

Use your bloggin'

Digital media guru John Hartley believes the online domain is changing the ways in which we interact, though not everyone is up to speed

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“Any new medium that isn't under the control of the pater familias IS SOMEHOW CONSIDERED DANGEROUS.”

WITH PHIL BROWN



One of the first things politicians do nowadays to appear young and hip is hop on YouTube. Premier Anna Bligh did, that launching her election campaign recently, although perhaps she should have spoken to Brisbane academic John Hartley first. An expert in the field of digital literacy, he could have advised her that being savvy online isn't as easy as it looks.

“The problem is that some politicians go on YouTube but still look and speak like politicians,” John points out.

“John Howard tried it but it was just him sitting at his desk so it looked awful and was a complete disaster. The YouTube generation isn't interested in that.

“Kevin Rudd has had more success and Barack Obama has the right idea – he's informal, filmed with a hand-held camera with natural lighting and he just talks directly to you. People like that.”

Politicians should take note and read John's new book *the uses of digital literacy* (UQP, \$35). It will be launched at the forthcoming Ideas Festival in Brisbane, at which John will also be speaking, disseminating his digital gospel.

He'll be in good company as the line-up of talent is considerable. It includes, among others, internationally renowned Australian human rights lawyer and occasional television star Geoffrey Robertson QC, the world's leading robotics engineer Dr Helen Greiner from the US, innovative city planner Charles Landry from the UK, and creative entrepreneur John Howkins, who is also British.

John Hartley is also from Britain and was head of the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University before

relocating to Brisbane in 2000 as foundation dean of the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology, where he is now a professor.

He also is research director of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence in creative industries and innovation.

John was one of the first academics to seriously study television back in the 1970s and, keen to move with the times, now focuses on digital matters.

“I started out in literary studies and my original PhD was on Shakespeare's audience,” says John. “My supervisor said to me, ‘If you are interested in audiences for popular drama, why don't you focus on people who are still alive?’”

That inspired him to study television watchers in the 1970s but now John has switched his attention to the new, vast, international audience that uses the internet.

In developed countries, that audience includes just about everyone, but in case you think you're too old or digitally illiterate to get online, you can take heart from the case of Australian centenarian, the late Olive Riley, who became a blogger in 2007 at the age of 107.

John chronicles the case of Olive, from New South Wales, as an example of someone using the internet to speak for herself.

“She was engaged in digital storytelling and that's a good way for older people to get involved,” John says. “There's now an international movement in digital storytelling and it has helped older people develop online capability.”

Becoming digitally literate can open up new

horizons for people, according to John. “Digital literacy is going to make a huge difference in the future,” he claims.

“It will open up possibilities that we haven't dreamt of. You just have to look at print literacy and the difference that made to people when it started to grow in about the 17th century. Some of the most important areas of life just wouldn't be possible without literacy.

“With digital literacy, the potential for the growth of knowledge is enormous.”

John admits he is something of a nerdish user of the technology he promotes, being mainly interested in using it for news and information, rather than for entertainment.

“Some people use Google, for example, just for entertainment or private pleasures,” he points out. “But when something happens, be it a terrible bushfire or some other event, Google turns into a public information platform.

“YouTube has different uses too. Sure it's a commercial venture and can be used for entertainment but it's also a great way to exchange ideas and participate



WEBCAM PAIN ... unlike some politicians, US President Obama uses technology to his advantage

in cultural activities. For example, there have been some fantastic debates on YouTube about creationism. It's a wonderful public forum.”

Some readers may still be trying to come to grips with the new technology while their children and grandchildren are way ahead of the game.

John cites his own teenage daughter, Sophie, 16, as an example of a modern, digitally literate citizen.

“She does her homework with the website MSN.com open, so she talks about it with others while she's doing it, while watching TV, while texting on her mobile phone,” John says laughing.

“To her generation, it's not technology it's just part of the social network.”

For those who think children's computer skills should be limited, John insists that opposing the new technology is futile.

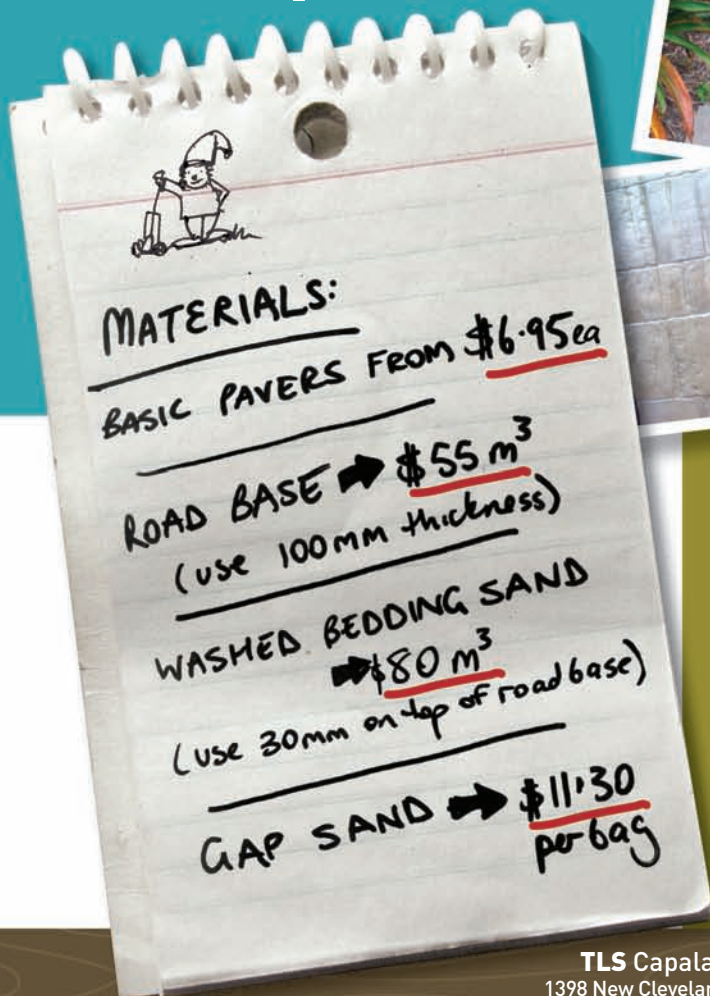
“We've been there before,” he suggests. “There was a time when children weren't allowed to watch television because it was supposed to be bad for them. Any new medium that isn't under the control of the pater familias is somehow considered dangerous.

“That's why in some countries use of the internet is suppressed. You won't find much public discussion about politics on the internet in Burma, for example.”

But in a democratic society we are free to watch as many boring political pitches as we like. Aren't we lucky?

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