. A little warning there. A tearful sorry afterwards will be both too late and insincere, especially from people with their record of sliming. (Bolt, 2010)

In an update to the post, Bolt characterised the faker as an identity thief, whose work was of a piece with hundreds of years of 'Leftist' excesses:

This is only a small instance, but as I've so often noted among Leftist activists from the French Revolution to the Internet revolution, many have a curious belief that their moral cause entitles them to act as barbarians. It's this loss of conscience in the collective that makes them such a menace. ... I've been given names, and at some stage may use them. Parody is perfectly fine, but identity theft is low. (Ibid)

In an interview published in another News Limited outlet, Bolt repeated

the claim that the account constituted ‘identity theft’, and further claimed that the account was ‘deceitful and defamatory’ (Ramadge, 2010). In the same story, Bolt claimed he had contacted Twitter a number of times about the account and the company had failed to respond. (Given the company’s policies and record in demanding that fakes be clearly labelled, it is curious he was not asked to substantiate this (Twitter, 2011).) This and other reports on the incident made some play of the fact that the account had not clearly spelled out that it was a fake when Bolt had written his piece. On this basis, Bolt asserted that it was possible for the unwary to confuse the fake account with one run by him.

In his response on the 4th of August, published in email newsletter *Crikey*, the author of @andrewbolt denied that he was operating on behalf of any organisation - he did not ‘work nor have contacts to the vaunted “media industry”’ (Fake Andrew Bolt, 2010). He then addressed the idea that his work was close enough to Bolt himself for people to mistake the fake for Bolt himself:

Andrew has charged that I am too close to his writing and not parodic enough, perhaps not realising that this reflects worse on him than it does on me (an update to his blog labelled me a ‘barbarian’, a word that I have delightedly put to frequent use since he started using it several months ago).

He also claims that I am engaging in ‘identity theft’, which sounds as though I am renting suits in his name and not paying

the bill. This, too, is nonsense. I encourage Crikey readers to read my tweets and decide for yourself whether I am parodying him or stealing his identity. If Bolt is right, [former Australian Prime Minister] Bob Hawke should take [his prominent impersonator] Max Gillies to court. (Fake Andrew Bolt, 2010)

Rather than identity theft, for the author of @andrewbolt, this was obvious parody, and if people were unable to distinguish between this and Bolt's actual output, so much the worse for Bolt – perhaps that just meant that he was beyond parody. If Bolt's intention was to get the faker to back down, he failed. At the time of writing in early 2011, the fake account was still going strong with over 8000 followers. Worse, as Bolt's complaints drew more attention in August 2010, a number of Twitter users responded by creating dozens of fake Andrew Bolt accounts – too many for him to track down, let alone silence.

For all of the possibilities of real-life consequences, all of the fakers emphasised the playful nature of their practice, at least to the extent of disavowing any explicitly political intent or impacts. When asked if they thought that their parody had any specifically political impact, Fake Penny Wong said 'I doubt it's having a significant political impact beyond what any small scale parody would be'. Fake Steve Fielding said that the parody was done for

[l]augh. Full stop. My parody of Steve Fielding is in line with my own contempt for his politics, but I'm not silly enough to expect that FakeFielding will have any political impact outside pandering

to people who probably share my contempt. ... I'm not sure that [Twitter] is the best forum for in-depth political debate.

The author of @andrewbolt also disavows any political impact or intention, and also claims Twitter is not as suitable medium for political debate:

Sorry to disappoint you but it's done for laughs. Political significance is zero. Twitter isn't really designed for political debate, which requires depth beyond 140 characters. It's much a better tool for parody, and a piss-taking tweet can do more damage than a 2000 word blog post anyway.

But the author of @andrewbolt also claims that there is an element of challenge underpinning his practice:

@AndrewBolt began as a challenge. Although I wasn't sold on Twitter for myself for a while, I did notice that the 140 character limit was perfect for a one-liner. I figured if I delivered one every half hour I should be able to deliver myself a sizeable following reasonably quickly. Any trouble I do have with the character limits can usually be solved with some tight editing.

