

CALLING THEM TO ACCOUNT

How can we demand higher standards from our failing news media?

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This seems to be the sort of speech that will ensure that I remain a university academic for the rest of my days and lose as many remaining friends I have in the media as possible. Having just launched a new book, it seems to run against every notion of seeking good publicity my publicity agent advised. But what's the use of being in a university if you can't speak your mind?

In fact the idea for this talk came from friends of mine in the media who were decrying declining standards in their workplaces but felt unable to speak about them for fear of losing their jobs. It also came from community groups talking to me about how powerless they felt about being run over by reporters with clichés and stereotypes rushing through their heads. And it came from a friend in the university who suggested many people felt the news media were misleading them about important matters of our times.

So here we go.

INTRODUCTION

I want tonight to look at some examples of where I see a decline in standards in the media. I will suggest that the decline is concentrated most in what we traditionally call our "quality" media. Then I want to look at the factors that might be driving this decline and the consequences for media consumers and for media proprietors. Finally I will look at some possible ways out of this problem – ways that are practical and useful, not destructive and adversary.

And in concluding I will suggest that we as a community need to look together with industry and government at the possibilities of new ways of holding the media more accountable than it is at the moment.

Journalists, media executives and media owners tend to be some of the most sensitive creatures on the planet when constructive criticism, no matter how well-meant, is directed at them. And there's nothing like the word "accountable" to set the adrenalin going. Phrases like "freedom of the press" and "public interest" seem suddenly to be wheeled in like ramparts to ensure no new thoughts breach the castle walls. But, as a former media worker and executive myself, I'll broach the subject.

DECLINING STANDARDS

It would be easy to spend time railing against some of the excesses of the high circulation and high rating media – the populist press – such as "The Daily Telegraph" (or the "Daily Terror" as its called in the industry), or "Today Tonight" or Alan Jones on 2GB.

There was a story just the other day on Channel Nine's "A Current Affair" about a taxi driver who ripped a passenger off and the story made sure its viewers knew the driver was a Muslim as though being Muslim, rather than Anglican, determined his behaviour as a cab driver. But what's the point? We know what happens at this level. Single mothers, Aborigines, dole recipients, fat people, petty crooks and many other victims inhabit this world on a daily basis. It's the equivalent of the medieval town square. And as a former head of a commercial current affairs division, I too have been there and done that.

What concerns me – and I suspect many others – is not standards in populist media but the standards in the media that claim to be "quality". Channel Nine news and current affairs, the broadsheet newspapers, the ABC and SBS, and so on. What do I mean by "quality"? I mean several things:

1. The idea that there is a corporate tradition of standards, explicitly acknowledged;
2. A structure of authority and accountability within the corporation;
3. A history of product with some intellectual density and by which new generations of staff can learn;
4. Commitment to a professional ethic beyond the corporation that involves journalism standards maintained for consumers.

In my lifetime, I have experienced what it meant to be proud to be a "Sydney Morning Herald" or ABC journalist. I know the same exists for colleagues in "60 Minutes", "Sunday", "The Australian", and SBS. In each, there is a sense that you are lucky to be part of this proud team that knows what it is doing, has a higher calling and respects its readers, viewers or listeners. My concern is that the corporate bean-counters are breaking down these sets of values and sense of pride in each of these media.

How so? I want to concentrate on four examples.

1. Channel Nine: "Sunday"

"Sunday" used to be to Kerry Packer what "The Australian" was to Rupert Murdoch: something quality to feel good about when you were doing low-class stuff elsewhere in your empire. It was also a way to keep onside with politicians and a way of wielding political influence through the policy agendas these enacted.

Kerry Packer is barely in his grave and "Sunday" is a changed animal. It's not that the program has lost its core, it's that it has succumbed to the temptation to dumb down in a drive for ratings. Melissa Doyle and David Koch at Seven's "Sunrise" have been so successful at the two-header trick, bringing current affairs in a digestible bright and breezy package at breakfast time, that Nine has finally given in and done the same – but on its most serious program of the entire week. So we have one of Australia's best and most serious journalists, Ellen Fanning, attempting to ape the Mel and Kochy jokey "thing" while introducing reports on China. Ellen's partner, Ross Greenwood, is a Kochy soundalike: same voice, same bald head, same open jacket. There's plenty of sport and plenty of technical hitches as one presenter with a fixed smile crosses to another set of teeth.

