

Australian Studies in Journalism 9: 2000, pp.3-14

A golden age for journalism?

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The information explosion demands good journalists to make sense of a complex world and explain it to busy readers.

I spend a fair bit of my life making mordant comments about journalism, not least when I am talking to teachers and fellow practitioners of it but I want to start on a positive note by observing that at some stage in the future most of us will think that this was a golden age for our craft, and look back on it lovingly. Whether they will think that we squandered our opportunities, I do not yet know, but when I move from this to talking about some of the challenges for the future, I think that in the background we probably have to bear in mind some of the good things about changes that have occurred and whether we might be making better use of our opportunities.

Some background business comments first. Although most newspapers are facing declining circulations, and no one has yet found a solution for that problem, newspapers in general have never been more profitable, and what they have lost in sales of individual copies, they have more than made up in consumption of extra newsprint for those who are purchasing them. The papers, by and large, are much bigger than they were before. From an owner's point of view, that is primarily because they are carrying more advertisements and hence generating more income — for most newspapers, advertising revenue exceeds circulation revenue by four to one — but even from an ordinary journalists' point of view, that extra bulk is creating a bigger editorial hole — in most cases about twice what it was about 30 years ago. I edit a modest metropolitan daily, one, moreover, that is to a degree rationing its newsprint because of massive cost increases brought about by the decline in the Australian dollar, but, even so, we are publishing on an average day nearly 100,000 editorial words — say two full length novels — and that is about 150 percent

more than we were publishing on an average day when I first entered its doors.

I do not want to harp on the old days, good or bad, but some distance is also a time to reflect that in those days, the average journalist had only a secondary school education and lived in an environment in which it could be much more truly said than now that they were regarded by their masters as mere inputs into production, skilled workers at most, and able to be replaced at will. It is fashionable to say that one of the reasons why journalists became much more involved in commentary and analysis was because of the changes imposed on newspapers by the competition of the broadcast media, but the truth is that it has been much more a function of the fact that journalists have in the meantime acquired many more skills and much more expertise, so that habits of deference and notions of being the passive observer and recorder are no longer so appropriate. Again it is always fashionable to speak of the wicked habits and secret agendas of newspaper proprietors — and, as with the poor these will always be with us — but the fact is that compared with a generation ago, the columns of most newspapers contain an incredibly catholic variety of opinion and comment, that the interference of proprietors is today much more focused towards circulation success and the bottom revenue line than the promulgation of the views or interests of owners, and that a far higher degree of editorial freedom prevails on most newspapers than at any time in our history. Newspapers have generally become forum newspapers, seeing their best marketing opportunities in reaching out to as wide an audience as possible, rather than mere vehicles of owners' views about what the masses ought to know about. The same change is noticeable about most of the western world, though in Britain most newspapers are far more obviously tied to party lines.

By editorial freedom, I mean, of course, primarily the freedom of the editor rather than the right of every journalist to write exactly what she likes, confident that it will be published without any change. There are always choices made by editorial managers about how resources are deployed. Yet even at the individual level, most journalists have far greater freedom of action than at any time in our

history and in most cases of which I am aware the journalist who is complaining of having too much of her copy spiked would find that defensible news judgments have more to do with it than anything which can be called censorship.

The range of human affairs about which journalists write and broadcast has massively expanded, if at a somewhat faster rate than the number of journalists hired to cover them. There are still staples of news — particularly in the front sections — politics, government, courts, police, sport, business and the town hall, for example — but there is a far greater coverage of culture and the arts, of a host of social welfare issues, of leisure and recreation, sociology, families and ordinary human problems. There are bigger and generally better magazines allowing scope for interviewing, profiling and coverage of issues and events at greater depth. Some of the journalism going into these areas may well be — is — far too sloppy and feel-good, but it would be idle to pretend that the expansion of writing into this area does not also create opportunities for new types of journalists and new types of journalism.

The journalist of today may live too ordered a life to be dedicated to comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. An increasing number of journalists are working nine-to-five hours, and in pleasant working environments. Even those who do not live a life of middle class ease are by and large far better equipped with tools of the trade than ever before. Some of the tools are physical things such as laptops and sophisticated communications equipment. Others are a little more intangible — access to the internet for reasearch purposes, enormously better access to information generally, far readier capacity to move copy and to maintain contacts with contacts and with editors. The importance of some other things now so old hat that we forget how new they are such as the photocopier, the mobile phone and the facsimile machine should also not be underestimated: it has massively increased the availability of information to us, even if it has posed some dangers too.

