Tall timbers come down:  
End of independence for Tasmania’s daily press  

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Introduction

For the greater part of the twentieth century, three families ruled the Tasmanian newspaper world: the Davies family (Hobart), the Rolph-Rouse family (Launceston) and the Harris family (Burnie-Devonport). By the end of 2003, each of the three families had been dethroned: the tall timbers of Tasmania’s newspaper environment had been toppled. The Davies family, which founded the *Mercury* in 1854, sold it and some minor titles to the Herald & Weekly Times Ltd (HWT) in 1986, about six months before Rupert Murdoch launched his ultimately successful takeover of HWT (Clark 1994: pp. 25-26). The Rolph-Rouse dynasty, in its third generation at the *Examiner*, disintegrated in 1990 when Edmund Rouse was jailed for attempting to bribe a newly elected Labor politician to support the minority government of Liberal Premier Robin Gray (Tanner 1995: p. 72). Rouse’s jailing and the battering taken by shares in the media empire he controlled opened the way for Rural Press Ltd (RPL) to take over the *Examiner*. Aiding, abetting and even nudging RPL was Burnie’s Harris family, a long-time enemy of the *Examiner*. RPL took 60 per cent of the *Examiner* and Harris & Co. 40 per cent (Tanner 1995: p. 83). In 2003, RPL seemed ready to do in Tasmania what it was doing in other states: exploit the economies of scale flowing from owning more than one newspaper or printing operation in close geographic proximity. It aspired to 100 per cent control of Tasmania’s two regional daily newspapers rather than 60 per cent control of one.

The aspirations were excited by some Harris & Co. shareholders, disenchanted with low returns on their investment in the company. And so RPL turned to its *Examiner* partner of thirteen years and made a takeover offer. But, after 113 years of running newspapers on the north-west coast, the Harris enterprise refused to turn over and go belly up. RPL found itself in territory into which it says it normally would not venture: making a hostile takeover bid. A bitter struggle ensued over four months before RPL gained a majority interest, with one Harris family member making the share sale that clinched the deal. On 29 December 2003, RPL became the owners of Harris & Co.’s newspaper, printing and associated enterprises (Crowther 2004a; Thom 2004). This article will examine the implications for Tasmanian public opinion and politics of the ownership and control of the state’s two regional daily newspapers now resting in the hands of one proprietor.

Historical context

Family enterprises have long been common in Australian and overseas newspaper publishing (Kirkpatrick 2000: p.242). Less common have been dynasties – such as the Fairfaxes and Packers, of Sydney; the Symes, of Melbourne; and the Murdochs, of Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, London, New York and beyond. It is harder to pass on, through successive generations,
the talent, drive, business skills and ethos of the initiator of the enterprise than the wealth created by the family newspaper. And even if sufficient interest and skills are passed on from generation to generation, the dynasty will face pressures from without and pressures from within. On the provincial scene, as Kirkpatrick shows (2000: p. 245), dynasties have played a significant role in the survival and continuation of newspapers. In the NSW provincial newspaper environment, the Vincents, Bradleys, Motts, Pinkstones, Leslies, Fitzpatricks, Dunnets, Longmuirs and Westons seem to have demonstrated that, for a dynasty to survive, an ethos must be developed, a sense of purpose and destiny, a loyalty to the enterprise and to the principles on which it was established. Those not involved in the business like to get their hands on the inheritance to use it for their own purposes. Dynasties become increasingly fragile from the third generation onwards. Evidence of these general conclusions will be seen as the story of the Rolph-Rouse and Harris dynasties of Tasmania unfolds below.

Launceston is the birthplace of the Australian provincial press. Not only was the first provincial title established there, albeit briefly in 1825, but also the next six titles – between February 1829 and March 1839 (Kirkpatrick 2003). The first newspaper published there appeared in 1825 and was, in effect, an offshoot of the first Australian newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette*. The Launceston title, the *Tasmanian and Port Dalrymple Advertiser*, was launched on 5 January 1825 by George Terry Howe, the eighteen-year-old half-brother of Robert Howe, owner of the *Sydney Gazette*. Both were sons of the late founder of the *Gazette*, George Howe. The *Launceston Examiner* did not begin publication until 12 March 1842. Through the columns of this weekly newspaper, the Rev John West waged a strong and successful editorial campaign to end transportation of convicts to Australia. The *Launceston Examiner* became a daily on 21 December 1877. William Robert Rolph became associated with ownership of the *Examiner* in 1897, became the sole owner in 1916, and the family connection continued until 1990.

