



COVER SHEET

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M / C Dialogue, George Negus interviewed by Lee Duffield.

George Negus has an inside perspective on mass media, being for over thirty-five years one of the dominant figures of television current affairs, and here he steps out of his familiar world to take an over-all look at media in its social and cultural contexts.

He is first and foremost a current affairs journalist, with plenty of field experience, but most familiar to television audiences as a studio presenter and interviewer with a good natured and persistently questioning style.

At the ABC he was among the team of young journalists who revelled in the relatively new media of television, among them colleagues like the late Richard Carleton, confronting recalcitrant Ministers of government, and many others, in ways they had never encountered before.

Those interviews and investigations on programs like *Today-Tonight* produced a great break-through in public accountability. Negus today considers it all hinged on the determination of the journalists to get answers to the one persistent question – *why?*.

He tells Lee Duffield, for *M/C Dialogue*, that's "the best question any journalist can ask, and it's not asked enough".

He is persisting with the *why* question in his current work on SBS, arguing that where news reporting leaves off, the current affairs programs step in to fill in with the explanations.

Duffield, himself a long-standing journalist with ABC, mostly radio news and current affairs, says it's a fair argument.

"With the news you find the best indication you can for the reason and you make sure it goes in, but very soon you have to move on.

"In the current affairs show later you get more time; you do not have to cover everything any more, so there is more time to look at stories you choose, and more time on air; which brings in a tough and persistent questioner like George Negus".

The interview takes in Negus's observations on media and society going into the 21st Century, with a main theme: more consideration is needed of strictly social values and cultural meanings in the news: "These days at the moment you are some kind of limp-wristed wuss if you talk about society's needs as distinct from the economy's needs ... It's a sign of economic obsessiveness and technological preoccupation."

The discussion moves on to ideas that will be not-unexpected but heart-felt, the television commentator and the social observer being fairly restless about the future but prepared to give it a go.

Domination of the social and economic scene by efforts to live off new technology is "obsessive", blotting out ordinary social concern, at least until things change once more. Democratising media, where everybody can be a journalist, may not make much difference, because "journalists get it wrong; there are a lot of people who are

going to be wrong occasionally”. Content providers for media like George Negus himself will continue at work while the flow of information surges confusingly, because, “the information being available to you, you’ll probably require assistance sifting it”. Re-enter current affairs, the leading portals and leading exponents of that art.

At the heart of it is drawing attention to the real world and its crises, like the issue of sexual abuse in aboriginal communities, which he sees as a field of failure and neglect for news media that makes him “furious”.

To George Negus, journalists have not been standing back to scrutinise, to identify the roots of a burning national problem, Centuries of harm to aboriginal culture: “What is more important than crime and punishment, law and order, and traditional *versus* British codes of justice, is why these things happen.”

That concern is consistent with the questioning style and image of the kindly buccaneer.

So here is the view of a self-declared humanitarian in the mass media, believing that individuals can make commitments and make a difference, and asked now about becoming a “cultural thinker”.

Question: Does doing so much journalism and media work over a long time in an exposed position turn you into a cultural thinker?

I suspect I was a self-styled cultural thinker before I became a journalist. So much of my journalism, my social or even political activity, I see as being fundamentally “cultural.” To me it is all part of this complicated mess we call society...

As a classic example, I am furious about a particular story that’s in the news right now and the way it is being handled. The cultural aspects of this whole aboriginal sex abuse issue are being ignored ..

The whole thing stems from the protracted destruction of aboriginal culture. That’s why these indigenous blokes do what they do. I’m angry. It’s very hard to find anybody in the media -- who love getting involved in these slightly soiled things -- who’s standing far enough to deal with the issue in a socio-cultural way.

Question: Give it more analysis?

Yes. So, I see that, in a way, everything I do journalistically can be placed under the broad title of culture.

Question: Looking at the Century we are going into, it seems that all economic production and social life also will have a huge component of communication or information in it. If forced to declare your feeling about that situation would you be optimistic or pessimistic?

Well it seems to me that despite all of our best and most persistent efforts to stuff up our entire existence, we always fail. So I’m optimistic. Nothing surprises me when we

get things wrong. That said, I'm always delighted when we don't. Thinking over the time I've been an adult – say, forty odd years – somehow we've managed to make it through the decades.

George Negus on being overwhelmed by new communication technology ...

The obsession we currently have with all things economic and technological bothers me. What we have now, everything we do, is driven almost beyond our control by economic rationalism and so-called technological advances, that we are in grave danger of losing the point of the whole exercise. That's the stage we are going through -- economic and technological "advancement" almost for its own sake, as distinct from a better society.

And that last word – society -- is so important even though it hardly ever gets used by the media these days. At the moment, you are some kind of limp-wristed wuss if you talk about society's needs, as distinct from the economy's needs. It's a sign of economic obsessiveness and technological preoccupation...

On handling generational change ...

Humanitarianism, social or cultural issues, or proper international perspectives, such issues are off the radar; but it will come back, because when the media gets bored, it'll swing; it'll swing back.

