

The changing role of a newspaper editor

Jack Waterford

Newspapers face new challenges because of the ready access readers have to alternative sources of information, including the burgeoning Internet, as well as the problem of journalists connecting effectively with their readers. Editors are expected to have more understanding and responsibility for marketing and revenue, and to produce quality newspapers while the proportion of their editorial staff deployed to revenue-raising work is increasing. The new environment creates fresh opportunities, with rewards for imagination and energy — but core professional values in journalism must be maintained.

One of the things which editors and journalists are currently muttering about under their breaths is the feeling that there has never been a time in which journalists, particularly newspaper journalists, have been less influential within the corridors of government. A John Howard, one might remark, is not much affected by what he reads in newspapers, though he is said to pay rather more attention to how the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* plays things than the way, say, it is played by the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Age*. When he speaks to journalists at all, it is usually in controlled doorstep interviews, in which he rattles off some pre-prepared line for the broadcast media and does not submit himself to questions. And he goes on to talkback radio, where he can speak directly to his audience without having his words twisted by or interpreted by a journalist. At best, most of the time, the print journalists who are reporting him are confined to picking up and quoting from the transcripts issued by his office, and, perhaps, weighing the spin placed upon it by his retinue against the spin placed upon it by his enemies. The transcripts, those who are mordant about the fate of newspapers might note, are available on the Internet.

It is not merely the lack of access, or his, and his colleagues' unwillingness to submit themselves to close scrutiny which is the problem. Whether because of that or otherwise, the problem is that very little of the agenda of the politicians appears to be being set by newspapers. The politicians might well be running on some of the issues which are on the newspapers' front pages, but, all too often, the newspaper is doing not much more than reporting what has been said by others. All too often, however, the newspaper has played little role, other than as a transmitter, of disclosing fresh facts to which the politicians have been forced to respond.

All too often, one might add, while one is continuing down this mordant line, there has been little news which has first been brought to the attention of readers by the newspaper anyway. It is not merely the fact, which has been going on for more than a generation, that radio and television, (and now the Internet) can and do bring spot news to the attention to most potential readers 12 or more hours before a newspaper hits the street. It is not merely a function of the fact that, within the past few decades, the broadcast media have ceased to draw up their news budgets from the front pages of the morning newspapers, but instead edit their material in such a way that it is, as often as not, the writers who are following them.

But it is also a reflection that the more serious broadcast media, particularly the ABC, are running extensive analysis and commentary as well as spot news, and where the influence and expertise of, say, a Laurie Oakes, a Kerry O'Brien or a Fran Kelly can stand up against anything that print has to offer.

Now add to this the fact that newspaper circulations are in long-term decline, and are now running at levels possibly a half of where they stood a generation ago. Add in, moreover, the evidence of increased use of the Internet. This is going up not only in absolute terms, but particularly among that class of people who are very information hungry, whose loyalty, one might think, is most critical for the survival of the newspaper.

We used to say, after all, that among the advantages of the newspaper over other media was the fact that it conveyed information in a permanent form, that it typically could provide more space, and thus more information and more detail, than any alternative, and that the production cycle also allowed that time for reflection whereby one could get context, analysis and understanding. It is by no means clear that any of these advantages still exist, or that, where they do, that they will continue.

There are, of course, some things that can be put against such gloom. One might note, for example, that newspaper profits have never been higher. Nor have their shares prices. Virtually every Australian newspaper of any substance has invested tens, sometimes hundreds, of millions of dollars in new printing presses over the past decade, investments which are calculated on being around for a long time. It is true that the circulation of newspapers has fallen, but the size of the average newspaper has not: the consumption of newsprint by metropolitan Australian newspapers has doubled in a generation and is still increasing. That newsprint, of course, is increasingly going into new sections — thick with advertisements — focused on lifestyle, and motoring, and food, and wine and travel and computers and so on, which claim to be successful in attracting or holding on to readers.

