Journalism and intellectual life: the exemplary case of Donald Horne

Abstract

Anti-intellectualism is widely seen as a feature within the modern mass media but it is also widely accepted that much debate about ideas occurs through the mass media and that, for example, the mass media has been the prime vehicle for public intellectuals. In this paper, we examine this paradox and will argue that there is a strong case that journalism, or parts of it, can be regarded as a form of intellectual practice. We do this by reference to a case study that examines the journalism of commentary and opinion and its use in fashioning a political and social agenda. This concerns Donald Horne's use of the magazines *The Observer* and the *Bulletin* to develop a public debate about Australian politics, society and culture. From this debate emerged the book *The Lucky Country* (1964) that set an agenda for public debate for at least ten years.

Keywords: anti-intellectualism, Donald Horne; journalism; mass media; ordinary people; public intellectuals;

Introduction

Anti-intellectualism is widely seen as a feature within modern mass media but it is also widely accepted that much debate about ideas occurs through the mass media and that, for example, the mass media is the prime vehicle for public intellectuals.

In this article, we examine this paradox and will argue that there is a strong case that journalism, or parts of it, can be regarded as a form of intellectual practice. Within this framework, moreover, we argue that journalism is one way of intervening in, and influencing a society's public life. By this we do not mean influence at election times or in other directly 'political' ways but by shaping the cultural concepts employed by many people to understand their society. In other words, we will consider journalism not just as the first draft of a nation's history, but also as a social communication practice linked with cultural development and nation-building.

As P. David Marshall recently noted, 'the power of the public intellectual, at its core, is the capacity to make ideas move through a culture' (2015: 123). This article examines the way Australian public intellectual Donald Horne influenced national

debates in the 1960s about politics, society and culture through the journalism of ideas. Specifically, we examine how this formed the basis of his book *The Lucky Country* that is widely acknowledged as setting an agenda for public debate for a decade after its publication in 1964.

The claim that Australia is an anti-intellectual society recurs frequently in literature about Australia's intellectual life (see, for example, Marshall & Atherton, 2015; Carter, 2004; Head and Walter 1988). Horne himself referred to 'the extreme anti-intellectualism of many educated Australians' (1965: 235). Journalists are commonly identified as part of the problem of anti-intellectualism both in Australia (see, for example, Wark, in Dessaix, 2001: 26-27), and elsewhere, for example, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Media* (Claussen, 2004). In this literature, journalists and intellectuals are often seen to be at opposite poles -- the immediacy of journalism, its reliance on official sources and its everyday vernacular seems to stand in opposition to the kinds of abstract, reflective and critical types of knowledge favoured by intellectuals. Scholars are known to despair at the shallow news treatment of their research and journalists often lament the lack of straight-talking academic experts.

We recognise these oppositions but we argue that the work of journalist-intellectuals such as Horne challenges this sense of incompatibility and we draw attention to journalistic practices that invite both ordinary people and scholars to participate in intelligent discussion of social and political issues.

Horne is not alone as an exemplar of the thesis that journalism as a practice and the mass media as a venue can both be part of the intellectual life of Australia (Buckridge, 1999; Van Heekeren, 2010, 2015). For example, Patrick Buckridge acknowledges that intellectuals and intellectual works appears regularly in the mass media both in columns by well established intellectuals and through occasional contributions from lesser known intellectuals in academia, politics, literature and the law (1999: 186). Buckridge's study is particularly interesting because his main evidence is based on the work of three editors of daily newspapers as intellectuals. The three editors are Brian Penton (*Daily Telegraph*, 1941-51), John Douglas Pringle (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1952-57, 1965-70) and Paul Kelly (*The Australian*, 1991-96).

Answering the question 'why editors?' Buckridge says that ideas and positions can

be mediated and disseminated by editorial management strategies: 'In this respect the organising, coordinating, directive and often pre-emptive role of the editor may be just as important intellectually as any individually authored contribution -- including even the editor's own editorials and occasional articles' (1999: 186). The three selected by Buckridge shared an intention to integrate the roles of editor and intellectual and all of them 'seem to have made it work' (1999: 187). Essentially this is what we will argue about Horne.

