



**Australian  
Broadcasting  
Authority**

Sorry seems to be the hardest word -  
the responsibility of the media

Speech given by Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman to the Sydney  
Institute Seminar

**Tuesday, 25 May 1999**

Jeffrey Barnard, the English journalist used to entertain us in his “*Low Life*” column in *The Spectator*.

Even when he died, he still managed to entertain us. He even wrote his own obituary. This was published in the *Daily Telegraph*, London (8 September 1999).

In it we find a description of his early life:-

“His drinking began to escalate to such an extent that he was unable to hold down the most ordinary job and he was consequently advised to take up .... journalism”.

As the media takes up a greater and greater role, as some of its practitioners become more celebrated, richer than ever before, there is an increasing crisis of confidence in the media.

Attitudinal research has confirmed this again and again. Those in any other industry or profession would be beside themselves in trying to find ways of reversing this trend. There would be constant calls - to use that word which lulls the listener into thinking all is solved – there would be constant calls to “address” this “issue”.

In fact there would be a whole industry of well paid consultants out there “addressing” the “issue”!

But what do our media practitioners do? (You will notice I am talking media at large. My comments thus apply to both broadcasting and print media.) They either shrug their shoulders or they thumb their noses. One former editor called these surveys “silly”. Silly? From a media which thrives on the almost daily revelation of some new and shocking attitudinal survey?

Something indeed is wrong. And it is not only here. Earlier this year a conference on this very issue was held in London chaired by Lord Nolan. (*The Media and Public Confidence* Conference, Financial Times, 4 February 1999). Those there came mainly from the British media. Or should I say a minority of the British media. They were those who were concerned about the media losing touch with a changing world.

Tonight I want to talk about that crisis of confidence. I shall ask five questions:-

- Is it the result of the media proprietor's interference, or must the media practitioners, the journalists and editors, accept the principal responsibility for this?
- Do the practitioners and teachers appreciate the true role of the media?
- What is that role?
- What is the media's principal duty?
- Does the media fulfil that duty?
- What impact does opinionated journalism have on fulfilling that duty?

### The Proprietors or the Journalists?

Now there are those who think that the sins of the media can be cured or at least controlled by regulating the owners. Some even think that sin will be prevented by regulating the owners. Hitherto much of our attention has been drawn to the media moguls. They stride the world like giant colossi. They are one of the chosen few against whom media laws are directed and almost daily, somewhere, in the world, new laws are proposed.

But I suspect that in actual fact, media empires are today something like universities. They are "organised anarchies". Giving authority and direction to academicians, journalists or editors, is I suppose, akin to attempting to herd cats.

Certainly proprietors, especially in the past, have had a considerable influence on the way their properties operate. They probably still have an influence, but their power has receded. Magnus Linklater says that staff at the London Daily Herald used to say of their proprietor, Julius Elias:-

“We have no party creed or bias  
We want a peerage for Elias.”

Which, Linklater points out, he got.

Now Lord Beaverbrook was quite open about media influence. He told the Royal Commission in 1947 “I own my newspapers for propaganda”. Northcliff was almost as open. But as Gordon Greenslade says, they ran strange campaigns.

Beaverbrook thought Britain ought to retain the Empire .... just as she was losing it. And Northcliffe thought people ought to eat more white bread.... just at the time it was becoming much more difficult to market.

Today it is more the media practitioners who seem to be in charge. (I shall give you my reasons later.)

Recently, I had the salutary experience of defending a small impoverished international association of press councils which had the temerity to ask two questions. First was it possible to draft guidelines on media ethics which could be of universal application? Second, could some sort of mechanism be established by and with the support of the media to handle media complaints across frontiers? Would it be feasible and viable?

The Association was instantly *hansonised*. Now what does to “*hansonise*” mean? It refers to the practice in the media of making a mountain out of a tiny molehill. Giving it status and notoriety, well beyond its wildest dreams.

I thought perhaps we should do a video in which we said “Men and women of the world, if you are seeing this, we have been assassinated”.