Anyone who publishes a newspaper, of course, accumulates an incredible amount of data. Increasingly that data is being recycled for profit in a range of ways — on Internet sites, in syndication among other newspapers within a group, in focused material directed at particular audiences, and, around the world, if not so much in Australia, which has its cross-media rules, in television, radio and pay broadcast media. The use of some of these media to transmit printed material may seem, at first sight, a risky thing, because its availability elsewhere might seem to threaten resort to the base medium, the newspaper itself. Yet, if there are risks, they are ones which owners have put themselves in good positions to control. It is no accident that media companies, and ones based on print at that, dominate the content of most news web sites, in Australia or around the world.

Even the supposed threat to newspaper revenue from electronic classified advertising can be exaggerated, especially in situations where one player dominates a local market. It is quite true that the computer can do a better job of classifying an advertisement than a newspaper. If it's all on a computer, and you are, say, wanting to buy a house, you can search for that house by locality, or number of bedrooms, or by access to facilities, or price range or a host of other things. In due course, probably now in some places, you will be able, once you fix upon a particular house, to do a virtual walk through it, or inspect its plans, or visualise it once the hallway is painted green.

The problem is in getting people to visit such a site. What it will attract, assuming that there is no problem about the marketplace being hooked up to computers, is the class of people who are conscious that they want to buy a house at that moment. But the newspaper, as a mass product, can bring in a much wider marketplace, one just as important to those involved in buying and selling, or, just as importantly, in playing middleman. Our real estate columns are read by people who are not aware that they are in the housing market, but who read them to windowshop, or to make some guess about the value of their own property, or to see what X is expecting for theirs. In just the same way, our for sale columns are read by people who did not realise that they were in the market for a cot, or a bookcase, until the availability of a cheap one was drawn to their attention. As a marketplace, that is, the newspaper is like walking through a busy marketplace in the street. The Internet, all too often, is a shop in a back alley, that you know about only after you consult the pink pages.

There's more than a lot of that of course, about news itself. I can — I do — program a computer to search various Internet sites to find material which is of interest to me, and it would be quite possible now to design for every news-hungry person in Australia their own site in which news is ranked in order of importance according to their pre-order. I used to be able to say, ah yes, but no pre-order can make sure that an unexpected event, such as an earthquake in Turkey or the self-defrocking of a bishop will come up — but it is possible to organise the mix to make sure that there is placed in the diet a host of breaking stories as well as the special orders.

What will not change, however, is the capacity of the news organisation to generate such material. And, particularly at the local level, material that rival news services will find it very difficult to match. Even if I stationed 10 reporters in Turkey, I could probably not match the material, available to me anyway, coming from a host of news and other services. But there are not that many rival reporters on the ground covering community affairs in Canberra, and those who want Canberra material in their diet will generally need to come to me.

And just as significantly the newspaper will still seem to be the best menu for the smorgasbord. It is quite possible to see the newspaper as a part of the layering which HTML can offer — so that, in a short time, the ordinary newspaper will routinely publish with almost all reports, little notes saying things such as “For the full text of the minister’s speech, and details of the scheme in operation, see our web site”. A challenging time will come, indeed, when the reader will be invited, if she wants, to look, in effect, at the reporter’s notes — all of the material, the press releases and the documents, and the notes and transcripts of interviews, which she used to prepare the report. Some students of media may deconstruct these to point to systematic problems about the way that reporter went about her work; but even ordinary critical readers may get access to materials from which they can draw conclusions contrary to those presented, or nuances which the reporter, for reasons of time or space, did not think fit to offer.

The sheer volume of such raw and processed material underlines the fact for more and more journalists, the central role will not be in writing stories as such, but in selecting and editing material to be published, in whatever form. At the *Canberra Times*, for example, more than half of the professional journalists are working on the production side of the paper. They are making editing decisions — deciding what stories to use and where. They are making presentational decisions — how to display it, and, increasingly, with what extra devices such as graphics, tables, dot point summaries and so on. They are working up copy which has been chosen so that it fits space allocated, meets standards of accuracy and so on.