Donald Horne and journalism

Donald Horne is one of a number of prominent Australian public intellectuals — including Morag Fraser, Catharine Lumby and David Marr — who started their working life as journalists. His career is a useful illustration of the bridge between journalism and the intellectual life of a country. It offers a way of unravelling the paradox of public intellectuals who have a close and enduring connection to the mass media irrespective of the anti-intellectualism typically found in the popular press (Buckridge, 1999). Horne's status as a public intellectual and his later status as a professor at the University of New South Wales was paradoxical in another way, since he had never completed an undergraduate degree let alone achieved a doctorate or higher degree.

Nevertheless, his work has many characteristics associated with traditional intellectual work. For example, his prodigious output of books and articles were the result of detailed research and his life also offers a way to explore in what ways journalism can be connected to the traditional intellectual's role of creating and spreading knowledge.

Horne's contribution was unusual in a country in which anti-intellectualism is paired with an historical anti-elitism. Also unusual is his political trajectory beginning as a cold war warrior and intellectual of the Right in a country in which much of the intellectual life was dominated by the Left, and then evolving from the late 1960s towards a left-liberal position.

Horne began his career as a journalist at the end of World War Two on the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, a tabloid newspaper of the kind that no longer exists. As well as news stories written in measured style it carried frequent and thoughtful feature articles written on issues of current policy. Horne always had mixed feelings about journalism and its worth. Early in his career he clipped stories from back issues of the *Telegraph* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, compared them and tried to understand more about journalism. After several hours studying 'I flushed all the clippings down the lavatory in case someone found them and thought I was taking journalism seriously' (1986: 206). Yet his time as a news reporter and later, his time in the prized position of feature writer, shaped his factual style and more importantly, encouraged him to learn the habits of research needed for commentary on contemporary society and politics.

The idea for a book that became *The Lucky Country* began as early as 1946, shortly after Horne had begun work as a casual reporter on the *Daily Telegraph*. His early, uncompleted notes on the book included his views that 'the theory of democracy was a swindle; that Canberra had the mentality of a small frontier settlement; that Australian nationalism was arrogant pep-talk...that many politicians were openly prejudiced against modern trends toward sex equality and saw women as wives and mothers but not as citizens; and not one of them could be described as liberal. They were all book-banners and intolerant bourgeois moralists' (1986: 202). Such themes reflected the influence of John Anderson the professor of philosophy at the University of Sydney and an inspiration for libertarianism in Sydney's limited intellectual life. After sketching the proposed book, which was a prototype of *The Lucky Country*, he was offered a permanent job at the *Telegraph* and let the project lapse, along with a planned novel.

But both projects were conceived because Horne was very keen to make a mark beyond journalism. The novel itself had earlier supplanted what he called his 'book about Australia' because the latter 'would be mere journalism' (1986: 257). This split between journalism and his world of ideas is captured in his recollection that, on the one hand, his intellectual life consisted of reading Dostoyevsky, thinking of Proust and planning to write a novel while on the other, his practical life consisted of writing 'Terrified kitten causes peak hour traffic hold-up' in the staccato *Telegraph* style. Horne always wanted to make a mark bigger than that allowed by journalism.

He recalled later, '[A]lthough my name might appear in the *Daily Telegraph* two or three times a week, it was on the jackets of books, not in a newspaper, that I wanted to see "By Donald Horne" (1986: 366).

Horne was an autodidact. While working as a journalist he set himself an extensive program of reading both literature and sociology. One of the significant influences on Horne particularly in the light of his setting a social and political agenda through *The Lucky Country* was the Telegraph's editor, Brian Penton. Penton had written a pamphlet *Think --Or Be Damned* in 1941 that attacked 'the philistinism of Australians, their deference to authority, the looting of the land, their dispossession of Aboriginal society, their anxious White Australia policy' (2000: 3). Similar themes would be taken up in Horne's planned book, but, in Horne's view, Penton's pamphlet had been too angry and, significantly, 'far too journalistically superficial' (2000: 3).

Penton's editorial approach was also an inspiration of *The Observer*, a short-lived magazine which Horne edited. His experiments with set piece public discussions in the *Telegraph* during the war and post-war periods had expressed 'a belief in the possibility that, if you take the trouble, you can give people something to think about' (2000: 4). The other inspiration was Anderson from whom Horne learnt to value diversity and the fact that Australia was a pluralist society: 'This was to leave me...more open to accepting surprises about Australia than was likely in people who believed that what "Australia" was had long since been reduced to an essence, bottled and labelled' (2000: 5).