But I know Mr Singleton or some other clever advertising *artiste* would do what he did to Mrs Hanson. An advertisement would show a talking head chicken saying “Men and women of the world. If you are watching this, I have been turned into a Kentucky Fried Chicken”.

This experience is little different to that which usually greets those who dare to suggest that the media has a responsibility. Those who doubt this should go back to the events which led up to the establishment of our Press Council.

If I may return to the crisis in confidence. If you find such a crisis, you quite often find the institution has somehow, somewhere lost its way. It is ignoring, or has forgotten its true role in society.

#### Media Practitioners understanding of their role

When I left the Press Council, one of our editors thanked me and, privately, told me that he had learned a lot from me about the role of the press. I don't think this was flattery. I remember when I became a member of the press council, I had sought to clarify in my mind precisely what that role was.

The extraordinary thing is that this comment indicates that many of our media practitioners do not themselves fully comprehend what their true role is, or rather ought to be.

This vacuum must surely be traced back to weaknesses in the education and training of journalists and editors. There is a debate as to whether they should be educated in university media schools. Many are not, and in the past none were. These were trained on the job. They learned good habits and skills, but being practical, this rarely touched on their *raison de'etre*.

To an extent this is part of our tradition, the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon countries. This is to eschew the theoretical and endorse the practical.

But surely those who are trained in the university media courses, the many BA (Communication) degrees, surely they would have studied the fundamental issues about the reason for press freedom.

Now Keith Windschuttle in *Quadrant* (March 1998) says there are the three characteristics of journalism.

First a commitment to reporting the truth about what occurs in the world. Journalists go out into society, make observations about what is done and what is said, and report them as accurately as they can. He says they have to provide evidence to verify and corroborate their claims and they have to attribute their sources. Journalism, he concludes, upholds a realist view of the world and an empirical methodology.

Second, that the principal ethical obligations of journalists are to their readers, their listeners and their viewers. Not to please their employers or advertisers, nor to serve the state or *support some other cause* (my emphasis), but in order to inform their audiences. The measure of journalists' success is their relationship with their audience.

Third, journalists should be committed to good writing. This means their meaning should be clear and their grammar precise. In our society it is journalists and subeditors who are the frontline standard bearers for good English expression. In practice, these three characteristics are usually taken so much for granted that they form an implicit background rather than the overtly stated principles of journalism education."

But then he makes a surprising observation.

This is that in most of the media and cultural theory that is taught within Australian communications and media degrees "none of these principles are upheld". In fact, he says they are specifically denied, either by argument or by example, by the dominant intellectual field that has reigned in media theory for at least fifteen years.

If Mr Windschuttle is correct this is extraordinary. As he describes these theories, they seem to have resulted from some distillation of Marxism. This reminds me of the bush recipe for cooking a galah. You boil it in water, throwing a boot in. You wait until the boot is soft. Then you throw away the galah. And you eat the boot.

Magda Zubanski on the TV series *Big Girl's Blouse*, satirises exquisitely just what these media and cultural stories are all about.

This is in the final round of the Women Philosophers' Fencing Competition at the Gay Olympics. The winner is the fencer who takes offence more times at a perfectly innocent remark. The announcer says that in this round the Australian champion, Sue, will be trying to improve on her personal best by taking offence six times at a perfectly innocent remark

While they fence, the challenger asks "Did you have a nice day?" to which the champion responds:

"*Day*", is a patriarchal structure in time.

'*Nice*' is a concept of behavioural conformity used to treat women as an underclass. '*Did*' implies I need to be doing something in order to make a worthwhile contribution to society.

'*You*' is a phallogentric division between 'self' and 'other'.

'*Have*' is a capitalistic consumeristic linguistic structure thus reflecting the dominant paradigm of ownership and economic violence perpetrated against women and ethnic minorities, and

'*A*' is a singular indefinite article which perpetrates bourgeois notions of individuality."