My first job in journalism was as a copyboy, and one of the jobs I had was to clear the telex machines, picking up takes of stories and putting them, according to subject, on the sport, or the finance, or the world, or the general news desks. On a typical day, there would be about 200,000 words or so of such materials coming from about eight machines. On top of that, of course, would be the press releases which came in by mail or which were picked up by roundspeople, and documents such as reports in parliament, court judgments, shire council agendas and minutes and so on — a confection from which we put out perhaps 40,000 editorial words a day — about a short novel.

Last week, we published 639,102 editorial words — averaging about 91,000 a day — in 1181 separate reports — about 170 reports a day if you count columns of briefs as though they were single stories. That's more than twice the output, but the rush of material in — and these days not only from the old sources but also by the computer, the fax and email is such that we are probably using only about half a per cent of the material which is readily available to us. It is the job of sifting through that material — say 20 million words a day — for that which is interesting, which is the most time and resource-consuming part of our work.

That task, of course, is engaged in at all levels of journalism — indeed it is the reporter who plays the major role in getting much of the material down to manageable shape. They may not do much combing of our world news, or many other sections, but it is they who will be combing through the press statements, the court judgements, the annual reports and so on to determine whether there is any material of interest. And in many cases, of course, it is they, whether by inquiries from real persons, or by Internet trawlings, or use of the library or whatever, who will bring into the selection process not only the material which has come in of its own accord, but that which casts some light upon it. It is not unknown, indeed, for their inquiries to reveal some story which did not come in of its own accord.

Now one may ask why, if there is so much extra material available and being published, so much more interesting a smorgasbord on offer, why fewer people are lined up to partake.

One of the obvious answers is that there is now a much greater competition in the marketplace for news and ideas. Some people are getting what they want elsewhere — though it is my experience that those who are hungry for news will devour it in any medium: I do not fear that news junkies will desert newspapers for the Internet. But not everyone is a news junkie. There are many in the marketplace who have little appetite for news and who have discovered they can do without it. Our market research shows that, in many cases, one could not give our product away to them.

They don't need news in the old way — or, if they do, they can get it from an array of sources and will go to newspapers only when it is necessary. I would like to believe that our phenomenal Saturday circulation is a function of my excellent column in our special Saturday magazine, but it may owe more to the car ads.

Even among those who are not positively hostile to newspapers, there are many who find that one can survive without them, at least for a while. The population has never been better informed, so that, when there are fresh events, it is easier to fake it from listening to radio or television broadcasts, or even by chatter at the office.

Moreover, the avalanche of information, even after it has been pre-sorted in the way I have described, is such that many people perceive that less and less of it is actually vitally important for them to know. Those extra 50,000 words do not often contain critical information, but they can make the paper more daunting.

The feeling that close readership of the news is not essential is reinforced if news judgments are awry. During the 1980s, Paul Keating boasted that the economic literacy of the population was increasing in leaps and bounds, and every parrot in every pet shop was talking about micro-economic reform. That might be so, but even when we all knew the balance of payments or the current account deficit was very, very important, most of us were bored witless by them and read, at most, only the headline and the first few sentences of any such reports. I suspect that this was so even for readers of the *Financial Review*.

Many of those who think that such material is riveting have been shaping other news judgments, and dismissing whole areas of interesting human activity as unimportant.

Similarly, we have often been guilty of boring our readers with many of our reports about politics and about policy. These should be interesting and important topics, and are when they are written with imagination and an eye and ear for the reader's attention. We must remember, of course, that we live in an age when there is increasing popular cynicism about politics and public institutions. Now this could increase interest in politics, but, too often, our readers have turned off not only our politicians but what is written about them as well. The tendentiousness of some of our copy, or its focus on some areas, however worthy, of little interest to readers has not helped either.