The creation of The Observer and the making of a public intellectual

Horne's emergence as a public intellectual, began to develop only when Horne went beyond daily news reporting. It was only in the position of editor, with his own publication that he began to fashion an agenda of social commentary that was distinctive.

In 1958, at the age of 36, Horne began editing a fortnightly intellectual magazine, *The Observer*. *The Observer* was the fulfilment of a promise by Frank Packer that if Horne successfully launched a new tabloid magazine, *Weekend*, he would support the new loss-making publication (2000: 1-2). In effect this meant abandoning the tradition of

news-centric journalism and instead embracing the older tradition of journalism as a literary or interpretive undertaking. As Horne explained in a prescient memo proposing *The Observer*, there were 'new kinds of educated Australians in the universities, the public service and in all kinds of niches in private firms' so that 'like the journals of the eighteenth century' the *Observer* could attach itself to 'a rising class who didn't really know what they thought, who they were, or where they were going' (2000: 17).

In a 1962 seminar, Horne described *The Observer's* approach as one of 'radical conservatism' and he defined 'radical' as meaning: 'that it wanted to see the shape of new problems, not simply recite recipes for the solution of old problems; in this sense, it wanted to pull to bits both reforming and conservative conventional wisdoms' (Horne, 1962: 3).

The Observer was certainly conservative. It was sceptical and highly critical of the Labor Party and the Left. Yet it was also one of the first articulators of the idea of a culturally diverse Australia. It also focussed on new issues such as the position of women in Australian society and expressed liberal views on issues such as censorship, capital punishment and what was then called 'racialism'. The Observer was folded into the *Bulletin* of which Horne became the editor in 1961. At that point, Horne argued that The Observer 'expressed a new trend in the intellectual life of Australia' and had functioned completely outside 'the existing intellectual establishment' (Horne, 1961: 3). At the *Bulletin* Horne continued to set a new cultural and political agenda although this was more difficult because the *Bulletin* had a long constraining tradition, unlike *The Observer*.

In 1962, Horne began to use the *Bulletin* to signal themes that would re-appear in *The Lucky Country*, with a six-part series called 'What's wrong with Australia?' (2000: 57). Intriguingly, the idea for this series came from a discussion with an Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) officer with whom Horne had regular contact. The ASIO officer discussed 'the importance of showing how one could be "radical" without being a Communist' (2000: 112-13; McKnight, 2008: 10-11). This expresses one of the paradoxical aspects of the writing of *The Lucky Country*. Although it was the culmination of two decades of critical reflection on Australian society, it came at a time when one of Horne's main pre-occupations was anti-

communism as editor of the culturally conservative *Quadrant* magazine as well as the like-minded *Bulletin*. Anti-communism usually took the form of a militant defence of existing society against the threat of communism. Communism itself was broadly defined as any suggestion for radical reform. Horne's own anti-communism, he said, was developing into an 'obsessiveness' (2000: 111). Years later, he reflected that there was a dissociation in this. There was 'a surrogate me doing this work' (2000: 116).

The Lucky Country: new ways of thinking about Australia

The Lucky Country was not a typical product of a journalist recounting of facts and celebrating popular tastes. Rather it was a book of ideas and social critique, aiming to set an agenda regardless of popular taste. It was good at 'putting into words a number of half-formed ideas that people have but that are not generally expressed' (2000: 130). Not everyone agreed. During the assessment of the manuscript the British head office of Penguin judged that the book would not sell enough and urged that it be re-written in a more factual-travelogue style of journalism. The new Penguin office in Australia rejected this and the book appeared as Horne wrote it: an opinionated book of social, cultural and political criticisms which sparked a massive debate and which, reprinted many times, sold around 60,000 copies in its first year, and since then has sold 260,000 copies (2000: 130).

Its most famous lines on which the often-misunderstood title is based, are: 'Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck. It lives on other peoples' ideas, and, although its ordinary people are adaptable, most of its leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise' (1965: 239). It was different from the many 'books about Australia' that were popular at the time by celebrating the actual way Australians lived – in the suburbs – rather than endlessly recounting the ethos of the Bush.

