

Our Media: What is good for Australia probably is not good for business

Stuart Littlemore opines on the state of the media

Now in my fifth year of Media Watching, and having written and presented some forty hours of television programs concerned solely with examining the standards and performance of the Australian mass media, I despair. While it can be amusing to chronicle the shortcomings, dishonesties and failures of those who provide us with news and information, the realisation derived from preparing and writing those programmes is much more serious: that the media's performance is declining, while the influence of the media increases.

The great and insidious influences of our media are negative: anti-educative, anti-intellectual, anti-cultural, anti-democratic and anti-minority. The ever-shrinking concentration of mass media ownership is producing a performance that is intolerant, indolent, inexpert and inept. It is not that the mass media shape our perceptions, objectives and priorities. That is far too gentle a description. Instead, they deflect them, deface them and even obliterate them mindlessly, with no thought of advocating different policies in whose merit they believe. The negativism is an end in itself.

Media treatment of the arts

In the visual arts, the journalists' pinnacle of culture is the Archibald Prize for portraiture. Yet that prize has been an artistic irrelevancy for at least a quarter of a century. The great achievements of our painters have been in anything but portraiture. However, try telling that to the tabloid editors and news directors who put together the evening news. The Archibald Prize is 'art' to the media because it is a contest, and the nearest parallel to the Melbourne cup. *Blue Poles*, on the other hand, was not treated seriously by the popular media for at least ten years and then only because its value had inflated by millions of dollars.

That same philistinism is institutionalised in treatment of all the arts. Paul Mercurio is good news because he is a married ballet dancer; but the story about Nureyev was that he died of AIDS.

Sport and the media

Even sport is invariably badly written, superficial and far too serious. In the film *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky expresses a telling view on the diversionary importance of sport in the mass media — but a minority view, for all that.

Sports coverage conditions the community, as demonstrated by conversations in a pub or with a cab driver. The views of Richie, Chappell and Rex are rendered instant conventional wisdom. And watch children playing sport. Even a game of street cricket celebrates the fall of a wicket with clenched fists and high fives. The de rigueur shows of bad temper and unsportsmanlike play can be seen in 12-year-olds playing tennis for their school team.

Ownership of the media: What are the responsibilities?

The important point is that this is not the fault of Rupert Murdoch or Kerry Packer or Conrad Black. They do not write the stories and choose the pictures. That is done by individual journalists, perhaps victims of a Murdoch culture or a Packer culture, but it could not happen if they did not make it happen.

One can rail forever at the catastrophe of the shrinking ownership of our media, but that is not the whole problem. Conceptually, a single newspaper and a single television network would be capable of carrying a diverse range of opinions and depictions. The tragedy for Australia is that we have too few newspapers, certainly, but more importantly that they reflect the views of such a narrow section of the society. We also have too much of the same television, most acutely in news and current affairs.

Jurisprudential theory (or part of it that attracts me, at least) holds that for every right, there must be a correlative duty. Applied to mass media consumption, we as consumers of news and opinion have a

right of access to accurate, reliable information and responsible, balanced commentary on that information. The correlative, we would say, is that the media proprietors have a duty to take all possible care and diligence in news gathering, to get their facts right, and to encourage informed debate by encouraging the expression of a diversity of opinion, and particularly from the well-informed and the expert.

While we might say that, the proprietors would tell us we are wrong. We have put the proposition on its head: their television licences (and counsel argued this before the ABT) are held as a matter of right. They have a right to broadcast (or to print money, if that is your definition of a broadcasting licence), and we have a duty to consume in silence.

And they can say that with some degree of justification. After all, Menzies awarded the television licences to the newspaper proprietors who had supported the Liberal Party, quid pro quo, and 'entitlement' is probably the right word.

Let us try responsibility as a less troublesome concept. Are not the proprietors responsible for the quality of the information and commentary they publish? Yes, they would acknowledge that: look at how much they have to pay out in damages for that particular journalistic irresponsibility that qualifies as libel.

Privacy

But what about non-defamatory irresponsibility? For example, there is no right to privacy. At present the media have a right to point their telephoto lenses and directional microphones over our fences and into our bedrooms.

The pity of it is that, with the spur of the Camillagate tape (ghastly word, but I can not avoid it), and with the release in January in London of David Calcutt's paper on media controls, all those long-overdue reforms are in great danger of rejection. The peg on which they were hung — invasion of the Royals' privacy — has proved to have been, at least in part, done at the behest of the vapid incubator herself.