There are some alarming portents on the horizon in this regard, quite apart from some truth in the comment I reported earlier about journalists never being less influential in national political debates. Take three recent elections. At the 1999 Victorian election, Jeff Kennett was able to make the media a major part of the issue, and then to use that fact to avoid answering questions. They were out of touch, he said. They did not really know what was going on, or what was concerning people or what was of interest to them. As it turned out, neither did he, but there was nothing about the coverage of the campaign which demonstrated that experienced political journalists were in fact in touch. No one, including I must confess myself, seemed to have any inkling of the result — a fact which has not stopped us all explaining, at great length, from the next day on, just exactly what Jeff Kennett did wrong. One might, of course, say much the same of much of our journalistic expertise on Indonesia and Timor.

At the past two federal elections, there has been almost no role for journalists to ask questions. Major party campaigns are so tightly organised that political leaders never have an unchoreographed moment: their minds dread the idea that all might go awry if, by accident, a journalist asked a question which stumped the boss. It's too risky. Indeed the major stories from their highly-scripted affairs is, often, some slight deviation from the script. Yet again, indeed, much

of the text of statements actually made come from picking up transcripts of talkback programs and doorstops. I can no longer see any reason for going on the zoo trail, except as a sort of deathwatch.

In such campaigns, one of the reasons that the conservative parties, in particular, will use for bypassing the press is that they see it as out of touch, and biased. The evidence used for this is not only the sort of material on actual bias or predisposition that John Henningham has published.

It comes also from the fact that the party's own polling often shows that press gallery preoccupations are of little interest out in the electorate, but that other issues, of which many of the journalists seem almost entirely unaware, are running strongly but being ignored. The contempt, in short, is professional — we are not doing our jobs.

The charge, moreover, that journalists identify with — indeed see themselves as a key part of — an intellectual opinion-forming elite, but are out of touch with what ordinary Australians think, resonates well in the electorate. It is not hard to find journalists more arrogant and dogmatic than Paul Keating, and it is not difficult to make some Australians focus their resentment on them.

As Pauline Hanson did. There were times when the Hanson campaign, badly derailed, set up confrontations between journalists and Hanson supporters as their only way of guaranteeing headlines.

Now by no means is all of the criticism deserved. But there is not only a germ of truth in much of it, and so little evidence of self-correcting mechanisms, that we can hardly be surprised about some cynicism by our readers.

In this context, of course, it is as well to remember that fashionable grab-bags of ideas about “the media” are not always very discriminating about which media, or which people, are being stereotyped. When it is time for generalisation about, say, privacy, it is by the conduct of the *London Sun* that we are judged; when it comes to public interest and common sense, by a Mike Willesee and the Kangai siege, and when it comes to ethics, it is by John Laws.

Now we all might spend some time asserting that we should not be judged by the lowest common denominator, but the truth is that we have often not demonstrated that the professional standards of our trade are any better than the example on which the public might pick. Even some of the quality newspapers are open to serious attack on issues of accuracy, privacy, respect for dignity and ethical standards. They are open to attack for their practices, what they actually do. But they are also open to attack for what they do not do — which is the setting and enforcement of standards, and being seen to do so.

A number of newspapers now have published codes of professional practice, but some still have not. The Laws affair has forced a number of media organisations to examine their own practices — with results which have often horrified editors — and to seek some consensus on ethical practices.

The problem we have in this area is often made worse by the fact that the professional standards which most of us would take as read in fields such as politics or finance are often not being applied in other, growth, sections of our newspapers. On some Australian newspapers, the perks available to journalists writing about, say, travel, computers, cars, fashion or entertainment are such that I am surprised the jobs are paid at all; they should be let out on tender.

There are now professional problems about new and highly unofficial types of advertorial — not copy written as a condition of the placement of advertisements, but copy written in fulfilment of unspoken agreements about the mutual exchange of compliments. In many cases, of course, not only are these entirely private and improper deals made by journalists, but editors have been slow to detect them — not least because they have never paid much attention to the stuff at the back of the paper, so long as there are no complaints from the management team — which is to say the advertising department.

