

CAN THE MEDIA TAKE CRITICISM?

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY PETER MANNING*

There is no doubt we journalists are a thin-skinned lot. The latest example is my friend George Negus in last week's *Sydney Morning Herald* TV Guide. SBS is under attack for increasing advertisements, lowering ratings and bad management but George complains about other journalists who use anonymous quotes from staff. And he comes to the defence of SBS management. He's been around a long-time. I suspect we've both in our time used tips, sources and backgrounders from people whom we have protected by suppressing their names.

ABC TV's *Media Watch* is nothing if not a display of journalist's sensitivities to criticism. In fact the show's slogan is 'everyone loves it until they're on it'. And I remember my own time as head of ABC TV News and Current Affairs when the head of Drama, Penny Chapman, revealed she had come up with a sure-fire hit. Its secret was it would send up current affairs shows. In an ABC television management executive conference, I hit the roof. Why would we trash our own output, I asked? And it would never work, I said. Penny stuck to her guns and the then managing director, David Hill, supported her. The show was called *Frontline*. It was a huge success. I think I was being a bit defensive!

Journalists' defensiveness comes from a fierce sense of independence. It's a bit tribal, a bit like the police. It is founded on key myths which sustain even the most troubled journalist faced with withering criticism. You could list four of them. First, the notion that you report 'without fear or favour' and if someone suffers in the process, well too bad. Second, that the story under attack is 'in the public interest' and this protects the journalist in a legal sense. Third, that it is 'for the public benefit' (slightly different) and that the story should be told even if the audience has no interest in it. And fourth, the general notion, now embodied in freedom of information laws, of the 'public's right to know' in a democratic polity.

These are powerful myths to sustain any working reporter. They give a halo to your daily work and a *raison d'être* to your profession. I'm sure law, medicine, teaching and building have similar myths.

But in my view they are being called on to do the wrong kind of work. They are being used to defend individual stories and individual reporters rather than act as benchmarks for a wider loss of independence which is happening simultaneously. It is these wider questions which lie beneath many of the issues being raised at this conference – and particularly as the digital world changes our media utterly. One of these questions is whether in the new media world the old paradigm of 'the media versus the people' will be relevant or whether we are heading into an era where the model will be a media which is 'our media', one in which practitioners are much closer to those consume the product. And that involves some form of community 'ownership'.

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The current myths I have named before act to maintain the ‘media v. the people’ model. They are the flags flown from the battlements of the castle walls of the media giants. So resistance to criticism takes the following classic forms:

- denial of errors;
- delay in reply such that the chance to correct is lost;
- no replies (one commercial boss told me he throws letters in his bin);
- bureaucratic snow-job (‘thanks...considered...but sorry...’); or
- the hospital pass to other agencies (‘try the Press Council’).

The attitude is one of negativity, paternalism and exclusion. I know because I’ve been on the other side! But that was 10 years ago and we are now in a different (digital) era.

The result of this Easter Island faceless denial of human error is now a growing sense of community restlessness by those most affected by repetitive misreporting. My studies (*Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism*, ACIJ, UTS, 2004) indicate the Muslim and Arab communities in Sydney have every right to feel that they are being stereotyped not by the events of September 11, 2001, but by a vicious, entrenched ‘orientalism’ that names every Arab and Muslim, no matter how innocent they are, as guilty of terrorism, anti-modernism and crimes against women. The Aboriginal community, similarly, has every right to feel their ‘narrative’ about police behaviour is not taken seriously and that rioting and drunkenness is somehow part of being black. Similarly, again, the refugee community who, far from being welcomed to this country, feel they are demonized, marginalized and labeled as ‘un-Australian’.

So the reaction is now not individual, but structural. Various communities have formed lobby groups to newly represent their interests. Media watch organizations are growing to document journalists’ work. ‘Representation studies’ have taken off in universities, unpicking the meanings between the lines of journalists’ work and comparing them with both other journalists around the world and other narratives, especially government ones. Media managers and key personnel are being targeted for special treatment: as I speak, the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies is following up its campaign decrying the previous Fairfax Middle East correspondent for anti-Israel bias by taking the next correspondent to lunch. And, of course, none other than former Queensland Premier Peter Beattie has lambasted the media for its standards and called for community mechanisms to ensure feedback actually happens. You could be forgiven for thinking these are all warning signs for the old media of a change in the air.