The question that has to be asked is: who needs this? Surely the people who come to “Sunday” know by now that it is a serious program and come expecting good journalism wrapped in the kind of relaxed presentation long associated with Jim Waley. They expect Laurie Oakes to break a story or conduct a tough interview. They expect investigative journalism from the like of Ross Coulthard. And they expect advertisements from companies like Mercedes Benz. They do not expect, or want, froth, bubble and bad live crosses. Providing this formula will ultimately damage the name of a product Nine has spent decades building up. It will alienate the audience its got. And sacking staff who send phone logs to the former presenter, Jana Wendt, won’t fix the problem, either.

2. ABC: “Foreign Correspondent”

This is a program that has a serious remit. I should know because I set it up when I was head of News and Current Affairs at the ABC. The intention was to give Australians a window on the world, using not only the program’s own reporters but also the array of television and radio foreign correspondents around the world. It was to be a very Australian version of foreign affairs. There has been, to my knowledge, no re-invention of the program that changed its first rationale.

Disturbing then to hear journalist friends of mine worry about the current direction of the program which they see as increasingly lightweight. Even more disturbing was a program earlier this year entitled “The Philippines – Road to Terrorism”. To my mind, it was the worst of tabloid television. It had a “Heart of Darkness” theme: white reporter, embedded with the Filipino military, takes viewer ever further into dark Muslim regions of Zamboanga. Terrorists to the left of me, terrorists to the right of me! The report never got the point of view of the people of this vast island, never spoke to moderate forces opposing the central government, never gave a history or context of the Muslim culture that existed long before the Portuguese arrived. The effect was pure CIA – or should I say ASIS? - propaganda.

I complained to the powers that be in the ABC and got a dismissive reply that denied the item’s bias. The reply made one interesting point, though. “You should be aware that the ABC and ‘Foreign Correspondent’ has always permitted the practice of ‘embedding’ journalists with military forces in times of conflict” said the ABC Acting Director of Strategy and Communications, Gary Dawson. He went on to say that this was the current practice with US, British and Australian forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Well, that’s new and that’s interesting. If that is so, in an undeclared war, then I think the ABC should be thinking again. Many Australians don’t support the war in Iraq. Most didn’t support it when Howard sent troops in without UN approval. Many believe we arrived there on a pretext of weapons of mass destruction that turned out to be a lie. Many would want the ABC to have a more independent view than our government’s. Knowing what people outside the Army bases think, I would have thought, would be a duty of the national broadcaster. The Australian Gold Walkley Award winner, Paul McGeough does it for the Fairfax group, why not the ABC?

I should add that a Wollongong historian, Peter Sales, who lives in Davao City in Zamboanga part of every year and lectures at Duntroon, also wrote a stinging letter to the ABC about the same “Foreign Correspondent” item. He said that the program should have looked at *state* terrorism from Manila rather than get embedded with it. I quote one section of his letter to the ABC:

“The promotional material on the ABC website boasted that Harley had unprecedented access to (Colonel) Casimiro and his anti-terrorism team. The claim is not very impressive as these thugs are self-promoting braggarts who would shoot their own mothers for a crate of San Miguel beer and will talk interminably about their derring-do to anyone willing to listen. As a longtime researcher, I have always found information from such sources disingenuous and unreliable...

“(This) episode of ‘Foreign Correspondent’ is the sort of story which lends legitimacy to efforts to impose draconian anti-terrorism measures into Third World countries like the Philippines – as if the answer to Islamic extremism is to give more power to corrupt governments and abusive, incompetent military forces.”