This stuff at the back of the paper is a problem of another sort. On not a few newspapers, a quick glance at a budget will give the impression that the staff and resources are growing, and have been consistently over a period. The truth is, however, that a higher and higher proportion of that staff are working in detached areas preparing

material for magazines and sections which are revenue-focused. Sometimes it seems as if there is a new one every week, and so stale are most of the ideas that most need to be reinvented and relaunched with a year in any event. Their content, again, may not be advertorial as such, but if it doesn't match the market research, the journalist will know about it soon enough.

Staffing these sections, and making these sections seem light and bright and attractive to advertisers is consuming more and more time and resources on newspapers — even if, as I say, too little of the time is being devoted to supervising content and establishing and upholding professional standards. At the same time, of course, such sections are becoming more and more important to the newspaper's revenue base.

There's a risk here which is not being managed well. The subject matter of many of these sections is already well covered in the ordinary magazine market. But the sections inside a newspaper have a head start over the magazines, not only for having the appearance of being a free bonus, but by being able to leapfrog off the circulation of a mass newspaper. In the trade, of course, there is great controversy about the capacity of some of these magazines to claim audited circulation.

In any event, no one seriously pretends that a magazine called *Drive*, or *Metro*, or *Domain* or *Icon*, to pick just a sample of one newspaper's offerings, would be snapped up separately from the newspaper. Even picked up if they were free. Rather, we like to think, they add value to a paper, but are bought with the package because the package contains news — that is, fresh information about important events. It is on the success of the newspaper that these magazines and sections depend.

The point I am making is that if we either starve the news section of resources, or, if we take our attention off the news in a way that it misses the market, then both sides of the product will ultimately fail. On too many newspapers, alas, the feeling of the managements seems to be that the back of the paper is too much subsidising the front, and that the consequence should be that the front takes another shave.

There is another risk too, of course. If, in the search for circulation, we make the front of the paper, the news section, look more and more like a magazine, some readers will treat it as such, rather than as a newspaper. That is to say that they will buy it when they want something to read, but not especially so as to find out what is going on. In such a marketplace, of course, it can be difficult for a newspaper to compete against *Who* magazine.

Another of the modern pressures on editors is to engage in one form or another of booster journalism. In many cases, straight conflict of interest is involved, because the newspaper corporation itself has an interest in the idea or the thing being boosted. The obvious current example is the Olympic Games, but, in this town, rugby league would do as well. In the more obvious cases, the journalistic conundrum is not merely the conflict of interest, obvious as that is, so much as the fact that the event or thing in question actually happens to be of legitimate news interest. One can — sometimes one must — write about it, but how will a skeptical public even believe that the newspaper is disinterested?

In other communities, the conflict is not necessarily one of the financial conflicts of interest of owners. They can be the pressure to suspend journalistic judgment because a project is worthy, or community focused, or might generate jobs or whatever. One sees it from the way the media allow themselves to be used by health and welfare groups who unilaterally announce that this week is Diabetes Week or this day is Scrofula Day, or whatever, and expect uncritical coverage of material which, however informative, does not contain news. But it is more insidious, I suspect, when there is an economic tinge.

There are areas in Australia which have been doing it tough and which are looking for projects which stimulate employment and growth. There are politicians and businessmen who gather together to devise such projects, which are, of course, worthy of legitimate news interest which might be expected to be reasonably sympathetic. It is perfectly reasonable to expect a journalist or a newspaper to be a champion of its own community.

But that community is generally best championed by the media's maintaining some distance and detachment too. If the cause is good, it will invite its own support. If, on the other hand, the newspaper's enthusiasm for a cause, however worthy, makes it a mere puff sheet, it is not only its credibility in this field which suffers. Yet all often, managements, and, sometimes, either editors, are jumping on board such projects in ways that are clearly compromising their primary asset — believability.