The announcer screams "Gold! Gold for Australia!"

I can however think of one practical use for deconstruction. It should be taught in law schools. It would help defamation lawyers to come up with even more improbable imputations from innocent statements than they already do now.

The philosopher Roger Scruton argues that deconstruction is close to a religious experience. The crucial terms are liturgical. They owe their effect to repetition.

Strangely, considering the influence of French authors, these theories have had more influence in Australian, American and British universities, than in French universities. The proponents of such studies have an extraordinary influence. This comes from the use of repetition, and their reaction to criticism. According to Roger Scruton, to scorn or question the structuralist milieu risk anathema. “The normal response to those who advocate deconstruction to those who question it is not to reply with argument, but to rule the questioner out of court. The critic.... is not one of us...”.

(Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*, London 1988, p 124).

These studies are used as a weapon against perceived hegemonic and authoritarian structures of our traditional culture. It is here that those theories punch above their weight. Fortunately in the universities, most other teachers and researchers just get on with their work.

So those journalists and editors who come from these academia programmes have a considerable exposure to these studies. In itself nothing unusual.

But from my visits to, and talks to the students they seem to know little of classical learning as to the role of the media in our society.

### What is that role?

In brief this comes from our belief in democracy and freedom of speech – at least political speech – which allows the citizen to be informed, and the need for full and free information in our market economies.



It also comes from a belief in the market place of ideas. That the market place itself weeds out the erroneous ideas.

Milton wrote:-

“Through all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?”

Areopagitica (1644) p.35

And Mr Justice Douglas expressed the same view:-

“When ideas compete in the market place for acceptance, full and free discussion exposes the false and they gain few adherents”

(Dennis v US 341 US 494 [1957], per Douglas J:584).

The English and Americans made a special contribution to democracy in the discovery of the principle that good government should not be totally dependent on finding and training good governors. Rather we should expect that those in public office may abuse power. Lord Acton’s dictum puts this principle succinctly: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

Central to liberal democracy is the concept of checks and balances on power. The courts must be independent of government control. Another and a most important

check and balance on power is the press, print and electronic. The role of the press depends on freedom of expression.

To perform its role it has become an essential institution in our democracy, but one which is not part of the state.

Thomas Carlyle expressed this eloquently when he wrote: “Burke said there were three estates in Parliament; but in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there saw a fourth estate more important far than them all. It is not a figure of speech or witty saying; it is a literal fact – very momentous to us in these times.”

The Americans went further. They decided to give constitutional recognition to this institution, the Fourth Estate. The First Amendment not only proscribes Congress from making laws abridging freedom of speech, it also proscribes laws abridging freedom of the press.

In a democratic society there is and will always be the inevitable tension and conflict between the press and government. This is part and parcel of a democratic state. It was the Americans that gave this conflict and tension not only political but, also, constitutional force. The majestic terms of the First Amendment of their Constitution state “Congress shall make no law.... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...”

There can be no better description of the role of the press in scrutinising government (whatever the formal constitution and indeed all matters of public interest) than Justice Black’s in that landmark decision, the *Pentagon Papers Case*. It will be recalled that the Supreme Court of the United States had there refused to enjoin the publication by the New York Times and Washington Post of the reasons for US involvement in Vietnam:

“In the First Amendment the founding fathers gave the press the protection it must have to fulfil its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the government, not the governors. The government’s power to censor the press was abolished so that the

press would remain forever free to censure the Government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government” (*New York Times v US* 403 US 713 at 826 (1971))

New free speech and freedom of the media cannot be absolute. As an American judge put it, no man can be allowed to shout ‘Fire’ in a crowded theatre without good reason. There may be restrictions on this freedom where this is necessary in a democratic society.

Outside of those laws the print media enjoys a wide freedom and is self-regulated. Less so the electronic media, which is still a scarce resource, and where in Australia co-regulation now prevails.