I do not think that there is any word I hate more than convergence, but it cannot be denied that we are already seeing an explosion of opportunities creating by old and new forms of media coming

together. Once we as journalists feared that the doing so would actually reduce job prospects for journalists, but, so far, the evidence is in precisely the opposite direction. I see a day not too far away, indeed I am hoping that the *Canberra Times* can soon start on such a project, where readers can use the Internet not only to deepen their knowledge of stories which we have delivered to them in print but which can, in effect, allow the reader to look over the reporter's shoulder — seeing the base materials, say the Prime Minister's speech, a copy of the full statement of the details of the scheme he was announcing, background archived material including reports on the subject published by other newspapers and broadcast mediums, and other statements and transcripts of comments made about it by experts and interested parties, and so on.

It could obviously not include access to information supplied in confidence, though the very establishment of such a scheme might well provide a useful discipline on those who are a little too careless in their willingness to use such sources. A fully developed scheme might even be interactive, allowing members of the public and or interested parties to make comments on the report, or issues that it raises, or matters which they think might be followed up. And, of course, one might well imagine that it might include any fresh updating material which has emerged since the report was published.

I do not think that most readers are going to be deeply interested, in part because the greater majority will either find their interest sated by proper journalistic summarisation in the newspaper, and because, in any event, it is daunting enough merely to absorb all the information in the paper without finding the need, on most issues, to examine the raw materials and, in effect, duplicate the work of the journalist. Yet some will be interested, and the sort of interest they will have complements the newspaper and the Internet site — one can scarcely do without the other.

Sticking to that point for a second, another reason for some optimism about the future of journalism is the sheer barrage of information reaching us. Once perhaps, the primary job of the average journalist was to trudge the streets or to visit offices in the search for something called news. What news emerged had to

be digested, extra information obtained and then presented in a fashion which would normally arrange the information in order of newsworthiness, of a length and placement proportionate to its importance. Today the fundamental job of most journalists involves sifting. Some of the ultimate processes are the same, but much more time is spent simply sorting through the available material and determining what is important enough to put in the paper. At the *Canberra Times*, we throw out each day at least 200 times more words than we publish, and that is not taking into account information retrieved from archives or the internet.

We get thousands of press releases a day, increasingly not only by mail or facsimile but also by email. We get, more or less automatically, hundreds of extra items ranging from court judgments, auditor-general's reports, council minutes, parliamentary committee hansards, annual reports, and so on which at the very least demand a cursory read. The job of scanning and getting this material to responsible journalists, then making decisions about where we will place our resources, commands more and more resources each day. It is a job, of course, which engages every reporters and every sub-editor. The point that I am making here, however, is no so much in stressing some sort of internal gatekeeping role, but the increased importance of the journalist as an agent in the reader in taking on the job of sorting through this barrage so that they do not have to bother with it. The great majority, of course, have no appetite for doing the job themselves — the point which I think underlines one of the limitations of devices such as the Internet.

That explosion of information sources is much more marked on the big city newspapers. It is not so obvious with newspapers that are closely focused on much smaller communities, where often, in any event, that is a lot less information flowing around. Even there, however, are new opportunities coming from wider arrays of information now considered as news.

Of course we all know now that most of the readers have access to alternative sources of information. Those who are hungry for news do not only read, say, my newspaper. About 40 percent of newspaper readers in Canberra take at least three newspapers every

day-mercifully for me, the *Canberra Times* is one of them about 95 percent of the time. Just the same people are waking up to morning television, the ABC news and AM, are listening to other news broadcasts during the day and television current affairs shows at night. They are also using the internet, particularly when they go to work. So far the evidence is that only a very few of these very news hungry people use only one medium, or are dropping particular mediums, such as newspapers, for the Internet. The biggest consumers of news on the Internet are the biggest consumers of news in any medium.

Of course 60 percent of our newspaper-readers are taking only one newspaper — almost invariably ours, and they expect that it will contain a daily diet of all that they want and need to know about. Most of these people are not as strongly news-hungry as the others — a reason why they also consume proportionately less news in other mediums as well — but my journalists are writing for them as well, and it is a part of the professional challenge that one must make news judgments and write in such a way that one satisfies their needs too.

I mentioned earlier the problems of declining circulations. Perhaps it is in part because the increasing availability of news from other mediums satisfies an increasing proportion of those who are not so news hungry. Perhaps it is in part because we are more boring or otherwise less necessary in their lives. Perhaps it is in part because the pressures of modern life and the modern workday means that people simply do not have the time even to skim-read the equivalent of two novels. In the case of the *Sydney Morning Herald* it may even be because its new typography makes it impossible to read for anyone over the age of 45. Each of these may be a factor. But there is another one too which should be considered, because I think it as much a challenge and an opportunity as it is a problem.