On the north-west coast, the slower-developing Burnie had to wait until 1890 before its first newspaper appeared (Kirkpatrick 2003; Tanner 1994). The *Wellington Times and Mining and Agricultural Gazette* was established as a bi-weekly by Robert Harris, aged 60, and his sons, Robert Day and Charles James. Robert had worked as a newspaperman and printer in Launceston, New Zealand and Victoria. It was, however, Charles James Harris who became the dominant person in the day-to-day running of the Burnie paper, which became a daily on 13 November 1899. Through various name changes over the years, it became the *Advocate* on 2 December 1918. The Harris family maintained its control of the *Advocate*, despite the early deaths of various family members who had assumed executive control of the newspaper: Charles James Harris at 49 in 1913; and Russell Harris at 43 in 1935. By the end of the twentieth century, the Harris family had become one of the great surviving provincial newspaper dynasties, but divisions were becoming evident.

**North versus North-West**

At the *Examiner* in the 1960s, Edmund Rouse, the brash, ambitious son-in-law of Sir Gordon Rolph, was the managing director. Rouse was constantly seeking expansion, even in what seemed to be the *Examiner*’s pre-ordained newspaper territory. He made no secret of his scorn for the Harris family. Such were the relations between the two companies that Rouse once admitted that the Harris family “would sell to the Devil before they’d sell to us”. The Harrises were a conservative, inward-looking company, ripe for the picking and Rouse devoted many thousands of dollars to pushing the *Examiner* into the *Advocate*’s market along the north-west coast. The strategy was to win the circulation battle and force the Harrises to sell the *Advocate* (Way 1992: p. 45).

Managing the *Advocate* was Lloyd John Harris, a science graduate, who brought astuteness and energy to his role and helped the *Advocate* maintain its place at the forefront of newspaper technology when it became the first regional daily in Australia to install its own
web offset press in 1968 (Pink 1990: p. 368). Lloyd Harris (2003) has strong recollections of the head-to-head battle the Advocate had with the Examiner from 1967 until the late 1970s when Rouse tried to reduce the Advocate to an easy takeover target. The Mercury had tried in the 1950s to expand significantly its circulation in Launceston, introducing a weekly in that city for a period and later inserted a Launceston section in the Mercury. Rouse, then the Examiner’s assistant manager, commented: “A paper published outside a regional area can’t possibly replace a well produced local newspaper.” Harris remarked: “That was probably the wisest thing he ever said.” Rouse ignored such wisdom in 1967 when he set out to do to the Advocate what the Mercury had tried, and failed, to do to the Examiner.

Harris & Co.’s chairman, Geoff Harris, said in 1990 the company had always faced competition from the other two Tasmanian dailies, but in 1967 the Examiner had claimed publicly that it “intended to capture half our market and become the dominant print medium in our traditional North-West and West Coast area of circulation”. Harris said: “They tried, with no expense spared, but they failed. Our employees were more than prepared to meet the challenge head-on, and our readers and advertisers stuck with us.” (Pink 1990: p.370) In the event, Rouse’s strategy was flawed because it assumed that the Advocate’s readers would desert their local newspaper. Rouse chose either to forget or ignore the parochialism that splits Tasmania into three geographic regions: the south, north and north-west. Earlier, in the fifties, Rouse had fought off the challenge from the Hobart Mercury by tapping Launceston’s parochialism (Lloyd Harris 1993). At the peak of the circulation war with the Advocate, the Examiner had only 4,000 buyers west of Deloraine, the unofficial dividing line between the north and north-west, compared with the Advocate’s 27,000. Yet the Examiner had established offices at Devonport and Burnie and produced a replated north-west edition of the Examiner. It wooed newsagents, and sent newsboys to the Gold Coast for holidays. It delivered free copies of the Examiner to north-western centres for weeks on end and offered advertising bargains (Tanner 1995: p. 75; McKendrick 2003; Lloyd Harris 2003). Geoff Harris said the Advocate’s circulation growth during the “war” was ten times that of its rival (Way 1992: p. 45; Pink 1900: p. 370).