Let me pause at this point to note two divergences between the United States and Australia. First, armed with a Bill of Rights, US Supreme Court (in denial of the fact that the document is the product of non-conformist protestant thought) has legislated a humanist liberalism into the Constitution. And second, Australia is, broadly speaking, a social democracy where the government, the Australianised Crown, founded and led the development of the country. Where the essence of authority is encapsulated in the phrase “peace, order and good government” in contrast to the American belief in “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. It is no coincidence Australia ordained very early in the piece a remarkable dualist structure in broadcasting. Eschewing the commercialism of the United States, and the government controlled radio of most of continental Europe, the system of commercial broadcasting was widened, diversified and enriched by BBC style public broadcasting. To which community radio was added later. Note that this was also the Canadian and New Zealand approach. It was no coincidence that the three were at the time dominions with a social democratic ethos whether government was more to the left or more to the right.

One which was to be followed more recently by many countries, especially in Europe. With little or no attribution to our model.

As I have said, in the area not regulated by law, the media enjoys a generous freedom. And great power. To which there are corresponding duties. For the media must never forget that society and the media have made a bargain, a compact. In return for your freedom, you have duties.

### The First Duty of the Media

The first duty of the press was described eloquently and succinctly by *The Times* a century and a half ago. (Just as we were beginning to assume the mantle of self-government.)

*The Times* was replying to Lord Palmerston:-

“The first duty of the press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the time, and instantly, by disclosing them, to make them the common property of the nation.”

To obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the time, and instantly, by disclosing them, to make them the common property of the nation.

There in a nutshell, in its express words and its implications we see the fundamental role of the media.

The “most correct intelligence” means a commitment to the truth. Now that is fundamental.

And from it flows the theme of this evening’s talk “Sorry seems to be the hardest word”. Why should the media say sorry?

Saying sorry is implicit in the first duty – obtaining the earliest and most correct intelligence. If it is wrong, correct it. Promptly. And where those who read the error, heard the error or saw the error are most likely to receive it.

In the last few months the ABA has called on broadcasters to do precisely this. These were not aberrations on the part of the ABA. We have decided as a general policy that more often than not the best remedy for a breach of the code of practice is immediate action.

In this way, errors can be corrected in the market place of ideas. And we will certainly take this into account when we are reviewing complaints which incidentally only come to us after the complainant has been unable to find satisfaction with the broadcaster.

How does a journalist know that the story he has is the most correct intelligence? I remember on the Press Council when we had a complaint about a story concerning a deceased politician. The story put up a case that he was corrupt. A public member pointed out he had never been found guilty of corruption. But neither had *Stalin*, nor *Hitler*.

Being correct, being truthful does not mean the media can only publish truths actually found by a court. (And a court can be wrong.) Nor does being correct mean being satisfied according to the standard required in criminal law, that is proof beyond reasonable doubt. Is it something akin perhaps to the standard of proof in the civil law – proof on the balance of probabilities. And truth becomes more difficult to establish from a distance. For example, we are indebted to none other than the *New York Times* for finally explaining why Sir John Kerr sacked Mr Whitlam, which was revealed in an obituary for art dealer Max Hutchinson, who brokered the Blue Poles sale to the Australian National Gallery 25 years ago

“The expenditure (to buy Blue Poles) required a vote by the Australia Parliament, and when it was approved, a storm of protest intensified by articles and editorials in the Australian newspapers brought down the government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.” *Stay in Touch, Sydney Morning Herald* 30 April 1999, *The Australian* 20 May 1999)

The test in American libel law is useful in telling us the standard of truth. This is that the journalist did not know that what was being published was untrue. Or that he was reckless and indifferent as to the truth.

Now the “most correct intelligence” would *normally* then exclude rumour and unconfirmed reports. I don’t think it’s enough to label them as such and then publish them. But doing that is better than nothing. There would have to be some strong public interest consideration in publishing rumours. At this point let us recall the celebrated warning. The *public interest* is not the same as something *interesting to the public*.