Historically, beginning to take a daily newspaper as a matter of habit has been a part of settling down. We tend to do it at about the same time we get married, and acquire a mortgage. Until then, regular newspaper reading has been a rather more peripatetic thing. Now, if you consider this, one of the very relevant factors is that people are

now marrying very much later and are now very much more mobile. They do ultimately settle down. When they do, they still tend to subscribe to the newspaper. The problem for us is that it is later in their life cycle, and that, particularly during weekdays, penetrations among people aged 20 to 35 are quite poor. It tends to mean too, that the average age of a newspaper reader is older and getting older than the general population — something which makes some people think that we are ultimately doomed.

Hence all of the activity — most of which seems unavailing — about attracting younger readers and about being more meaningful, viable and relevant to the younger generation. It may well be, however, that much of this activity is counterproductive. Existing older readers find much of this pandering tiresome, and it might make some marginal older readers drop off because they do not think the paper speaks to them any more. At the same time, quite a few younger people will judge, accurately enough that much of this new hip crap was conceived and executed by some old fogie like me and continue to stay away.

I want the paper to appeal to and to talk to everyone. But more than readership demographics are involved. There is in fact a general demographic shift which deserves more recognition. The fact is that the set of older people is increasing, and will continue to do so during our lifetimes. I do not mean only the 70-plus, but also the 35-plus, the 45-plus the 55-plus and so on. Old age pyramids are beginning to turn into rectangles as younger people are having fewer children and not replacing those who pop off at the other end.

I am not sure whether we can inculcate habits which create seven-day sales to people who have not settled down. What I do know is that the number of people who have settled down will be bigger in the future than it is today, and that so far, Internet or not, they are quick to pick up the habit. And, forget for a moment the fads of some people for the youth market. The most significant market for the advertiser, the set of people with the greatest consumption and the greatest disposable incomes, is precisely in the field of people who tend to acquire newspaper-buying habits. Without being too vulgar about it, while marketeers chase that spending the future of

good newspapers is assured. In that context, good may mean newspapers which treat that section of the market most seriously.

Ah but will not that market progressively wither as the internet takes over. If you want to buy a house, is it not much more convenient to do it on a screen, where you can search it by any number of criteria, such as price, location, number of bedrooms and so on, then do a virtual walk through the house, see it from 10 perspectives, and, probably search council and planning records and a draft contract. Can a newspaper ever compete?

Perhaps not, for someone who has decided that they want to buy a house. For them, the internet might be the place to go, assuming that they know what they want. But the problem about this is that about 60 percent of the houses sold in Canberra last weekend were sold by or bought by people who did not realise that they were in the housing market at all until they bought a copy of the *Canberra Times*. Lots of people browse the real estate. Sometimes just for a perve, or because you might incidentally gain intelligence about who's moving or divorcing or whatever. Lots of others browse it because they are curious about how house sales are going and what theirs might be worth. These are the people who are unlikely to browse through a focused internet site but who will in fact engage in more than half the transactions, once they are suddenly stirred to action by an appreciation of the value of their own house or the realisation that there is a better one more cheap than they thought.

It is much the same with positions vacant advertising. By and large, those who will scroll through computer screens of vacant jobs are those who are unemployed or who are discontent with their present jobs. If you are in secure employment and reasonably happy, you are far less likely to be searching. But those who are advertising jobs particularly want the interest of just those people — those whose interest will be stirred by a better salary or an interesting challenge if only their attention can be drawn to it.

In this respect it is sometimes useful to think of a newspaper as a busy bazaar in an Indian street, in which many hawkers are calling out their wares to people passing by. Some are just strolling, others

are focused on something, in just the same way that some readers are simply turning the pages and others are intent on a particular story. Yet everyone can be distracted, and the real pickings come not from those who were always going to buy but those who were suddenly brought to a realisation that this — whatever it is — is a bargain.

It is still the mass audience that a good newspaper can deliver to its advertisers. A high proportion, of course, may not be attracted at all. Similarly, a few may have searched out and bought the goods even had there been no ad. In the middle are those who might be sold.