Note that these community responses are peculiarly asymmetric. They are not so much about individual complaints of error but about persistent bad reporting. It’s not about just ringing *Media Watch* with examples of the latest outrage. Instead, these are structural responses to a perceived underlying problem.

The structural reaction, in my view, is entirely appropriate. Why? Because the threats to journalists’ beloved myths of independence are not ‘nutty’ individual complainants but big-picture economic, social, political, technological and legal changes. And it’s these changes that are at the bottom of the editorial and content ‘errors’ of which marginalized, but growing, communities, complain. Let me list three types of structural change threatening the independence of journalists

First, there are the ‘global’ ones which simply wash over Australia. These include:

- the ever-reducing variety of ownership of our media. Now our newspapers are down to two - Murdoch and Fairfax – and in places like Brisbane, it’s Murdoch town;
- investments in new media by the old media leading to cuts of staff, news space and resources in newspapers, TV and radio (Fairfax are rumoured to be implementing 16% cuts to the Age and SMH to help cover their new digital investments);
- anti-terrorism laws heavily restricting reporters’ ability to report key federal agency activities (including detention without charge or trial);
- digital technology offering niche ‘news’ (sport, soft porn, food, etc) that ignores the activities of the key institutions of our society; and
- the final triumph of the consumer-as-king, demolishing the Reithian (BBC) notion of a ‘high culture’ that ‘needs’ to be passed on. Ratings rule!

Second, there are the narrowing of the political agendas in the public space. My studies indicate that, whether we are talking state or federal governments, Liberal or Labor, what you might call the ‘government narrative’ and the ‘media narrative’ have become shockingly close. In other words, the line the government wants to push tends to be that reporters, editors and opinion pages support. My impression from years gone by was that reporters tended to be sceptical, larrikin types who kept their physical and intellectual distance from governments of all stripes. In the last 10 years or so, not so. Why is this so? Let’s consider the reasons.

This could be because governments have finally got it right! But Iraq, climate change, broadband and the water crisis don’t seem to attest to that, so I doubt it. It could be because of the ‘war on terrorism’: media cosy up to governments when there’s an external threat. It could be because the public relations and spin-control industry is bigger and more powerful than ever. It could be because audiences are more conservative than ever and media are playing to them. It could be that journalists and/or editors have lost their interest in scoops and investigative journalism and/or offending the hands that feed them. Or a combination of all of the above. I don’t know. What I do know is that we seem to have less space for genuine debate in our mainstream media and there appears to have been a capture of the Fourth Estate by governments. Our democracy has suffered.

Finally, there has been growth inside media offices of what I would call ‘top-down reporting’. By that I mean more strict delineation by the media organization of what it expects the story to look like once the reporter returns to the office. The more ideological the outlook of the news agency, the more this is so. The result at one level can be hilarious and ridiculous: reporters begging Muslim women to put on hijabs they never wear so that news photographers can make them look more threatening on the front page! But more structurally it means reporters having less space to find ‘the truth’ and find stories that are genuinely surprising and revealing. Increasingly, journalists are losing their independence not from outsiders’ complaints but from their own bosses.

Let me conclude by saying it is these major structural questions that should be the subject of journalists’ concern. Whether they got something wrong is important but small in the big picture. Journalists will get things wrong and there should be fast, efficient and commensurate ways of addressing those errors.

But unions, community groups, media consumers and media workers of all types should be addressing the wider issues and structural changes which are driving bigger losses of

independence and making such practices as stereotyping and demonizing more likely rather than not.

We are told we get the media we deserve, just as we get the politicians we deserve. I am not sure that this is true. But to the extent it is true, we should be claiming the media in the new digital era as 'our media' and not considering it as inevitably behind those castle walls. Once claimed, it can change.

Record of the Communications Policy & Research Forum 2007

**compiled by
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P R E F A C E

The aim of this volume is to share with everyone interested in communications the papers delivered at the Communications Policy & Research Forum on 24-25 September 2007. This was a formidable gathering of experts on telecommunications, broadcasting, journalism, Internet and new media, as reflected in the papers.

The Forum is a co-operative effort by Australian centres with interests in communication and media policy and research. The objectives are to promote policy discussion and share research findings and analysis. It brings together a broad community of interest including academic researchers, policy makers, and professional and industry practitioners.

