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When Rumour and Comment Become the News

By Jason Wilson, Barry Saunders, and Axel Bruns

Many of the dust-ups so far between bloggers and the mainstream media (MSM) in Australia have concerned comment, not news.

The kinds of spats [we've written about previously](#) have been over who exactly has the mortgage on punditry about established stories, social issues, opinion polls and the like.

Occasionally the MSM's resistance to the blogger commentariat can be less than rational, but they often get the final word with the accusation - containing more than a grain of truth - that bloggers "don't break stories", and are simply parasitic upon the news-gathering activities of established outlets.

The problem with this claim is that when big stories come, parts of the mainstream media can often appear negligent in their pursuit and treatment of a story, and more and more often they're coming off second best to other, new kinds of news media.

The big story this week has ruthlessly exposed the MSM. Heath Ledger's death was a tragically early end for a talented actor, a terrible blow for his family and friends, and it was also the biggest news story of the year so far.

The combination of A-list celebrity, youth cut down, an Australian connection, and dark hints of drug use and depression made this a colossal yarn. (The need for a distraction from impending economic meltdown didn't hurt either.) The problem was that for the first few crucial hours, there weren't many hard facts to go on with.

In Australia, the story broke at an awkward point in the news cycle, with the morning papers well and truly out, and both breakfast television and daytime radio clearly struggling with the diaphanous nature of the story. The unfortunate result in many parts of the broadcast media was a constant, arguably insensitive repetition of what little information they had to hand, which amounted to little more than the fact of Ledger's death.

This one-sentence story could only be varied with some rather unfortunate "grief athletics" from the talking heads. In Wednesday's [Crikey](#), Jonathan Green deplored this "desperate, frenzied, vacuous pursuit of nothing in particular". (This might come be seen as a case of pots and kettles, however. After all, Green's story was itself run within hours of the news breaking, and Crikey has run a series of Ledger "jokes" - in dubious taste - since then.) It must be said that Channel Nine's *Today* did well in stressing that all reports were unconfirmed, but they cut a lonely figure Wednesday morning.

Although a one-sentence story is a problem when you have hours of broadcasting given over to it, it's perfect for the viral transmission through channels of social networking services. Many Australians were at work when they heard about the news, and many - like us - found out by means of contacts' status updates on [Facebook](#) or [MySpace](#).

Increasingly, when big stories break, social networkers often now find out from their friends, in a fascinating partial return to news's origins in oral "tidings".

Visiting MSM websites during the morning on the strength of these "update-bulletins" added little value, and indeed may have actually confused many readers due to the preparedness of MSM websites to publish the merest hearsay.

Over at [The Australian](#), for example, by mid-afternoon their page on the story was little more than a compilation of wild rumours. Although the [Courier-Mail](#) did well in being one of the first news services - globally - to break the story, in general News Limited's sites collected and published material we might charitably call speculative, and which could hardly have been confirmed (needless to say, much of it has now been removed).

The Oz also ran photos of Ledger looking sick and mad, but neglected to caption these as shots - in character - on set at his latest film. Their strategy bore all the hallmarks of a new practice that we might like to christen "journalism by RSS" - the simple reprinting of unchecked and unverified material from elsewhere on the internet, just in case some of it sticks, and all in the interests of being "across" the story.

At least the Australian media held off reporting on some aspects of the story. Perhaps the biggest boo-boo came from the *New York Times*, who prominently carried yet another rumour - that Ledger's body had been found at an apartment belonging to the actor Mary-Kate Olsen.

This part of the story was initially published, investigated and disproven by none other than [TMZ](#), the celebrity news website - not usually regarded as a journal of record.

What's interesting about this is the way it exposes the equivalence of so much of the media in the face of big celebrity yarns - too often the broadsheets come over like glossy gossip mags, and the celebrity journalists who know the beat are able to get the goods.

Everyone understands that as a big story develops, mistakes may be made and inaccuracies reported as journalists and the public work to make sense of it. Equally, the ripples of "tidings" across social networks, the blogosphere and mobile communications usually have their origins in what's reported by credible, professional newsmakers.

When Jason was in London on July 7 2005, and the Tube was bombed, the strange rumours that were broadcast on the day are forgivable in retrospect, given the scale of the story and a prolonged official silence. As that day progressed, British news services did well in hosing down some alarming gossip that might have caused panic as they circulated in a jittery city.

But in a story like the death of Heath Ledger - no national emergency, and one where a grieving family's privacy and a dead man's reputation are at stake - surely discretion and reflection are preferable to the hasty publication of potentially damaging rumours.

Australia's bloggers, in general, were able to write in ways that acknowledged the story and Ledger's achievement, but which did not rush to judgement on the circumstances of his death.

Perhaps bloggers are better able to ride the wave when a story breaks online, waiting for the facts to bubble up. For now, parts of the MSM seem unable to tell good information from bad, or make judgements under pressure about what kinds of online tidings should be republished.

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