One of the reasons for the Examiner’s failure was Tasmania’s distinctly regional and parochial structure (Tanner 1994, 1990). In a Tasmanian context strong “territorial loyalties” (Paddison 1977: p. 50) have evolved over the years. According to de Grazia, such regions do not necessarily have defined geographical boundaries, but tend to owe their existence to “the community-forming tendencies of geographical proximity, functional interdependence and homogeneity of attitudes and values” (1971: p. 315). All of these ingredients are evident in Tasmania and over the years have been promoted and played upon by the various media organisations. The reasons for Tasmania’s distinct regional structure and its impact on all aspects of life, including politics and sport, are discussed elsewhere (Tanner 1994 and 1990). It is fair to say, however, that, over the years, Tasmania’s various newspapers have, for their own financial gain, played on the parochial sentiments that such regional divisions promote. (see Pink 1986: p.14; and Tanner 1990: p.135). These attitudes help explain the responses of the Launceston and Burnie newspapers and of their broader communities to the takeover bids 13 years apart. They also explain RPL’s strategy to convince readers in Launceston and along the north-west coast that under their ownership the Examiner and Advocate would retain their local focus.

A dynasty disintegrates (I): Rolph/Rouse

The end of the Rolph/Rouse and Harris dynasties at the Examiner and Advocate respectively caught media watchers by surprise: both newspapers had appeared almost impregnable to takeover. More surprisingly, given its size and aggressiveness, the first of the companies to fall was the Examiner, owned by ENT Ltd, one of Tasmania’s largest listed companies. On Sir Gordon Rolph’s death in 1959, aged 66, the Rolph family owned the company outright and debt-free. What passed on to Edmund Rouse was an enterprise that
included not only the newspaper, but also commercial printing, radio station 7EX, real estate and shares in the Reuters news agency (Clark 1994: p. 19). The company was valued at between $750,000 and $800,000 (Clark 1994: p. 20). Under Rouse, expansion became the name of the game. In 1965, the Examiner became a subsidiary company, trading under the name Examiner Newspaper Pty Ltd. The holding company underwent a number of changes as its interests changed over the years, gradually developing significant interests in both media and non-media companies (see Tanner 1995, 1994, 1990). The former included newspapers, radio and television in Tasmania, radio and television on the Australian mainland, and radio and television in the United States. The latter included interests ranging from casinos, hotels, car dealerships, printing (including bingo tickets), cinemas and real estate.

Under Rouse, the company began to prosper. At its peak, ENT Ltd controlled Tasmania’s two commercial television stations and had a market capitalisation of $120.3 million (Clark 1994: p. 101). Although Rouse was widely considered brash and arrogant, he had a soft heart and an adventurous spirit, supporting employees when they struck difficult times and winning considerable loyalty from his executives for his innovative strategies and his trust in them (McKendrick 2003 and Whish-Wilson 2004). He was always trying to prove he could live up to the name his father-in-law established, but a knighthood eluded him.

Rouse’s reputation – and ENT’s fortunes – plummeted in mid to late 1989 when he was charged with attempting to bribe a politician after the 1989 state election. Rouse initially pleaded not guilty to the charges, but later changed his plea and was jailed for three years, fined $4,000 and banned from serving as a company director for five years (see Tanner 1995 for details). The guilty plea meant that few details of the bribe were made public through the court case. That quickly changed after the new government – Labor with the support of the Greens – was sworn in, with the new Premier, Michael Field, deciding that he would establish a royal commission to investigate the bribery attempt so that the details would be placed on the public record. Meanwhile, the charging and eventual jailing of Rouse had spelt doom for ENT as one of Tasmania’s pre-eminent businesses. ENT’s share price plummeted over the next two years. On 27 June 1989, the day Rouse was charged, he resigned as chairman of ENT Ltd, although he remained a director. The chairmanship was vested in another prominent Launceston businessman, Keith Hardman. Rouse resigned all other positions on 30 April 1990, the morning of his trial (Clark, 1994, p. 80, 84; Tanner, 1995.). Under Hardman as chairman and the television-oriented David McQuestin as chief executive, ENT Ltd decided that it would refocus the company’s core activities. The central focus would become television, even though the Examiner had long been regarded as the highly profitable jewel in the crown (Clark, 1994, p. 85. It was this latter decision that provided an unexpected buying opportunity for Harris & Co., owners of the Burnie Advocate.

A dynasty disintegrates (2): Harris

For much of its history Harris & Co had been a very conservative company. A privately owned and operated company, its share register had been tightly controlled by various arms of the Harris family until the late 1990s. The only other shareholders were a small number of long-term employees, including the Cherry family, four generations of whom had edited the paper. In fact the company had staunchly fended off suggestions that the company be listed on the Australian Stock Exchange. Management of the company had also been dominated by the Harrises, both in executive and non-executive capacities. For example, the chairmanship of the company had been handed down through the various arms of the family, as had the senior management positions such as managing director and general manager.