And, sometimes, of course, you can be damned if you do, and damned if you don't. In my city, for example, we have a chief minister who, like the departed Jeff Kennett and your own dear premier has a soft spot for sporting coups, whereby, at vast public expense, games, races, tournaments and what have you are lured to our city. The doing so, of course, brings in tourists by the million. These spend millions of dollars in money, which circulates around the city creating jobs and, so, is a good thing. Heaven help you, in any event, if you suggest otherwise. One will be accused of being anti-Canberra, and anti-jobs.

One of the legends of the newspaper on which I work is of John Douglas Pringle, who became managing editor of the *Canberra Times* in 1963 at the time the newspaper passed from the hands of the Shakespeare family into the Fairfax Empire.

John Pringle was a great journalist. Before he came to the *Canberra Times* he had been deputy editor of the *Guardian* and of the *Observer* and editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He was, before he retired, to edit the *Sydney Morning Herald* again, spending as many years as I have been in journalism as editor or deputy editor of a substantial newspaper. He was, of course, a brilliant writer of great ideas. Yet, whether as a manager or as an editor, he sometimes seemed to have only the haziest ideas about what was involved in the physical production of a newspaper.

He knew, for example, nothing at all about typography. On one occasion he wandered out to the linotypesetting department of the *Canberra Times* with his leader and said to one of the setters: "Now, I think I have made a very important point here. Could that be put in that — you know — that slanty type."

I'm a bit italic myself, and used to tell that tale to excuse some of my own ignorance about some of the finer points of the newspaper production process. I became an editorial executive at a time when it had become unusual for a person to reach such a position without extensive experience on the sub-editors' table, and I had none, though it was a deficiency I was soon forced to remedy. But it was not the only deficiency.

The modern editor needs to know about a lot of things which I like to think did not distract John Pringle too much from the essentials of journalism. One now has to know about spreadsheets, and rosters and annual leave and industrial awards, about computer systems and raster image processors, and mysterious devices which integrate pictures and text on a page. One has to know something of marketing and circulation, about the affairs of the advertising department and the accounts departments, and, though there is nothing particularly new about editors having to keep within budgets, or be held to account for a newspaper's circulation or, at least to some extent its revenue, the tools and techniques for doing so are of a sophistication beyond all imagining a few decades ago. There are many many more meetings, and many many more internal pieces of paper to sign.

Moreover, that editor no longer lives in an environment in which he exercises power in an autonomous way, but is increasingly a part of a management team.

As a recent series of articles in the *American Journalism Review* put it, there was once a time when "editors ruled their world like princes. No more. In today's corporate environment, their roles have multiplied even as their clout has waned".

Actually, I am not entirely sure that a John Pringle would necessarily agree that his life as an editor was idyllic, scarcely ever troubled by mundane considerations such as budgets or rosters, or worries about the advertising revenue. He might also point out that I, and most other editors like me, enjoy a freedom of action in our journalistic functions which was unimaginable, even in enlightened newspapers, in his day, and with staff and resources and access to information out of all proportion to what he had then.

He might be telling me gently that it was not so much that all these things did not trouble him than that they were mere incidents of something which mattered more. There are not that many editors who are remembered for their skill in keeping to a budget, or who, in their declining years, would think that the trouble of doing so was worth writing about in their memoirs. There are plenty remembered for setting standards and creating and nurturing public debate.

I must say that I am an optimist in this field, not only about the future of newspapers, but about the future of journalism. I do not think that there was ever a time when imagination and energy had better prospects. The very challenge of the new situation creates a lot of opportunities. And even some of the dreaded tools of modern managerialism are capable of helping.

I do not think, however, that we are going either to scale new heights or find new readers if we abandon core professionalism and standards. It is about these that editors must nag themselves, their owners, their staffs, and sometimes those who share with us in the responsibility for nurturing and establishing these standards.

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