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This is embarrassing for advocates of a legal right to privacy. But let me go on with this theme of media responsibility. Even the media will agree they have a responsibility to get their facts right. To get around that problem, there is no need to raise the standards, only to publish fewer facts, even on the front page.

Take an example at random from the front page of *The Australian*. It purports to be a report on the standing of Saddam Hussein during the last moments of the Bush presidency. We are invited to pity George Bush because Saddam will survive him. I quote: "... despite having unleashed more whizz-bangs than any other post Vietnam United States president ..." The reference to whizz-bangs hardly passes for factual reporting. Next paragraph: "... the Iraqi evening news each night ends with songs of how Hussein's people worship the ground he walks on." How would the journalist know when he is in Washington? And has he not read the second stanza of 'God Save the Queen'? Third paragraph: "If the Iraqis hear enough songs about how much they love their lunatic leader, then they will eventually assume they do". That sentence says it all: a news report, in which Hussein is unremarkably described as a lunatic and in which a ludicrous proposition is asserted as fact.

Fifth paragraph: "We have accidentally abetted the lion-at-bay syndrome ..." What does the journalist mean, "We"? This is partisan, tendentious, pretentious, presumptuous, unsubstantiated, and non-factual. This passes for news reporting, by their Washington correspondent (no less), in what the Murdoch people are pleased to call their 'quality' paper.

That quality of journalism is fast becoming the norm. Journalists are, it seems, weary of their craft — not for them research, inquiry, checking and balancing. They all want to be stars. What we want from our journalists, accurate and comprehensive factual reporting, is devalued as if it were no more than a mechanical function. They are itching to give us the benefit of their opinions.

Commentary on current affairs is essential, because it provokes debate and exposes opinions that we may not have heard. However, it cannot replace the foundational material: the news before the views.

The boundless freedom of the media?

The community has no opportunity to examine the processes of its print media. We have a Broadcasting Authority, as

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World Review

A survey of some recent international developments

In Japan a company was formed on 13 April 1993 to acquire two BS-4 satellites. The acquiring company was formed from a consortium of eight banks, five private broadcasters and Japan's Government broadcasters. The satellites will be launched in 1997 and 1998.

Intelsat held its annual global traffic meeting at Washington DC. between 3-10 May 1993. In all, 210 telecommunications carriers, covering most of the world's countries, were represented at the meeting. The meeting forecast the Asia-Pacific region would have the fastest growing demand for telecommunications services.

Germany's largest mobile telephone carrier, Mannesmann Mobilfunk, recently awarded a contract worth almost \$US500 million to Ericsson for the supply of mobile telephones and equipment. The contract represents Ericsson's largest order for supply to a mobile network. Mannesmann Mobilfunk expects to cover 90% of Germany's population by the end of 1993. Ericsson had previously been the largest supplier to the rapidly expanding German network.

The Philippines could have more mobile telephones than fixed telephones by as early as 1995, according to an International Telecommunications Union Study.

Thailand could follow suit by 1997, the study found. The study's projections are based on the present high penetration rates of mobile telephones in both countries, reflecting their strong economic performances.

Hong Kong is also experiencing rapid telecommunications growth, which is reflected in a recent recommendation that its seven digit telephone calling system be increased to eight digits. The move, if implemented, will expand capacity from 2.5 million telephones to some 50 million. However, even this change is forecast to last only 15 years, before capacity is again fully utilised.

Fiji's PTT has selected NEC Australia to supply it with customer telecommunications equipment. The contract is worth \$A10 million and will include technical training for PTT staff.

The European Radiocommunications Office recently completed its first detailed spectrum investigation regarding the harmonisation of Europe's use of the radiofrequency spectrum. However, some of the ERO's proposals for harmonisation are already the subject of debate between European States. If implemented they will unify spectrum usage and create a common market across Europe for radiocommunications equipment. Implementation would take place over a 15 year time frame. Currently, the proposals are subject to public consultation.

France Telecom is likely to be privatised, in line with a general trend for the privatisation of Government-owned telecommunications carriers. France Telecom represents one of France's major corporations, with some 150,000 employees. At present no timetable has been set for the privatisation, which would require the enactment of legislation. However, it is envisaged that privatisation would occur in late 1994. In 1991 France Telecom was changed from a Government Department to a State-owned enterprise.