During the mid to late 1980s, however, the company embarked on an expansionary program. In 1985 Harris & Co. took a shareholding in a new Hobart-based start-up weekly,
the *Southern Star*, established by a number of prominent Hobart business identities. The partners believed the *Southern Star*, as a giveaway, could rival the *Mercury* as a provider of community news. The newspapers were printed at the *Advocate*’s Print Centre in Burnie and transported by road to Hobart. While relatively successful in an editorial sense, the *Southern Star* struggled to make a profit, particularly after the Federal Government legislated to ban tobacco advertising. Over the years, the *Advocate*’s stake in the newspaper increased – mainly because it struggled to pay its way. Mounting printing bills translated into a greater shareholding for Harris & Co. In March 1994 the *Southern Star* decided to challenge the *Mercury* in the lucrative real estate advertising market. The newspaper was expanded to encompass four versions: the *Bay-City Star*, *Eastern Shore Star*, *Glenorchy Star* and *Kingborough Star*. Initially it appeared that the tactic would work, but News Ltd signalled that it would not give up the lucrative real estate advertising market without a fight (Catchpole, 2004). It poured millions of dollars into its real estate section to buy back its market share and to force the *Southern Star* out of business. It worked. In December 1995 the *Southern Star* closed. The *Southern Star* is widely believed to have been a major drain on Harris & Co. Interestingly, the newspaper is not mentioned in the Harris & Co. historical timeline, whereas the start-ups of other smaller, north-west coast, subsidiary newspapers were (http://ta.harrisgroup.com.au/history)

A second major drain on the company’s finances appears to have been the decision to establish a major new Print Centre in Burnie in 1996. Harris & Co. had always prided itself on its technological innovation, as indicated above. The 1996 redevelopment involved the installation of a MAN-Uniset press, the first in Australia. At the same time the company developed a new multi-million-dollar purpose-built print facility (RPL, bidder’s statement, p. 11). Both the move into southern Tasmania, through the *Southern Star*, and the new print centre were implemented while Paul Harris was the chief executive officer. He is a fifth-generation member of the Harris newspaper family. He, according to other members of the family, had driven the company’s expansionary agenda – even the decision to compete head-on against the *Mercury* for the Hobart real estate advertising budget. Not surprisingly, when the opportunity to purchase the *Examiner* arose, and particularly given the earlier history between the two family-run companies, Paul Harris saw an opportunity in the making. However, it was not one that Harris & Co could manage single-handed. Its own cash flows were being hit by the *Southern Star* and some of its other operations. Consequently it needed a partner. The *Examiner* was profitable and a steady dividend stream from the *Examiner* would help offset some of the problems it was experiencing in other parts of its operation. In hindsight, it seems that the *Examiner* provided something of a lifeline for Harris & Co, not only during its investment in the *Southern Star*, but later following the investment in the new press and print centre.

**The beginning of a fatal alliance**

The *Examiner* was sold to the Rural Press/Harris consortium for $30 million in August 1990. (Clark 1994: p. 85). Under the agreement with RPL, Harris & Co took a 40 per cent stake in the *Examiner*, with RPL taking a controlling 60 per cent holding. From the *Advocate*’s point of view it was to be a fatal alliance, despite the short-term benefits of a guaranteed dividend stream. Yet still Harris & Co. struggled. According to takeover documents lodged with the Australian Stock Exchange and sent to shareholders, the company’s core businesses had run at a loss for a number of years (RPL, supplementary bidder’s statement, p. 9) To improve its liquidity, in the late 1990s Harris & Co. took the unusual step – given its previously tightly controlled share register – of inviting Allen Hansen, the managing director of Tasmanian Seafoods Pty Ltd, to invest in the company. He acquired 210,000 shares, or a 13.69 per cent interest, making him the second largest shareholder (Horwath, December 2003, p. 17). Paul Harris and his family held a 21.88 per cent interest. In total, the company’s 1,534,378 million shares were owned by 34
shareholders, with the top seven shareholders controlling approximately 69 percent of the company, or 1.055 million shares (Horwath, p. 17).