The appalling headline in a British newspaper “x says he is not gay” offends this. For two reasons. First he is denying a rumour. Second the rumour relates to his private life.

So the first duty is about making the most correct intelligence the common property of the nation. In other words the intelligence has to be something which may *properly and ethically* become the common property of the nation. One of the basic human rights, defined in numerous international and national institutions is this right to privacy, a right to be let alone. Private matters should not properly and ethically become the common property of the nation unless there is a compelling public interest.

Even public figures have a right to privacy. Private facts can only become the common property of the nation when they relate to their public office. This principle is summed up, vulgarly, in this observation “I don’t care if a public official goes home and sleeps with a sheep, unless he’s on the agricultural committee dealing with sheep subsidies.” (Andrew Lack, CBS News in L.J. Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy*, Free Press, New York, 1991 at 216).

There is a view, expressed by a former Director of the Communications Law Centre, that there is one class of public figure which has no right to privacy. Members of the Royal Family. In fairness I think he was describing a practice, rather than prescribing an ethical rule. But the ethical rule is in fact absolutely clear. *Everyone* has a right to

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privacy. A private fact should not become the common property of the nation unless it falls into that class of private facts in which there is a legitimate public interest.

When the engagement of Prince Edward was announced, one of our broadsheets almost ignored it. Which was its right. But the other media found the story newsworthy. A few days later that broadsheet published, or rather republished, a story based mainly on rumour and unconfirmed reports. I have read less venomous stories about serial killers. You would not have read such an unpleasant piece about two young people getting married but for one simple fact. It was about a member of the Royal Family. Later we read stories about the alleged overdraft of another member of the Royal Family. That she was a spendthrift. The elderly Queen mother. Pull her down because she is far too popular! Didn't she once say in the war, when she was advised to send the children to Canada. "They won't go without me. And I won't go without the King and he won't go".

And then when the palace was bombed "Now we can look at the East End in the face".

Fearing perhaps the Queen Victoria precedent – your popularity seems to go up with your age – she had to be pulled down.

Well if her alleged overdraft is public property, why don't we read about the overdrafts of editors and journalists. Aren't they public figures? Perhaps they don't see the beam in their own eyes. How would an editor like to see a story of his son or his daughter's engagement dripping in vitriol based on rumour and innuendo. Or of the editor's 90 year old grandmother's financial affairs.

But let us go back to *The Times* dictum that the first duty is to obtain the "most correct intelligence of the time".

And saying sorry if you get it wrong.

The ABA is charged with seeing that there are in place for the commercial and community sectors, codes of practice which reflect *community standards*.

In assessing *community standards*, do we assume the continuation of the broadly defined community standards which flow from what was (and may well still be) clearly a society dominated by a Christian Judaic ethic. And if society, or a significant part of it, is moving away into humanism, do we assume a new ethic applies? Or that the religious ethic mirrors a natural law truth? Professor Peter Singer disparages ethical codes based on religious standards:-

“We have an historic chance to shape something better, an ethic that does not have to be propped up by transparent fictions no-one can really believe, an ethic that is more compassionate and more responsive to what people decide for themselves, an ethic that avoids prolonging life when to do so is obviously pointless”. (*Rethinking Life and Death.*)

But that led Professor Singer to the conclusion that the humane killing of disabled babies was morally acceptable – a conclusion I am confident most of us would say is morally erroneous. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 1999). I suspect that the humanists among us endorse the fundamental aspects of the ethical standards we have inherited.

I am confident that expectations I glean from this first duty of the press, and the corollary of saying sorry, still conforms to community standards.

The question remains. Do our editors and our journalists suffer from having no coherent school of thought either in the university or in the profession which studies, debates and disseminates the proposition that the media enjoys its freedom and power only because of a corresponding duty to society?

If our practitioners do not understand and accept this and, most importantly, if they are not constantly guided by this fact, there could be an increasing crisis of confidence in the media. Because the public, with its usual good sense, will suspect that the media is not keeping its side of the bargain.

Is the Media doing its Duty?