As we noted, the origins of *The Lucky Country* lie largely in Horne's construction of a new magazine (*The Observer*) and in his demolition and reconstruction of an old one (*The Bulletin*) but these efforts were only part of his work as an editor and journalist. Another part consisted of editing and designing several mass-market magazines such as *Weekend*, the *Australian Woman's Mirror* and *Everybody's* magazine. In his

autobiographical writings Horne says little about the content of this journalistic work, probably because it had little lasting intellectual content. But whatever else was achieved by his work on mass-market magazines, it forcibly put him in touch with the taste and sensibilities of ordinary Australians, something usually lacking in the circles of intellectuals and writers.

Research and ideas

The books and articles that Horne produced during his life usually relied on an enormous amount of research. For example, after a few months' holiday in Europe, which doubled as research for his 1984 book *The Great Museum*, he returned to Australia with 65,000 words of notes he had typed, which joined the 500 pages of secondary material he had researched before he left and which he had placed on index cards (2000: 237-240). This prodigious research was typical of the way that Horne bridged the journalist-intellectual divide.

Similarly, in the foreword to *The Education of Young Donald* (1975: n.p.) he noted that, 'Although it does not show, a lot of time has gone into what, in other connections, would be called research'. The autobiographical book, which takes his life from childhood to his joining the army in 1941, was based on considerable research. He later explained:

As well as sinking back into my own memories, my mother's, my grandmother's, I looked at every piece of paper I had kept from primary school onwards – diaries, school essays, letters, old books, photo albums; to check the status details of a country town such as attendance at annual balls I looked over several years' issues of the Muswellbrook Chronicle and then read a year's issues of the Daily Telegraph to get down its view of the world in 1936; I revisited all the relevant sites, including railway journeys that had survived from my boyhood, youth and student days (2000, 134).

Horne remarked on his research for *The Education of Young Donald* as a way of reassuring the reader that the book was not fictionalized and, in this way, later staked his claim as an intellectual. But in *The Lucky Country* he was not was so concerned with this aspect. He helped stake his claim in a different way when he

wrote that the book was one of 'imagination and ideas' (2000: 129). In fact, he was diffident in staking any claim to 'research':

I did no special reading before I started and I certainly didn't do any 'research'. I had my plan and I wrote the book around it. However, there was a cardboard box, in which I had thrown clippings, notes, scribbles and a small exercise book in which I had been writing 'Thoughts' about things in general; I kept in mind things I had written in the *Observer* and *The Bulletin*...and I went off to a few places to see what they looked like – beginning with South Sydney Junior Leagues Club, from which I wanted a good opening paragraph – but much of the real life feeling was already there [in his own experience] (2000: 128).

This was indeed research but it was something more than research as Horne is at pains to argue. After the publication of *The Lucky Country* in 1964, Horne became one of the first widely regarded public intellectuals in Australia.

Public life and intellectual practice

Why is it important to assert that journalism can be an intellectual practice? One reason is that it enriches the institutionally-oriented analyses of media which frequently collapses the autonomous initiative of journalists into the influence of media proprietors. In this case study, we've noted the diverging impacts of Horne's work as opposed to that of his conservative proprietor, the Packer organisation. This contrasts with Buckridge's account of the *convergence* between Paul Kelly and his proprietor Rupert Murdoch, which made for 'a powerful media instrument for conferring intellectual coherence and cogency on a range of political positions' (1999: 202). Too often, the latter is taken as the sole possible kind of relationship. Horne clearly followed the alternative 'model' of Brian Penton, using journalism as an intellectual practice to go beyond (or around) this kind of proprietor-editor relationship, with significant results.

Journalism's contribution to the public life of a nation cannot, of course, be gauged from the experience of one individual, no matter how distinguished or prolific.

Nonetheless, the Horne example can help us identify some of the general properties

of journalism as an intellectual practice. It can also help broaden the understanding of a practice that is as strongly constrained by the social conditions under which it is produced, as it is hotly contested by its critics.