Whether Hansen was considered a “white knight” investor is debatable. Other shareholders have expressed mixed views about the decision to open the share registry up to outsiders. In fact in February 2003, only months before Rural Press subsidiary Regional Publishers Pty Ltd made its takeover offer, the company changed its articles of association to require shareholders to offer their holdings to other stakeholders before selling them to non-stakeholders. At this time it was clear that there had been considerable ructions within the company. In fact signs of internal concern first appeared in 1999 when a restructure was announced. This involved the amalgamation of Harris Group subsidiaries to form a single company, Harris & Co. Ltd. At the same time, senior management was rationalised, with at least one member of the Harris family losing his position. That was Nigel Harris, general manager of the Advocate, although he retained his position as director of the company’s printing arm. His responsibilities were taken over by Paul Harris in an extended role. The changes were attributed to falling circulation and advertising (Mercury, 30 June 1999: p. 29). The fallout continued in 2001 when Paul Harris was forced to step down as managing director and chief executive officer. The position was split into general manager Advocate and general manager corporate, with the former position going to Phil Begley, formerly of the Townsville Bulletin. Further signs of uncertainty also appeared at board level, with a succession of non-family members chairing the company from 1993 onwards. As the largest shareholder, Paul Harris, would have been expected ultimately to take over the chairmanship of the company. Instead, the position was held by former long-term employee, Grahame Riley (1993-97), Stephen Lovass (1997-2000), Roger Martin (2000-03) and Rod Roberts (2003-04). Roberts was chairman for just four months.

Rural Press takes over Harris & Co.

RPL began its own foray into north-western Tasmania officially on 22 August 2003 when it informed the Australian Stock Exchange that it was making a takeover bid for Harris & Co. Ltd, offering $31 a share for all the issued ordinary shares. RPL had made an initial inquiry to Harris on 23 June 2003, seeking confidential discussions. None took place. RPL’s approach to Harris was prompted by disgruntled Harris shareholders. Harris’s operation of the daily Advocate itself was, says Lloyd Whish-Wilson (2004), “making very little money, which is when some shareholders approached Rural Press and said we’d like an offer”. Whish-Wilson, RPL’s general manager, metropolitan and regional publishing – southern, and himself a former Examiner chief executive, offered the view that, for a daily newspaper with a circulation of 25,000, the Advocate had been making “fairly miserable profits”. The shareholders were never going to obtain as good a return as they could by simply putting their money in the bank.

RPL expected a straightforward takeover, but ended up in the midst of a bitter struggle (Whish-Wilson 2004). At first RPL seemed no more welcome in Burnie than Rouse would have been 30 years earlier. Both were seen as intruders, seeking to grasp a distinctly north-western icon. The RPL offer valued Harris & Co. at $47.56 million. Harris & Co. made a profit of $2.011 million in the 2002-03 financial year, after a loss of $808,000 in 2001-02 (Crowther 2004d and 2004e; RPL, supplementary documents). The RPL offer of $31 a share for Harris valued Harris at less than 20 times the Harris share of the profits of the Examiner alone (Regional Publishers Bidders Statement 2003a; Beverley 2003: p. 6). Harris obtained independent advice that valued its operations at somewhere between $7 million and $13.5 million more than the RPL offer (Horwath, 4 Dec 2003; Harris & Co. 2003; Mercury 2003).

The Harris board – which included no major shareholders – recommended its shareholders reject the offer, dated 7 October. Shareholders were allowed until 10 November to consider it (ABC online news 2003). Board chairman Rod Roberts said that “careful and
detailed analysis of the takeover offer had revealed it to be financially inadequate and not in the best interests of shareholders”. Roberts said the offer was roughly equivalent to the value of Harris & Co.’s 40 per cent interest in the Examiner. RPL won acceptance, however, among the major Harris shareholders as it added sweeteners to its original offer and extended several times the deadline for acceptance of the offer. Ian Crowther (2004e), who had been the Harris chief executive for 11 months, did not know which way the shareholders would jump. They were sending out mixed signals. David Cherry (2004), a small shareholder, said that in Tasmania, RPL needed to make its operation more economic. Harris & Co. presented the only opportunity for them to do that. Unfortunately for Harris, significant shareholders of increasing age and with no succeeding generation involved in the day-to-day management of the newspaper needed to do something about their affairs. They saw RPL as the only chance to realise on their investments.