At the London Conference Sir Robin Day describing himself as a “humble seeker of the truth” lamented the passing of a “golden age” of journalism. He was immediately challenged by a *Daily Mail* reporter, Ann Leslie. She said:-

“I started my career at the grubbiest end of Grub Street, though you might think I am still there, in Manchester. I came down from Oxford with a degree in Anglo-Saxon poetry and my first job is to doorstep a dwarf in a snowstorm in Oldham who alleged he had been at school with Cary Grant. This was over 35 years ago, at the time when this would be a golden age and free of trivia”. She pointed out that her particular speciality now tended to be foreign reporting. She recalled that if she looked back at the way wars were reported, it would always start off “As I flew into war-torn Wonga Wongaland, the fuzzy wuzzy....” Recalling some very famous war correspondent who had died recently, she referred to one of his pieces which began “Sorry about that, I was interrupted and a dead African has just fallen into my soup”. What is happening now she says is that there is more space for people to give more of their personal views about a war.

### Opinionated Journalism

One of the first papers at the conference was by Mick Hume, Editor of LM Magazine. The people from LM seemed to me to be very sensible. (Incidentally “LM” stands for ....”Living Marxism”!)

Mick Hume identified three heretical practices which involve a deviation from obtaining the most correct intelligence. “Victim” journalism, “personal” journalism and “confessional” journalism.

Firstly, *victim journalism*. He described this as the attempt to reduce not only trivial stories, but even many very important stories, to a rather “cheap kind of melodrama” of what is now called human interest stories. This will have a continual focus on victims and their feelings. Or which often focus on the feeling of self-styled victims, those who identify themselves as such. Victim journalism is not just the preserve of *Jerry Springer* or of *The Sun*, he says. It is at the heart of mainstream British media

where the first question a journalist seems to ask on arriving at a newsworthy situation today is “How do you feel?” rather than “What’s happened?”, and those who are most concerned with what happened and why are left to wait until the feelings of all those involved, and particularly anybody who can claim to be a victim of the circumstances, have been sifted through first. As examples he said that if you are dealing with the question of BSE on TV, rather than having a boring discussion of the science and what really causes BSE and what can be done about it, why not follow for a week the family looking after a teenage CJD victim. Or rather than having another boring documentary about the Northern Ireland and peace process, have a week in the life of Mo Mowlam, who is of course not only a woman, “but a cancer victim herself and therefore perfectly packaged for this kind of treatment. I think that is the kind of practical illustration of what we are talking about in terms of victim journalism”.

The second related trend he identifies is the rise of *personal journalism*. Where the reporter ceases to be an observer but becomes increasingly a participant in the story covered. They become part of the story. “So they are not only reporting as a journalist, I am not only reporting what those involved feel, but I am telling you what I feel, my feelings as a journalist become an important part of the story, and I would say to many of these rather self-important correspondents I do not really care what you feel about the situation. I am interested in what you know about it and what light you can throw for me on what is taking place there”. Much of this kind of personal journalism, by the way, but feels that much of this kind of personal journalism, he says, is really kind of ersatz or instant emotion of the kind of helicopter in helicopter out variety.

The third tendency, is *confessional journalism*, the undermining of the line between the private and the public. Not only are the newspapers full of columnists, but they are columnists many of whom feel it is their job to burden us with the most banal details of their lives and their feelings. For Hume this is far more mawkish than that, where is a school of biographical writing seems to emerge, where rather than writing about what you have done in the world, you write about what the world has done to you. It is your feelings and the traumas that you have gone through that becomes the stuff that everybody else is supposed to read over breakfast. It seems to him that is

confessional journalism and removing or at least undermining of the line of public and private is that third of these kind of worrying trends.