Sales got a similarly dismissive reply, most of which borrowed whole slabs from my own. The underlying message was: we don’t take criticism well, whether from former ABC staff or experts in the field.

3. “The Sydney Morning Herald”

The “Herald” embodies all those standards of “quality” I listed before. It is so proud of them it spends considerable effort at celebrating its history of being “the paper of record”. But how much of that celebration is now a marketing strategy rather than a reflection of what’s happening inside the paper?

On Friday, August 4, this year the “Herald” published on its front page this story: “The good life catches up with Thorpedo”. The caption to the big picture of Thorpe sucking on an apparent iced Coke read: “Flabby: in Los Angeles last month, showing the effects of a less disciplined lifestyle”. Three journalists were assigned to the story. And, of course, it wasn’t just on the front page, it was the front page lead.

Inside the “Herald” there was shock and amazement. The story was an old one, dredged up from gossip magazines. The photo was old. The story was shonky: Thorpe was on a regime that would see him burst back into fitness and this was him on a holiday getaway. It was paparazzi journalism of the worst kind. Because it wasn’t news it had to be turned into what they call a “news feature”. And the next day the “Herald” ran the denials at the bottom of page 7, deep into its news pages.

What had happened, many of the reporters at the paper asked? So did many of my colleagues at the UTS Journalism School. And so did many of my friends who read the “Herald”. The sudden drop in standards, style and appeal from the “Herald” seemed a mystery but there was more to come.

Another indication of the thinking behind the paper came with the sudden coup d'état in Thailand. I understand a raging debate occurred inside the paper as to whether to put the Thai coup on the front page on the evening of September 20 for the Thursday morning paper. The foreign desk demanded it. It was the biggest story in the southeast Asian region this year. The collapse of democracy in one of our Asian partners was a major story in anyone's terms. The "Herald" was "a paper of record". Did it deserve front page? The answer: no, it didn't. Instead, the Thai coup got a pointer to coverage on pages 10 and 11.

The same treatment was meted out to the news that all 16 of the United States top intelligence agencies found that the war in Iraq was increasing the risk of terror, not combating it. Once upon a time, this would have been the page one lead and on the side would have been a story from a feisty political correspondent, like Peter Bowers or Mike Steketee, dragging John Howard out into the light of day to answer questions about the massive relevance of the US report to his own policy in Iraq. Once again, not so.

What we are seeing is the deliberate dumbing-down of the "Sydney Morning Herald". You can see it in the editorial priorities, the bigger pictures (and the picture-led stories), the racier headlines, the page three lifestyle stories and the massive Princess Di-type spreads about icons like Peter Brock and Steve Irwin. It takes your mind off such horrible things as petrol prices, interest rates, the war in Iraq where our soldiers are and, of course, the million homeless Lebanese who are finding it difficult to return to their homes and their fields now peppered with cluster bomblets.

4. "the commentariat"

Finally, in this list of examples, I just want to record the erosion of standards in opinion pages. The increasing narrowness of these pages has been a source of concern for many academics for some years. Five years ago a proposal was submitted to the Academy of the Humanities in Canberra to fund a round table with newspaper editors to broaden access to oped pages. It reflected a strong feeling that the pages had been "captured" by a small band of right wing ideologues – not in the sense of dominating opinion, merely in occupying so many column inches there was little room for other views.

The funding never happened. But five years down the track, the problem remains. There is barely room to express a thought at variance to the band of brothers who dominate such papers as the "Herald". The internal justification for these Neanderthals is that they will "create controversy". But in truth their themes are so well-worn that their use to the Letters pages is now minimal.

I should stop at this point and say that there are counter-signs of great creativity and rising standards, too. Radio National at ABC Radio continues to be a beacon, so does the ABC Online site, SBS and so does The Bulletin magazine out of the Packer stable. But I would argue that these are at the edges of our everyday, mass circulation media and are possibly able to hold the line because of their relative marginality.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

These are four examples where I believe our “quality” media have let us down and let themselves down in the process. They raise questions about senior editors’ views of their markets. Does “Sunday” believe their audience, or any future audience, wants a chuckling Mel and Kochy treatment? Does the ABC think its audience wants an item that represents the worst of “60 Minutes” or to not have independence from government in its war reporting? Does the “Herald” think its readership wants the paper more like the “Tele”? It seems to me there’s a stampede towards a sludge of journalism in the middle ground.