One business day before the RPL offer was to close, shareholders holding 26.9 per cent of Harris had agreed to sell. On the closing date, 15 December, shareholders holding a 35.4 per cent interest sold, making the RPL bid a successful one. The 62.34 per cent acceptance level triggered another extension of the offer deadline, to 29 December, to allow RPL to mop up (Schulze 2003b: p. 21). The shareholder who tipped the scales was Paul Harris, sacked as chief executive of the company in April 2001. Harris, no doubt part of the initial approach to RPL, sold a 21.88 per cent interest. He said he had taken the decision to sell with “a great deal of regret” and had made his decision only on the final day of the offer (Ford 2003: p. 2). He talked of how the newspaper industry had changed from family-run to corporate enterprises. Economics of scale and degrees of skill in access to capital had made it a very bottom-line business. This had made it very difficult for independent papers to “go forward and grow through acquisition because there’s so few targets available (and) they’ll be faced with bidding against other people with deeper pockets”.

Harris said he would not have sold if he had not believed selling was in the best interest of the Advocate. “Whilst Rural Press can never replace that proprietorial strength that’s been there promoting the independence of the newspaper, they really are the next best thing to it.” The various arms of the Harris family had held a 43.59 per cent interest in the family company before the takeover was launched (Crowther 2004b). When the final extension ran out on 29 December 2003, RPL held 85.33 per cent of Harris & Co. Allen Hansen, of Tasmanian Seafoods, still clung to a 13.69 per cent interest, preventing compulsory acquisition of the remainder (Crowther 2004a).

What the takeover means for Tasmania

For some Tasmanians, the fact that a mainland company now controls the island state’s two regional daily newspapers is difficult to accept, especially when the only other daily, Hobart’s 150-year-old Mercury, is part of Rupert Murdoch’s global media conglomerate. For others it is nothing short of a disaster. Among those with this attitude are some former small shareholders in Harris & Co, such as the Cherry family. What they feel, especially, is the loss of an independent voice for the north-west of Tasmania. David Cherry, a Harris director, 1979-2004, and the Advocate’s editor, 1968-89, and general manager, 1989-94, was devastated by the takeover of the newspaper that had been not only his life, but also the life of his father, Jack (editor, 1942-68), and grandfather, Philip (editor, 1902-42). They had formed a dynasty of editors from 1902-89, and David’s son, Michael, had been editor from 1995-2000. The Cherry family did not sell its 8.21 per cent interest in Harris until RPL had gained control. Of the takeover, David Cherry (2004) said:

To me it has been one of the most gruelling, upsetting and disappointing times in my 50 years in the newspaper industry. I was totally opposed to it from the outset and I am still opposed to it. It’s very sad to see the loss of independence. Rural Press defends its takeover by saying that it allows the continuation of strong independent voices. In the
Tasmanian context, the *Examiner* was considered a mature newspaper. We (RPL and Harris) took it over in 1990; it is no longer such a newspaper.

Cherry has highlighted the crucial element in this takeover for any Tasmanian: independence of editorial outlook. The RPL takeover of the *Advocate*, an independent voice on the north-west coast of Tasmania since 1890, is the final nail in the coffin of independence for daily newspapers in the tiny island state. RPL disputes this, claiming on a number of occasions:

> Rural Press has given a commitment to retaining separate editorial functions for the *Advocate*, which is consistent with its policy at all of its 148 regional titles throughout Australia (including the *Examiner* in Launceston). The *Advocate* will remain an independent, passionate and parochial newspaper representing the communities of the north-west of Tasmania. We have a strong track record of providing close support for local community initiatives (RPL, supplementary documents, p. 4).

It appears that David Cherry’s concerns were quickly realised. The only independents remaining are three weeklies, each with a circulation of about 2,500: Smithton’s *Circular Head Chronicle* (established 1906); Scottsdale’s *North-Eastern Advertiser* (1909); and Franklin’s *Huon Valley News* (1910), owned by the Yeates family best known for its *Bairnsdale Advertiser*, Victoria. Of the three independent Tasmanian weeklies, the *North-Eastern Advertiser* is probably the most susceptible to takeover; it ceased publication for two weeks in June 2003 while new ownership arrangements were negotiated (Fish 2003; *North-Eastern Advertiser* 2003). RPL has already effectively closed another weekly, Rosebery’s *Western Herald*, which came as part of the Harris & Co. package, and a monthly, the *Western Tiers*, which served the Meander Valley, near Deloraine. The *Western Tiers* was closed within a month of the RPL takeover (*Mercury* 2004b, p. 13). In March RPL emasculated the 12-year-old *Western Herald*, converting it from a weekly stand-alone publication to a monthly 12-page insert in the *Advocate* (*Australian Newspaper History Group Newsletter* 2004: p. 8). News Ltd owns Hobart’s *Mercury* and Derwent Valley’s weekly *Gazette*, based on New Norfolk.

