

Epilogue

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In hindsight, it seems obvious that the Lowy Institute would have an inhouse publication such as *The Interpreter*. But back in 2007, when *The Interpreter* was first published, things looked a little different. For a young think tank that had already established a reputation for rigorous policy analysis and that had ambitions for a global profile, the idea of a blog might have seemed a little ... frivolous. To many, a glossy print magazine or a quarterly journal of international affairs would have been more in keeping with the Lowy Institute's character.

The institute's founding executive director, Allan Gyngell, made the bold and farsighted decision to set aside those concerns. The institute would have its own blog—a forum for Lowy Institute scholars to publish their assessments on breaking international events. It would be a source of high-quality analysis for foreign policy professionals and all intelligent (but non-expert) readers, and a way to project the institute's voice even if there was no space on the opinion pages of our newspapers or interest from TV and radio producers.

But neither Allan Gyngell nor I, as the founding editor of *The Interpreter*, had any idea of what it was to become. The transformation began early. I expected *The Interpreter* to be overwhelmingly a platform for the Lowy Institute's own scholars but, within months, the site became a popular forum for commentators from around Australia and, increasingly, the world. Andrew Selth was one of the first such experts to appear on *The Interpreter* and, as you will read in these pages, he remains one of our best and most valued contributors.

Andrew and *The Interpreter* were a perfect fit. Here was a writer who specialised in analysing the politics of a nation that was critical for Southeast Asia and important to Australia, but which only occasionally enjoyed mainstream media attention. *The Interpreter* soon became a place where experts such as Andrew could write for a readership they had never reached before—one that hungered for news and analysis that they could not find from a struggling mainstream media.

The internet has changed a lot since 2007, and *The Interpreter* has reflected some of those changes. The site started as a blog, with that familiar reverse-chronological format that spoke to the immediacy and vibrancy of the diary-style medium. Yet political blogging never caught on in Australia as it did in the US. There were not enough Australian foreign policy blogs out there to sustain a true ‘blogosphere’, with debates and readers moving freely among them.

Instead, over the course of the 2010s, Australian political debate moved to social media, particularly Twitter. It did not mean that longer-form writing was suddenly sidelined; readers remain hungry for smart and informed perspectives on world events, as *The Interpreter’s* steadily growing readership attests. But, after reading a piece they like (or hate), they comment about it on Twitter, and the debate flourishes there.

Social media also changed the way readers discovered articles. Instead of bookmarking a list of their favourite sites and then visiting regularly, they would use social media as a way to have interesting articles recommended to them by people they trusted. It allowed for exposure to a new range of sources, but it also meant that readers stopped returning daily to regular online haunts. Blogs could not rely on brand loyalty anymore.

It made sense, in that environment, for *The Interpreter* to complete its slow evolution from blog to an online magazine. We dispensed with the reverse-chronological format and built a true front page—an online version of a magazine cover—with links to lots of standalone articles that did not assume the reader had kept up with a long debate thread or had even visited the site before. It is a shift that has suited Andrew, who writes deeply considered, richly researched magazine-style pieces that emerge from decades of immersion in his chosen subject.

Over this same period, we have also witnessed a change of mood about the internet and particularly social media. In the early 2000s, techno-optimists argued that the internet would be a tool of political liberation

in authoritarian societies. That mood peaked in 2010 and 2011 when it looked like Twitter and Facebook would help overthrow dictatorships around the Middle East.

But the liberal hopes of the Arab Spring gave way to repression, civil wars and new dictatorships. Around the same time, we began to learn more about the colossal scale of China's efforts to censor the internet. More recently, we have read of cyber operations by Russia and China against their Western adversaries.

The mood suddenly changed. For authoritarian countries, the internet had become a tool of repression and surveillance at home and one they could use to manipulate opinion—and even elections—abroad. In its own small way, this shift was reflected in Myanmar, where early promise of liberal reform emerged in 2008 with the announcement of a new constitution. The widespread adoption of mobile phones and social media soon followed. Yet this promise was crushed over the following decade by the clay feet of Aung San Suu Kyi and the cruelty of the military's repression of the Rohingya people.

Yet we should not assume that the pessimists, and the authoritarians, have won. The internet is barely 30 years old; Twitter and Facebook less than 20 years. To argue that this issue is settled would be like saying that the impact of the printing press could have been realistically assessed less than one lifetime after it was invented. This judgement is especially true of weak states such as Myanmar, where governments can easily lose control over public information and suffer a fatal loss of trust with those they claim to lead.

The internet has barely begun, and so has *The Interpreter*. The Lowy Institute is proud to have made a contribution to Australia's online debate about international policy, and particularly to our collective understanding of contemporary Myanmar.

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