Graeme Osborne and Glen Lewis's (1995) overview of Australian communication history provides perhaps the most important example of a scholarship that situates debates about the press in the broader context of Australian intellectual culture, but this approach is yet to be replicated in a specific study of Australian journalism despite some notable contributions (see, for example, Rose, 1996, Cryle, 1997, Pearce, 1998, Curthoys and Schultz, 1999). Of particular value to this study, is Osborne and Lewis's observation that there was a persistent emphasis in the 1940s —the decade when Horne got into journalism—on intellectuals breaking with the colonial past, articulating national aspirations, and 'Australianising' communication. One *Meajin* contributor well captures the mood of the day in claiming, 'A country cannot achieve nationhood until it has achieved articulateness' (Phillips in Osborne and Lewis, 1995: 77), suggesting further that talk of the 'Australian way of life' would remain superficial without vigorous and coherent debate. This article provides evidence of the ways Donald Horne took up this invitation in both his journalistic and, later, academic writing.

Three themes emerging from Horne's experience will be discussed here. First, the nature of journalism as an intellectual practice; second, how we might understand journalism's expertise; and third, the debate about intellectual leadership in journalism and the social purpose it might serve.

To what extent can journalism be seen as part of intellectual practice? Horne's experience reminds us that journalism provides different ways of writing about society that vary from daily news reporting in a 'factual' style aimed at the general reader, to agenda-setting commentary based on research and targeting elite readers. Put another way, his experience suggests we need to think of the variety of journalism practices, some more complex and difficult than others, and some more interested in working with ideas than others. While this may not be a new distinction (see Garber, 2001, Champagne, 2005), it is nevertheless a difficult one to make. The intellectual authority of all types of journalism is always challenged on the basis that academic ways of writing about and understanding society are more

logical, knowledgeable and rigorous. Even those scholars, like Marjorie Garber, who accept the contiguities between journalistic and more critical forms of writing, are reluctant to accept that they may share the same goal:

The difference is rather that the journalist of ideas attempts to explain and describe them, while the scholar of ideas attempts to think through them, to enter into and advance an ongoing intellectual discussion. Every scholarly move is part of a dialogue (Garber, 2001: 34).

The term 'dialogue' is clearly used here to refer to the formal processes of academic peer review and critical evaluation that sustain knowledge creation, processes that exist only in weak form, if at all, in journalism. The inference is therefore that journalism has little to no capacity for generating new ideas and offers little more than self-serving monologues that recycle the ideas of others. Yet this analysis misses the crucial point that journalism's generative capacity, its expertise, lies in both creating public ways of talking about ideas and in creating publics interested in those particular kinds of intelligent discussions (Lewis, 2012; Reich, 2102; Schudson, 2005).

In the latest research on journalism and expertise, Reich (2012) conceptualises journalistic know-how as a 'bipolar interactional expertise', that is, a capacity to interact swiftly and publicly with both news sources and news audiences, while Lewis (2012) highlights the growing complexity of such interactions as multi-way networked digital news-making supersedes traditional one-way publishing model. Elsewhere, Schudson (2005) takes the view that journalism's expertise should be market-oriented and 'serve democracy' rather than 'self-enclosed and separated from outside pressures' like poetry or mathematics. He says, 'journalism is not supposed to be a set of individual thinkers and explorers in search of truth but a set of energetic and thoughtful communicators who try to keep a society attuned to itself' (2005: 220).

Horne's use of journalism as a bridge toward public intellectual life suggests that he understood this interactional capacity of journalistic expertise better than many of his peers and rivals and was thus able to use it to advantage. It was this understanding, rather than a particular writing style, that linked the tabloid reporter

to the editor of a prestigious newsmagazine, the autodidact with a yen for 'culture' to the public intellectual, and the journalist to the professor.

Intellectuals are often categorised or appraised by reference to their particular expertise, so how might we further capture the expertise of journalism? One part is its capacity, noted above, to generate publics but other than this the answer is not self-evident: the work is routinely regarded as 'practical' or craft-based because it can be done (it is said) without either abstract knowledge or tertiary qualifications. Indeed, as a recent study of professionalism and expertise in journalism notes,

Journalism seems to simultaneously make a grandiose knowledge claim (that it possesses the ability to isolate, transmit, and interpret the most publicly relevant aspects of social reality) and an incredibly modest one (that really, most journalists are not experts at all but are simply question-asking generalists (Schudson and Anderson, 2009: 96).