The corporatisation of newspaper ownership, with its attendant demands for close attention to be paid to the bottom line, leads inevitably to a diluting of independent editorial outlook and to a diminishing of the likelihood that dissident voices will be heard, whether those voices belong to editors or members of the public. A former chief executive of the *Advocate*, Paul Harris, viewed the local newspaper as the soul of the community because it provided a strong and independent local voice. That is the past, he says, and the present is an industry controlled by groups, “an almost characterless industry” where the bottom line rules. This is what David Cherry has seen happen in the columns of Launceston’s *Examiner*. It reflects aspects of the new wave of market-research-inspired-thinking that swept Australian newsrooms throughout the nineties and can be summed up by the KISS principle: Keep It Short, Stupid. “This,” said Garry Linnell (2000: p. 37), now the editor of the *Bulletin* magazine, “is the mantra of publishers and most editors these days.” The KISS principle has been applied by many regional newspapers, especially those owned by groups such as RPL and Australian Provincial Newspapers (APN). These groups, either implicitly (through constant changes in the editor of many papers and through competition for promotion) or explicitly (through the messages presented at editorial seminars and via the house magazine), encourage editors to develop a standardised outlook on news, presentation and editorial issues generally, as well as on marketing the “product”.

1 Rural Press Ltd, in the late 1990s, was encouraging its editors to follow the proposals outlined in the community news package prepared by Tony Gillies, then its manager, publishing services (and now the editor-n-chief of Australian Associated Press). The package set out a *pro forma* for publicity officers to present news about such groups as the Red Cross, the Country Women’s Association or the Rotary...
The standardised approach and the emphasis on cost-cutting impact, ultimately, on even the keenest editor, as Mark Hinchliffe (a son and grandson of two long-serving Toowoomba editors) found when he became the editor of an APN regional daily in 1991. Management was pleased when he increased the volume of community news in the pages, but was concerned about the focus on harder news and the pain this can sometimes cause in a small community. Hinchliffe (2000a), who had four “very different managers” during his seven-year term as editor, found that the bottom line had a profoundly adverse influence on the editorial content of the paper, the Queensland Times, Ipswich. Hinchliffe said the top two criteria for appointing APN editors now were financial management (the ability to meet budgets) and industrial nous (Hinchliffe 2000a and 2000b). He left APN because he found he was spending much of his time “in management meetings, working on budgets, planning promotional strategies”.

At the Bendigo Advertiser, a talented, independently minded editor of nine years, departed only eight months after RPL had bought the paper from INL in June 2002 and slightly more than a year after he had said he had the “best job in the world” (Gregson 2001). Wayne Gregson (2004) had collected a Walkley Award as a journalist with the Advertiser in (1988) and, as editor, an F.J. Meacham Award (1994) for the best regional daily and a string of other newspaper design awards. As he puts it, he thought he “had a bit of a track record of seeking to produce a bloody good paper”. But, in his view, RPL gave him no room to move. In the final year of INL’s ownership he had been required to trim approximately $300,000 from an already emaciated editorial budget. When RPL took over in June 2002, the Advertiser was producing the same volume of news as the Ballarat Courier, but with “half the number of journalists and photographers”. Gregson says RPL demanded “more and more and more”, and started syndicating entire sections and pages that often had little relevance to Bendigo. “RPL wanted sales results based on even more smoke and mirror tricks than INL had required.” He was being second-guessed at every opportunity.

Everything I’d achieved was held up for scrutiny and (more often than not) dismissed with an almost contemptuous attitude. I was sent to Launceston (the spiritual home of RPL under Lloyd Whish-Wilson, as evidenced by the senior appointments at Canberra and Ballarat) for sort of remedial editing sessions. Then I lost the power to appoint my own chief of staff, or [make] any other appointments, come to that.

The final straw came when he was required to remove Linda Barrow as chief of staff, not because she lacked talent but because she was his wife. It did not matter to RPL that her appointment had been made only after a rigorous selection procedure. RPL told Gregson a chief of staff, Leanne Younes, would be brought in from Canberra, and he was to regard her virtually as his understudy until she had become familiar with Bendigo. Gregson resigned immediately, and Younes, who had been a senior writer and sub-editor at the Canberra Times, was appointed editor (Gregson 2004; Rural Press News 2003, p. 5).