All three authors, while specifically ruling out any political significance for their faking, all gesture toward forms of pleasure that arise for they and their audience from faking – along with 'laughs' they indicate that faking involves a level of craft and/or challenge that is a stimulus to

them as writers. We can connect this with the claims made for fan fiction and fan culture generally by Hills (1999) – that it involves a high degree of non-competitive, affective play. Faking is playful notwithstanding the fact that for these authors it involves a sustained performance, which can involve a significant level of craft.

### **Concluding questions: Faking as mobile, playful performance**

It is possible to connect faking with wider debates arising from cultures of Internet use, and changing styles of news consumption in post-broadcast democracies. The parodic and satirical aspects of, for example, @andrewbolt's work, and its baiting of a right-wing commentator, link the author's practice with the so-called 'new blue media' (Hamm, 2008) in the USA. The likes of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert draw a growing audience to consume news in the form of comedy and parody. In particular, @andrewbolt's play with Bolt's identity has a strong and obvious link with the faux conservatism of Stephen Colbert, whose on-screen persona is reportedly inspired by Fox News conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly. Despite their political disavowals, is it possible to say of all of these fakers, as Boler (2006) says of Stewart and Colbert, that 'the access and use of new media to transmit dissenting political commentary is arguably a sign of new counter-public spaces that coincide with increased mainstream media control'? Even if the authors deny the political import of their performances, could we see them, too, as contributing to a counter-public space that offers a response to the deadening impact of the

requirements of mediated politics on political discourse and debate? Does their playfulness actually work to underline the constrained possibilities of contemporary mediated politics?

Faking is of a piece with other uses of social media that have reignited debates around online identity and reputation (Solove, 2007), the changing status of professional journalists in an age of mass publishing (Flew and Wilson, 2010), and the limits of civility in online discourse (Kushin and Kitchener, 2009). All of these debates could be usefully extended by considering the histories, practices and ambiguities of political faking. Is faking really akin to identity theft in world where the 'personal branding' of journalists and other public figures has increased in importance? Are amateurs using social media freer to pursue these forms of parodic intervention? Where is the line between parody and uncivil abuse?

Other interesting questions with particular relevance to Game Studies arise from the way in which faking brings the phenomena of post-broadcast democracy in contact with theories of fandom and play. Fan studies scholars have pointed to the performative aspects of a wide variety of fan fiction (Coppa, 2007) and increasingly Twitter is being recognised as a platform for such performances (Caddell, 2009; Jenkins, 2009). Performativity and the assumption of character roles are also central to well-established styles of play – such requirements can be seen at work in some of the most popular genres of digital play, like Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Here we can revisit some theories of play that have been at the headwaters of game

studies. It is useful, for example, to think about performative faking in terms of Caillois's distinction between *ludus* play – rule-governed, goal-oriented and structured games – and more open-ended *paideia* play – spontaneous, unstructured, open-ended and done for its own sake. For fakers, there are no strict rules, scores, conditions of victory – indeed there is no end-point built into the activity at all. That said, the answers given by fakers about their practice suggest a framework of generic understanding involving attentiveness and a submission to the necessities of in-character performance. Twitter as a *public* platform also offers tangible rewards and reinforcements for successful fakers, meaning that it carries some traces of goal-driven *ludus* play. Gaining followers, 'retweets' of fakers' witticisms by other tweeters, and even public acknowledgement by their targets (as in the case Fake Andrew Bolt) may serve as significant rewards for playing with politics in this way. It perhaps gives us cause to think of *ludus* and *paideia* as ends of a continuum on which play and games lie, rather than a strict dichotomy, where we can see that faking lies closer to *paideia* but embodies some quantitative rewards.