Yet, this dichotomy is less paradoxical, if we separate and examine the vastly different practices covered by the label 'journalism'. We argue that the expertise of journalism begins to reveal itself not by comparing simple news writing to scholarly research, but by comparing everyday news writing to sustained journalistic political commentary, or by comparing simple human-interest stories to investigative reporting of complex government or corporate affairs. In this way, we see that the nature and complexity of information mediation *within* journalism varies dramatically. In that respect, the expertise of journalism involves both an understanding of the editorial demands and possibilities available in different types of outlets, as well as awareness of the unequal distribution of those possibilities across the broad territory of journalism as a whole. One telling example of this was Horne's ability to convince Frank Packer to fund *The Observer* in exchange for the successful launch of *Weekend*.

Intellectual leadership in journalism is the final issue taken up in this study. One of the most interesting aspects of Horne's trajectory was his preference for exploring ideas about political culture rather than the narrower but more familiar terrain of political journalism based on parliamentary reporting. His preference that suggested an unusual concept of journalism, one that went beyond the conventional liberal idea of journalists as a 'fourth estate' to incorporate wider concerns about national culture, identity and civil society (perhaps prefiguring the subsequent 'cultural turn' amongst intellectuals more widely).

Horne's vision of a diverse and pluralistic Australian political culture demanded a broader concept of journalism, one that allowed for a degree of intellectual autonomy by journalists and expressed a capacity for leadership of public debate on a wide range of issues and ideas. And, as the pages of *The Observer* testify, there was nothing 'modest' in this ambition. Indeed, we find evidence in his seminal work *The Lucky Country* that he was comfortable competing on equal terms with politicians and academics alike in setting a national agenda for social change.

Conclusion

To conclude, we consider how to situate Horne's contribution in the history of Australia's public intellectualism. In the recent special edition on public intellectuals (see Media International Australia No. 156, August, 2015), Marshall and Atherton (2015) point to *The Lucky Country*'s definitive critique of Australia's impoverished intellectual life in the 1960s as the source of enduring doubts about Australian public intellectuals as 'second rate' (2015: 75-77). This is a reasonable assessment. Yet, it misses a crucial caveat in Horne's analysis, that is, his belief in 'ordinary people' (1965: 17) and their capacity for 'new views of the possible' despite the constraining 'conventionalism' of the country's elites and institutions (1965: 251). Horne's core concern was to animate wide public debate about Australia's future, by establishing a productive relationship between the everyday lives of ordinary people and creative thinking about key challenges, such as 'Australia's strategic environment' and 'the demands of technology' (1965: 241). The Lucky Country directed itself to a general audience, and achieved record sales. In this way, it answered the fundamental question at the heart of Horne's critique: 'Is Australia really inimical to ideas? Or has there been something wrong with the ideas presented to it?' (1965: 25). We argue this approach is essentially journalistic and therefore situates Horne's public intellectualism as an exemplar of the productive potential of journalism as an intellectual practice that can creates opportunities for people to engage meaningfully with issues of public importance as they relate to their everyday lives.

Horne's experience enables us to see journalism in ways that are rarely appreciated. It provides evidence that certain kinds of journalism can form a bridge to other kinds of intellectual practice; it also encourages us to look for journalistic leadership beyond the realm of political reporting in order to better evaluate journalism's contribution to Australian public life.

To better understand Australian journalism's role in politics and culture, we need to explore this country's history and develop a deeper appreciation of its intellectual traditions. In this regard, both the self-effacement of journalists and popular hostility to 'the media' (including among some scholars) are obstacles. The absence to date of this kind of scholarship about Australian journalism has robbed us all of shared frameworks and lexicons for analysis and evaluation of this vital means of social communication. We have been left with little more than the 'practical' talk of journalists (captured in biographies, autobiographies and institutional histories) as the main medium for interaction and debate. Yet, the picture is not all grim. The 'practical' talk of journalist-intellectuals such as Donald Horne, and others like him, canvasses the journalism of ideas and thus helps to open up and extend discussion and research into how ideas work in journalism.

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