One of the characteristics of group-owned regional newspapers is that editors are continually on the move. A study of the house publications of RPL and APN demonstrates this. In December 2003, Rural Press News reported new editors for seven of its NSW and ACT publications. The editors are rarely given the opportunity to put their roots down in a community. Before they can learn the culture of the community and establish good contacts, they are whisked away to the next exciting rung on the promotion ladder, which often has “Management” lights flashing at the top. Even since RPL’s takeover of Harris & Co., the editorial reins at the Advocate have changed, with Peter Dwyer being shifted to Ballarat in June to edit the daily Courier in place of Stuart Howie who was transferred to the Canberra Times to

become deputy editor (Advocate 2004: p. 2; Examiner 2004, p. 3). Only weeks earlier Rod Scott had left the editorship of the Examiner after 11 years, joining the new Tasmanian Premier, Paul Lennon, as his chief of staff. Scott’s place was taken – after the position was advertised – by his deputy of four years, Dean Southwell (Examiner 2004b). Des Ryan, former editor-in-chief of News Ltd’s Adelaide suburban newspaper chain, Messenger group, is the new editor of the Advocate (News Ltd, media release, 2004).

**Printing rationalisation**

In the longer term, Tasmanians can expect the Launceston and Burnie dailies to roll off the one press. The need to stay up to date with technology and the capacity to meet the constantly changing needs of advertisers and readers will ensure that. In the short term, however, Whish-Wilson (2004) promises there will be no rationalisation of printing of the Examiner and Advocate. “There’s a lot of work going through Burnie and we’re expanding the Launceston press to give us more colour capacity.” If that subsequently does happen, it will not be without precedent. For example, the Advocate was printed by the Examiner for three weeks in 1920 after its printing press was damaged by fire (Tanner 1994; p. 64).

However, given the peculiar nature of the Tasmanian print media market identified above, it is likely that the two newspapers will retain their separate identities (Scott; 2004). In fact this was highlighted by the ACCC when approving the takeover (ACCC: 17 December 2003). Rod Scott believes that there will always be a competitive spirit between the two newspapers, which highlights the parochial market within which they operate. This division reflects the politics at play in Tasmania. Politicians operating in Australia’s smallest state have historically exploited these divisions for their own purposes, in the process providing sustenance to the regionally-based newspapers such as the Examiner, the Advocate and even the Hobart Mercury (see Tanner, 1994, 1990). To try to break these barriers down artificially by merging mastheads and staff would work against the circulation interests of the newspapers. Despite the highly competitive markets in which they operate, at different times the three newspapers have operated copy-swapping arrangements (Tanner 1995, p. 64-5). For example, the Advocate and the Examiner exchanged copy until the latter’s forays down the north-west coast in the 1960s. Copy swapping resumed again following the takeover of the Examiner, although it did not extend to critical rounds such as politics and courts. Even today, hard news stories are covered separately, irrespective of where they occur throughout the state. Scott considers that this will need to continue if the two newspapers are to maintain their links with their respective regions.

**Conclusion**

The takeover of Harris and Co in 2003 by RPL highlights the vulnerability of small independent newspaper groups in an era when scale and the bottom-line are the determining factors of newspaper success. For many years Tasmania had been able to support three newspaper groups because of its unique parochial divisions and loyalties. However, once the Rolph-Rouse dynasty’s control of the northern newspaper market had been broken, it was inevitable that the third pillar – the Harris Family on the North-West Coast – would ultimately fall as well. Even though Harris and Co had sought to secure its position through what it saw as a strategic alliance with the John B. Fairfax-controlled RPL, its poor performance in key areas of its operation meant that it was vulnerable to takeover. That was realised when a small number of key shareholders approached RPL and offered it their shares. Despite initial resistance by the company, within a couple of months the takeover had been effected and Tasmania’s print media landscape changed forever.
The critical question now is whether the Tasmanian market will continue to be divided between the Murdoch controlled News Ltd (publisher of the Hobart-based mercury), and RPL (which now controls the two northern newspapers (the Launceston Examiner and the Burnie Advocate). As history records, the most successful newspaper groups continue to look outwards and both these companies have a record of successful expansion.

From a Tasmanian perspective, the end of the Rolph-Rouse and Harris dynasties does leave a question mark hanging over the impact the amalgamation will have on the reporting of politics in Australia’s smallest state. The parochial divisions that have existed since colonial times will continue to influence the way in which politics is played out and any attempts by RPL to try and subsume the distinctive northern and north-western rivalries into one anti-southern rivalry will have only limited success.

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