The point that I am coming to here is that in this context newspapers might be making a mistake in filling up the middle and back of their paper with gay little sections dealing with food and wine, and cars, and lifestyle and going out. These magazines and sections may be self-selecting readers but not be interesting enough that the casual reader will browse them. Personally, I rather dislike these sections for personal reasons in any event. In many cases, in many newspapers, the subjects are pap and the writing is crap — and by no means subject to the same editorial scrutiny that the real stuff of a newspaper gets. Increasingly, as we in the industry have become infatuated by them as devices to get focused advertising or to appear with it, we have removed resources from real news to produce it. We have often, too, foolishly conned advertisers out of good positions on the news pages, perpetuating the notion that, somehow, news is a loss-making operation entirely subsidised by advertising. There is something distressing too in being regarded as the paper you must have to know what brands of chardonnay to take to the picnic this afternoon.

As newspapers grapple with changing demographics and lifestyles, a lot of different ones are trying different strategies. One part of the recognition that most people get their first intelligence about major news events from other mediums is in fiddling with the sort of presentations newspapers can make. We all know that newspapers can deliver more words, more detail, more twists, and more background and analysis than the broadcast mediums, but it can also experiment too with better writing and more conversational styles. It can play with its mix, too, providing a richer smorgasbord of stories, some

important but character forming, some fun or off-beat, some turning more on the skill of the reporter or commentator than on the substance within. In the past few years, for example, both the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* have developed more of a magazine format right up on their front pages, with much more material presented as a read. There is a strong feeling that readers are skimming more, browsing the headlines and perhaps the opening paragraph, but that ultimately they will feel unsatisfied unless they are sufficiently attracted into at least one or two stories of substance which they have to take more time and energy to absorb. As I say, there is now a richer variety in any event, most of the time. But on top of this, much more attention is being given to devices which reward the skim or do not assume that everyone has read all of the story to date, or which work much more on techniques of narrative to bring the reader in.

There are, of course, risks with this. Having a wealth of 10-minute *Herald* devices — in the case of the *Herald* up to three sets of summaries — can underline how disposable the papers are. Presentations which take a sense of urgency out of the news can also suggest that this story might be interesting to read, if one has the time, but is not essential. There are a lot of magazines about, some more frankly focused on entertainment than most newspapers. There is a risk that the newspaper will be seen as yet another magazine, and ultimately disposable if one is time-poor or making hard money choices.

We have not yet seen the day when production technology has improved to the point where the sub-editor's focus is allowed to be primarily on the content and the words, rather than on typesetting and composition. Yet we have gone some distance along the way, masked in part by the fact that we are mostly more sophisticated in using graphics, tables and other devices to help with our presentations and make our stories more interesting. Here too are opportunities for journalists as well as graphic artists, and here too we are learning quite a bit from techniques pioneered on the internet.

How well are we training younger journalists for this golden age. I am sure that our young journalists are brighter and better equipped

to cope with some of the classic tasks of the journalist than ever before, but if I remark that they are only marginally better equipped, mostly in research skills, in the newer tasks than the older journalist, then that is not so much a criticism of journalism schools as a reflection of the fact that we are all learning most of it as we go along. Speaking for myself at least, I would much rather that a bright young person was well-schooled in the basic professional and craft skills and learning on the run some of the new ones than that they were completely adept in the new ones but woefully ignorant of how to get a story and how to put it together. Many of your graduates, in any event, will do their apprenticeships on newspapers, or on jobs within newspapers, where the older skills are much more significant in any event.

Some of the good things come from a high financial focus by newspaper managers, but that, of course, has its downside too. There is a lot more focus on the bottom line, and, newspapers being very labour-intensive, the factor that one can most fiddle with are journalists jobs and rewards. The more mechanistic employers are putting a lot of silly faith in spreadsheets and on productivity measures — the average number of stories written by, words written, pages shifted by a sub, and so on, in the process killing an awful lot of enthusiasm and excitement in newspapers, and, probably, slowly shifting some of them rather more towards advertiser-friendly copy. The publisher-editor phenomenon is also reinforcing this. There is now, moreover, probably a greater divide between the top and the bottom of the profession, and not only in rewards and status, but in the type of work that people are doing. Ordinary reporters, in particular are two bob a dozen, still very necessary, but increasingly able to be regarded as being able to be bought off the shelf, and fairly indifferently at that, as circumstances require. Those who have that philosophy, of course, prefer them cheap. Sub-editing is increasingly a skilled craft still in demand, but there are definite limits to how far one can go in this field. The challenge of writing career paths, and of training, nurturing and developing staff is still the greatest one, perhaps the one most easily ignored, not least in this age where, for a change, most newspapers have a reasonably high capital investment

and accordingly find it easier to forget that their most valuable capital asset walks out the door each day.

I think that there are still challenges of finding hungry journalists, and, particularly ones of keeping them interested. But for those who are looking for meat, I suggest, there have never been so many wild animals out there.

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