None of the things it will swing back to will have the same names, but there will be a swing back away from economic rationalism, and technology, and go back to things we might call more humanitarian and social.

Question: There are people who say that to manage the confusion of the new Century, what counts is wetware; it's what you learn, what you carry inside your head is the really powerful factor.

Exactly. A lot of people are like me in the media or the communication game; I've never been accused of being out of date. I actually think my wetware is still viable and relevant. I can plug into any aspect without trouble.

The thing that bothers me about the younger generation of thinkers or journalists is they think we haven't moved - my generation- they think they are the people who are the guardians of everything that's modern, new, or technological, *et cetera*. Bullshit; it's not (so). We've always been there. It is just a different phase we're going through. I can't remember the last time I wrote something, where people have said: "What's he talking about, that's old stuff." I've never got that said and that makes me feel encouraged that what I'm saying, writing, doing is not outdated.

On learning for life ...

Question: Just talking about yourself for a moment. What influences on you were most important in building up your professional skills and identity?

I think my own identity is the most powerful thing I called upon. I've never seen the media as being anything other than a vehicle for expressing ideas, opinions, analysis of what's going on around us. I've never been terribly interested in the factual side of journalism. I'll leave that to other people, but I'm quite happy to use their facts if I trust them, to develop my own ideas.

My intellectual maturation was a pretty interesting one, from Brisbane working class, to high school, to be the first tertiary educated person in my family, and that influenced me... One thing that affected me hugely was doing political sociology at UQ, having to do an essay on my own political sociology, and when I worked out what that meant, I looked at my own life, where I had come from and where I was going, my own family... and I learned a lot about society by analysing my own upbringing.

On the question *why* ...

It made me realise at the time, because I was still teaching school and doing university part-time, that I wanted to be in the ideas business. I wanted somebody to pay me for asking the question *why*.

Question: That was the main question.

It's the only one. All the rest of them flow from that ... *Why* is the only question that really matters to me. Why some things happen, why some don't; some people seem to understand what is going on around them, and others don't. I think I'd regard myself as journalistically having made a profession out of that question, and having made a living out of it.

I think it's the best question any journalist can ask about anything, and it's not asked enough.

The classic example is the aboriginal sexual abuse issue.

I'm sure there are thinkers out there doing the right thing and asking the question, but what is more important than crime and punishment, law and order, and traditional versus British codes of justice, is why these things happen.

The question *why* plus an analytical approach to things makes things make sense.

Question: The point about analysing your self and the family situation; do you find your way in life by stopping to ask where George fits in?

In a way. I've gone from Brisbane working class to a globe-trotting middle-class professional. My situation has changed. I do it often when I'm rabbiting on about interest rates, mortgage rates, and tax levels, tax breaks or tax thresholds, the sort of thing that is absolutely preoccupying Australian society, media, and Australian politics.

I use my own situation as a benchmark. What are my problems, my advantages, and why? So I have a different analysis from when I was working for \$50 a week as a young school teacher or a cadet journalist.

On new media, and media democratisation ...

Question: There are people who say you can find out why in this new media situation where we can give up on the gatekeepers, and everybody gets to be a journalist. If you trawl through the blogs and wikis and see the independent sites, one way or another you will come around to a truth that suits you.

(Laughs) I don't think so. I think the push button information is not a great deal different from information we had to gather far more laboriously in the past. We went to libraries, we read outside the textbook, we would read not just newspapers or magazines only from this country. Anybody who wants to go beyond the obvious will always go beyond the obvious source.

Who controls the gatekeeper when the gatekeeper is keeping watch? I am sceptical of the so called democracy of the Internet for that reason. Half the time you don't know who or what the people are, providing the information. In the same way as before you could always find information to substantiate your own point, pre-internet. You can do it quicker now, but the amount of it is so much greater. I think the possibility for error and misjudgement is greater ...

Everybody as a journalist? Well, journalists get it wrong. There are a lot of people who are going to be wrong occasionally. ..It's possible to allow ourselves to be snowed by the technology to the point where we believe it's better because it's more vast.

Question: Considering the way you have learned to manage ideas, information, people, and present it. We are going into a Century where communication technology is a reality; you've got all the main organisations looking at ways they can put up new carriers, new channels. Does that make you excited about having a go at it, or, like a lot of others are you saying: "I've learned all of this, and this now will obliterate a lot of it, and put me on the back foot.?"

(Laughs) As a content person I don't think so. All these new forms of communication gathering and dissemination of information need content. I was baffled by the typewriter, then by the TV camera, then by the computer. .. and I've managed to be deliberately ignorant of the technology to a large extent. I was once told when I went to television: "Don't worry about the technology darling, just think of something bloody smart to say" ... Now I'm computer semi-literate. I can handle it. It does not frighten me, and I can see that like I've seen all the other things, like a tool. I know it's become a contemporary cliché but we've still got to see that stuff as a tool, to make use of, not something which is the master of our being, the master of our information gathering. Some people believe too fervently in it.