So now, *why*, not how, has this happened?

I think there are three separate factors at work here. The first is global competition. This is most obvious in the new media laws which the Howard Government is intent on bringing in now that it’s gained its slim margin in the Senate. It will allow in global players to compete, thereby forcing a tightening of margins, a slimming of profits and more competition in a stagnant market. Australia is still a small capital base and competitors in the small pond will start eating each other fast. There’s a sense of panic around. At the “Herald” for instance, that means constant rounds of redundancies, falling morale, and, more importantly for readers, the loss of key senior reporters like Anne Lampe (NRMA and Nick Whitlam stories) and Margot Saville (Rodney Adler and One.Tel).

In a wider sense, though, the world has gotten smaller. Even at the ABC or Nine, the resources of Reuters and the BBC become ever more important as budgets are trimmed and staff numbers slashed. And everyone’s aware of what the big brothers – ABC News America or CNN or Al-Jazeera – are doing

The second factor is the impact of digital technology. Digital is enabling everything to be done – and done now. Whether it’s a fisheye camera in a stump or delivery of pictures from the depths of the Brazilian rainforests, digital is causing havoc to the old rhythms of news production. Or, put another way, challenging news executives to think differently and creatively.

Finally, there's the explosion of online, both news and advertising. Newspaper circulations are falling, not just in Sydney or Australia but worldwide. More importantly for the newspaper industry, their classifieds, the source of their wealth, are disappearing online. Latest figures, quoted in "The Economist" of August 26, show newspapers claimed 36 percent of total global advertising in 1995 and 30 percent in 2005 and will almost certainly be 25 percent by 2015. In Australia, for something like the "Herald" which has been absolutely dominant in the classified ad. Market, this is a major disaster. It threatens the future of the paper. For "The Australian", there is some security in being part of a global company and not having had a lien on the classified market in the first place. But circulation figures still say newspapers are declining.

A major part of the problem is also, of course, that new readers aren't appearing. Young readers under 25 are not becoming newspaper readers. They are online surfers from age 10 (at least) onwards. They get their information elsewhere and they get only what they want. The very idea of an omnibus news-paper is disappearing for them. The consumer is becoming king or queen in the sense that they will not need to know what they don't want to know rather than being told what they need to know. As one journalist said to me the other day: "But we're here to tell people what they don't know. How will they know they need to know it?"

So what are the consequences of these dramatic turnarounds – though they have been coming for a long time?

Well, a bit like global warming, which has also been coming for some time, we're already seeing the consequences for media consumers. Let me name seven of them.

1. Less coverage of the things that matter

For a decade or more there's been a shift to lifestyle journalism but in the last year or so, with pay-TV eating into free-to-air and online into all media, there's simply less reporting of the big, serious issues. Where to get your next Brazilian wax has beaten global warming and the science of biotechnology. Foreign affairs issues like the growth of India as a world power have taken a back seat to Peter Debnam's increasing hysteria about losing the next State election. And so on.

2. Less variety of sources of news.

Media companies are relying more and more on the old contacts and the old networks: Reuters, AFP, AP and the newspapers of England and the US east coast. We're getting an Anglo-American view of the world more than ever before, just at a time when some variety might do us good. This is certainly true about the Middle East.

3. Less community input.

Newspapers and television, including the ABC, have turned in on themselves in tight times, excluding more and more the communities and markets that are their lifeblood. The castle walls are up and criticism is not welcome.

4. More reliance on government spin

In an age of terrorism, the government is always right. A formidable array of spin doctors in Canberra – and the state capitals – beaver away to ensure that the government message gets through – unalloyed. Those that don't toe the line get punished. As journalist numbers get cut inside mainstream media, the ratio of public relations spinmeisters to straight journalists leans heavily towards the spinners. The result can be seen in the more tame treatment the federal government gets.