When reading these papers, you may start thinking about what you would like to write on a similar topic. If so, please feel very welcome to propose a talk for the next Communications Policy & Research Forum. It is held in late September each year, in Sydney. It is very open to all viewpoints. Proposals for papers and talks are refereed by an independent program committee, as explained below. You will find details of the next Forum on the web at <http://www.networkinsight.org>.

We would like to thank the authors of these papers, who spent so much time and effort to produce the work you will read here. Thanks also to the many people from the six supporting research centres who made the 2007 Forum such a success. They include Cristina Abad for brilliant management and execution, supported by Bruce Moir, Shilo McLean and Peter Darling. The convenors of the four panels added a really valuable breadth and immediacy. They were Trevor Barr (Innovation), Gail Hambly (Free Speech), Peter Gerrand (Broadband Ratings) and Lesley Osborne (Evidence-Based Regulation). Like many others, they helped the Forum as work for the public interest, with no tangible reward. Thanks also to Noelene Lowes, the editor and publisher, who brought this volume into existence with great speed and skill.

We also thank the five sponsors whose generosity and public spirit made it possible to promote the Forum, and to offer participation at a more researcher-friendly price:

The Australian Computer Society Telecommunications Board
The International Institute of Communications Australian Chapter
Gilbert + Tobin Lawyers
News Limited
The Smart Internet Technology CRC

The process for selecting the papers

The papers were volunteered by researchers from around Australia and overseas, in response to the call for submissions earlier in the year. Proposals for papers and talks were refereed by an independent program committee. To ensure impartiality, the committee assessed the proposals without any identification of the authors. These are the committee members:

Chair: Professor Franco Papandrea, University of Canberra;
Professor Trevor Barr, Media and Communications Unit, Swinburne University;
Associate Professor Terry Flew, Creative Industries Faculty, QUT;
Associate Professor Andrew Kenyon, CMCL, University of Melbourne;
Professor Don Lamberton, Queensland University of Technology;

Professor Julian Thomas, Director, Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University

This was the process, with two main stages. The first stage came after the call for proposals, when all submissions were initially evaluated by the Program Committee. Offers to present papers at the Forum were then made on the basis of that initial evaluation.

Proposals for inclusion in the refereed section of the program went through more intensive scrutiny in the second stage of the evaluation process. All those receiving an offer to present a refereed paper were required to submit full papers for anonymous peer-review by two experts in the relevant field. The criteria used for the evaluation of full papers were fully consistent with DEST specifications for refereed conference papers. Final inclusion on the program as a refereed paper was conditional upon a positive assessment by referees and, where relevant, resubmission of the paper after adequate amendments taking into account observations and recommendations made by referees. Refereed papers are marked by the word '(refereed)' adjacent to their title in this volume.

Whilst there has been a careful and objective process for evaluating papers, they are entirely the work of their authors. No views or statements expressed in them should be attributed to any organisers of the Communications Policy & Research Forum. Similarly, the authors are the exclusive owners of the copyright in their work reproduced here. Any questions about further reproduction should be addressed directly to the authors.

The underpinnings of the Forum

The Forum is supported by the following six centres:

ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation
Centre for Media and Communications Law, University of Melbourne
Communication and Media Policy Institute, University of Canberra
Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University
Network Insight Institute (which provides the Forum's management)
Smart Internet Technology Co-operative Research Centre

Reinforcing the Forum's independence and openness are six custodians, who advise about major issues affecting it. They are all committed to ensuring that research and policy experts in communications have a way to share their insights with each other and with the community at large; regardless of any boundaries within institutions, professions, or industries. The custodians are:

Mark Armstrong, Director, Network Insight Institute;
Professor Trevor Barr, Media and Communications Unit, Swinburne University;
Emeritus Professor Reg Coutts, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, University of Adelaide;
Professor Franco Papandrea, Director, Communications and Media Policy Institute, University of Canberra;
Debra Richards, CEO, ASTRA
Dr Christina Spurgeon, Queensland University of Technology.

Franco Papandrea and Mark Armstrong
Sydney, October 2007

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Before relocating to the US in 1997, Nick spent eight years with Blake Dawson Waldron's Sydney office and affiliated law firm in Tokyo. Nick received a "highly recommended" mention in the Technology, Media and Telecommunications section of the *AsiaPacific Legal 500*. Nick is on the Cyberspace Law Committee of the American Bar Association and is President of the Australian Communications & Media Law Association.

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MEDIA