On futures of mass media ...

It will still need content. Nobody told me what I had to say when I went from print to television. I just did what I normally did. I just happened to do it in front of a camera instead of in front of a keyboard. My preoccupation is going to be with the content. I do think that the opportunities presented by the new technology, for us who have to learn it, who did not grow up with it, are there to be aware of – otherwise we could miss opportunities.

Question: Which way do you see the mass media going? Are we going to see more fragmentation? Do you think the familiar, like big scale live television events, like the Beaconsfield coverage, will still be there?

They do that because they can, not because they have to, and that's going to be a big debate. A lot of these big, major news events happen like that because technologically they can. Add to that the competitiveness in television, or all media in general, nobody will say, "no I'm not going to do it", as they all have the wherewithal to do it – for the instant gratification as it were. How many of these things require asking ourselves whether it was really necessary; what that circus was all about? It's because, (a) they could do it, and (b) not one of them was game to say "we're not going to".

Question: Meantime, how about these thousands of production efforts, people talking with them, special interest things too? You can see a future where there will be a lot of dispersal and it is hard to keep track?

I think in terms of the specialist, special interest areas, the potential is enormous. That's a good thing. I think a lot of these specialist things would be satisfied far better by the new media than they ever would be by old media.

This is something I find fascinating. Here we are talking about the new media and the new media is using the old media to propagate itself. People go to these funny inserts they see in the newspapers every week, but television hasn't done that, nor radio; I don't know why. Even though we've become obsessed by the new media in its many forms, dotcoms *et cetera*, there's no television program I can think of in this country about how to use the new media, or how to use the internet. We have become obsessed ... You're a second class human being if you are not on top of it...but you don't come home to watch your TV program, like the "E Thing", telling you, say, how to avoid spam.

Question: It's not as interesting as gardening I guess.

Exactly. So this is why I think we have almost gotten ahead of ourselves in how we assess its importance. But I don't think it is anywhere near as important as we think it is, when gardening's got its own programs, cooking's got four thousand, sport is everywhere, music is everywhere, and this new technology thing which is supposedly taking over our entire existence, doesn't even rate one bloody program.

On hopes of putting technology in its place ...

Question: So "social" is important and technology is just the tools; you're back to what you started saying.

I hope that is the case. I think the disproportionate attention and preoccupation is because it is about an almost totally commercial thing. People are making a lot of money out of somehow or other infiltrating our existence to the point where we feel totally obliged to jump on this new bandwagon; and I'm not a Neanderthal; I'm not against it. Where there is a commercial element to the whole thing you've got to be a little sceptical about its real worth and its commercial worth.

Question: You would not be surprised that here we are interested in teaching people how to do journalism and how to do media, and of course we are confronting the proliferation of media. If everybody is setting out to be a journalist would you agree there is some reasoning and some hope in teaching everybody to be a journalist to some degree?

Yes I think we are our own news gatherers. What people always have a need for. I think what the information age will do is make analytical and opinion journalism even more important than it always has been, because the information being available to you, you'll probably still require assistance in sifting it, assessing it, evaluating it, working out what use it is to you ... I think the great paradox will be that as information journalism becomes less important, because the information will be so freely available to any one of these gatekeepers, self styled journalists, the opinion journalism, and commentary and analysis will become more important – because most people don't have time to do that; they're too busy doing other things.

Question: If somebody being a self-styled journalist was not just looking up information, but has tried to do writing and reporting, it would kit you out to be better at understanding it.

That's true. It does, but I feel we should, I hope we should never lose our innate scepticism. If we become mindless disciples of this stuff we are asking for trouble. In the same way we are always told, don't believe what you read in newspapers; there is definitely a new media equivalent and that is, don't believe everything you pick up anywhere else either.

George Negus is a celebrated Australian television presenter and interviewer, over the years talking to thousands in front of hundreds of thousands – millions all told. In 2006 he hosts the SBS flagship current affairs program Dateline, following on from a long period as a reporter and presenter on Channel Nine's Sixty Minutes and the Today Show. He has had many roles with the ABC, most recently hosting trends and issues programs, and Foreign Correspondent. In recent times, with partner Kirsty Cockburn, he lived in Northern New South Wales, establishing a family and working together on a wide-ranging series of films and books. George says that as time permits he enjoys conference facilitating and consultancy work for business or government. George Negus was brought up in Queensland, he is presently based in Sydney, and has accepted an appointment as an Adjunct Professor at Queensland University of Technology to take effect in 2007.

Dr Lee Duffield is a Journalism Lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology. During more than twenty years as a journalist with the ABC he worked in several roles, in Brisbane, Sydney and Perth, and overseas as its European

Correspondent. His doctoral thesis recounted his experiences reporting on the fall of the Berlin Wall. Lee Duffield also worked in public affairs, as a Senior Ministerial Media Advisor in the Queensland Government, and for a short time with Australia's High Commission in New Zealand. He says that as an academic over the last ten years he has been working for the best professional preparation for journalism, and high standards of journalism in the future.

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