5. Journalism standards lower

How many times have you heard ABC News at 10pm as a virtual repeat of the ABC News from 6 or 7pm? Has nothing happened in the entire world to suggest an update? The whole of Europe has been awake and working since 7pm but has nothing happened?

Or how many times do we see statements in newspaper headlines which are not fact but allegation by someone? The practice of attribution seems to have fallen foul of the subs.

6. The return to 'the bloke'

In tight markets, it's the women that lose their jobs first. The same is true of the media. We don't have to rely on the charming language of famously macho Channel Nine executives – “boning” their female employees – to know that living in conservative times means “the bloke” is back. Once the “Herald” had many female executives. Now the Editor-in-Chief, the Editor, the Deputy Editor, the News Editor, the Foreign Editor, the Chief of Staff and the Oped Editor are all “blokes” – in other words, the entire upper structure of the “Herald”.

7. A confusion of “popular” with “serious”

There's an attempt to popularize everything. “Foreign Correspondent” is the best example, but it's right across the media as well. Got an online story for the “Herald”? Can we get sex into it somewhere, even if only in the headline? Gruesome details of a court case? Sure, but don't show dead bodies from Iraq or Palestine! Keep it local!

THE WAY OUT

I am not pretending to be some kind of savant here with all the answers. I am simply saying let's not pretend we don't notice the changes to our media environment.

But watching and deploring some of the strategies corporations are taking to avoid slow decline – or just to get ratings – is not good enough, either. There needs to be some community thinking about ways out of the dilemmas.

I'll take the bit between my teeth and suggest three:

1. Embrace digital and all it means

Art, media and journalism schools around Australia are turning out every year bright students of the age that any of these mainstream media would kill for. They want them as something called “readers” or “viewers”. But these young graduates are needed beyond that. They're able to do documentaries on your mobile phone. They are the people the media need *inside* to go properly digital. “New media” is not an addition to current media, it IS the new media just ahead of us.

2. Embrace community and local journalism, including accountability.

Mainstream media will be broken up into niches, just like our cities have been. Get the two together. Big media needs to think global but be local. People's lives are increasingly villages within cities. Report them. But that also means accepting it's a two-way street: those at the local level might want feedback and some measure of control over how they are reported up close.

3. Enhance, not run from, traditional standards of journalism

The way through is not competition for the middle ground but emphasizing difference. Me-tooism seems not only to have infected our national politics but our business and media cultures. Corporations should market their differences not their similarities. In Sydney Robert Fisk, the award-winning foreign correspondent for “The Independent” had thousands coming to his lectures when he was here. Why does not one paper in Australia take his stories? Take a risk, someone! It might mean, for the “quality” media, getting ratings through even better journalism, not worse!

ACCOUNTABILITY

I am the last person to want to hamper a journalist's right to report what they see without fear or favour. But I also think, maybe in reaction to the intense times we have lived since September 11, that there is a need for some accountability mechanisms to apply to all media. The strongest case for such mechanisms is the role of radio prior to the Cronulla riots late last year. But there are other examples, too.

I do believe that the media's current right to treat its consumers like dirt is neither good for the consumers, the media or our democracy. The Press Council is a standing joke as an accountability mechanism. Referring complainants to the journalist's union is not much better. As a community we need to debate other ways of ameliorating media power.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with this thought.

It is just possible that the Australian population knows more than the media executives think they know. It might be that, particularly when it come to the things that matter, like global warming, they want to hear vastly more, not less. It might be that they know that, from the media that calls itself "quality", there ought to be bigger, more exciting ways of looking at the world. It might be that they know George Bush makes their future scarier and John Howard should let go of his coat-tails. They might like higher taxes to pay for hospitals and schools and solar energy.

In other words, they might want more "quality", not less.

Let's test the edges, not the middle. Let's be brave, not fearful. And let's above all push our media to try new things in the pursuit of quality journalism.

Thank you.

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