We can also understand faking in terms of one of the four 'patterns' (genres or modes) of play Caillois proposes. Faking conforms most closely with the pattern of mimicry, the pattern of 'make-believe' activities which includes arts like theatre, traditions of carnival and even, in Caillois's exegesis, 'hero-worship'. For Caillois, 'Mimicry and travesty are ... complementary acts in this kind of play' (2001: 22). He argues that:

Mimicry exhibits all the characteristics of play: liberty, convention, suspension of reality and delimitation of space and time. However, the continuous submission to imperative and precise rules cannot be observed – rules for the dissimulation of reality and the substitution of a second reality. Mimicry is incessant invention. The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. (2001: 22)

The incessant invention of faking, the uncertain boundary between mimicry and travesty, and the art of fascination may lead us to consider expanding our notions of what digital and multiplayer gameplay is.

Recognising faking on Twitter as playful in this sense becomes even more interesting when we consider its mobile nature. From the beginning, when it offered the capacity for text updates, Twitter pitched itself at mobile users. A significant proportion of its user-base continue to update to Twitter and interact with other users using mobile devices. In the era of 3G mobile services and SmartPhones, a range of mobile applications have been developed for Twitter users. Significantly, the Twitter fakers interviewed for this article all use mobile technologies regularly in posting updates to Twitter, and also in occasionally publishing supplementary multimedia material to the stream using parallel services such as TwitPic and yFrog (both image-hosting services). The 'always-on' (Baron 2008) nature of mobile technologies allows continuous posting, and flexibility in responding to various source

materials in mediatised politics. Along with mobile gaming, we need perhaps to think longer about mobile playfulness, where mobile technologies are used in open-ended, performative, affective play. Faking with mobile technology is one way in which the materials of mass media culture are reworked in real time in the interests of affective play.

Twitter faking – mobile, open-ended, incessantly inventive, combining mimicry and travesty – reveals a new episode in the mediated spectacle of mainstream politics. At the very least, it suggests that understanding open-ended playful phenomena emerging from cultures of social and mobile media use might be fruitfully examined by combining some of the sources of contemporary fan studies, game studies and performance studies with our understandings of post-broadcast democracy. Faking and other emerging forms of mobile and social play will likely be responsive to further interdisciplinary evaluation.

1 The arguments made in this paper benefit enormously from an early conversation with Catherine Driscoll from the University of Sydney, who also invited me to present a preliminary version of them in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies in 2010. I profited from comments made by her and her colleagues there, and my co-presenter on the day, Dr Jean Burgess. Additionally, Melissa Gregg provided commentary on an early version of this paper. Comments from the anonymous peer reviewers were also invaluable. Needless to say, any deficiencies in the paper are my own responsibility, and are there despite the assistance of those mentioned in this note.

2 It may be that to the extent that political blogging reinforces a divide between triviality and seriousness in political commentary, spruiking its credentials as a new deliberative public sphere (See Bahnisch, 2006), and the contrast made with mere leisure activities like LiveJournalling, MySpace and later Twitter, that blogging and blogging research has contributed to a lack of a connection between political fandom and fan studies.

3 Q&A's use of Twitter has occasionally been accompanied by controversy. In 2010, former Liberal Prime Minister John Howard appeared on

the program. A broadcast Tweet urged the audience to throw a shoe at the former PM, in imitation of an incident involving George W Bush and an Iraqi journalist. Moments later, an audience member did just that. Despite the fact that the studio audience cannot see the Tweets as broadcast, the incident provoked outrage in some sections of the media about the “disrespect” accorded to the conservative hero on the national broadcaster.

4 Bolt is a climate change sceptic, suspicious of Muslim immigration, a prominent denier of that the past practice of removing indigenous children from their families in Australia (the so-called “stolen generation”) ever happened, a fierce critic of any public figure to the left of the Liberal Party (Australia’s conservative party), and a self-appointed scourge of academics, environmentalists and liberal journalists.

5 The interviews quoted from are Fake Andrew Bolt, 2009; Fake Penny Wong, 2009; and Fake Steve Fielding, 2009.

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