He says together these are part of a tendency to elevate emotionalism over analysis. When feelings and facts are so mixed in this way. Not only are journalistic standards lowered. There is a lowering of levels of tolerance in the media. And this he says means a slide into something that has been called “*emotional correctness*”. This is where the journalist is not only telling the world what he feels but is telling people what they should feel as well. There is a very coercive element to this. The public is told there is only one correct way to feel about any situation. There was the headline “SPEAK TO US MA’M” which cleverly deflected attention away from the media’s involvement in Diana’s problems to the Queen’s alleged coldness. Hume says it was most brazen in the coverage of the build-up to Princess Diana’s funeral with the kind of banner three inch headlines in the Daily Mirror, “BE SILENT ALL BRITAIN”, “you know, on your knees, whether you like it or not”. There seems, he says, to be this rather sanctimonious instruction in some quarters of the media today that there are *things that cannot be said* and it is their job to say so and to stop them being said. There are *questions which cannot be asked. Those that express offensive opinions must be censured and punished.* Asked what can be done he eschews a return to some “golden age”. His concern is to encourage a new school of critical journalism, which is prepared to question everything’s anew, which will not worry too much about upsetting public opinion, not worry too much about offending the consensus of the day; journalists who see their job as being to challenge popular assumptions, rather than simply connect with what they assume to be the popular emotions of the people, with an upper case P. He wants journalists in which the emphasis is on the importance of facts and ideas rather than feelings and emotions. “I would simply ask those journalists to take a different tack and those who feel this desperate need in the media to connect today, since when did it become part of our job as journalists to be loved or to be thought as warm and emotional human beings, you know, just to be liked by the public? When did that become part of our job? My opinion has always been that to be a journalist doing a job properly, you have to be making some enemies, and not just ex-Tory MPs and England football manager”.

Are these tendencies present in Australia? Is there an “emotional correctness” here?

According to Professor Henningham that there is a dominant ideological trend among media practitioners. Professor Henningham's 1996 survey (J. Henningham, *How Political Correctness Shapes the Media*, The Independent Monthly, February 1996) tells us that on a wide range of social issues journalists are (measured in percentages) significantly more liberal than the general public. In industrial relations more likely to support unions than employers (84:47). More supportive of Mabo (78:44) multiculturalism (85:78) and republicanism (78 to 49).

But when it comes to economic issues they seem somewhat drier than the general public. For example, free enterprise (92:86) and business profits (91:90). But a certain schizophrenia emerges. They are more in favour of socialism (34:29)!

Does this matter? It once did not. Why? Because editors kept a tight reign. Especially in the separation of fact and opinion. Only editors had opinions, at least openly. And editors and journalists were clearly different ranks. So Emerson once said: "Democracy is a government of bullies tempered by editors".

But can we truly say today, that journalists are with Robin Day – *humble seekers of the truth?*

Are there examples of Mick Hume's deviations in Australia? Do the views, the opinions, in Professor Henningham's survey intrude into the fulfilments of the first duty of the press? Yes, at times. Of course not all the time.

They intrude in three ways. In determining what is newsworthy, and in distinguishing fact from opinion. And whether an orthodoxy is emerging in the opinions journalists and editors think right thinking people should hold.

These three phenomena come from the greater autonomy and standing which journalists enjoy today.

Exacerbated by the use, the almost universal use of:-

- Bylines,
- The journalist's photograph with the byline,
- The interview by a journalist with another journalist;
- The journalist shown against the backdrop of some serious institution – the White House, the Palace of Westminster, to give *gravitas* and authority to what is after all just another opinion.

There is today not only a greater likelihood of subjectivity. There is a strong incentive to give an opinion.

In fact these not too subtle devices have not only encouraged, they have entrenched *opinionated journalism* as the dominant method of informing the public.

Does this matter? If journalists tend to think along surprisingly similar lines, at times significantly different from the public, and the journalism is mostly *opinionated*, should it be any surprise that the public is losing confidence in the media?

Let me give some examples of how subjective and opinionated news can become.

In the final months of the Whitlam Government, when all the media turned against him, Bill Hayden observed that even if E.G. Whitlam walked across Lake Burly Griffin, the newspaper headlines the next day would say, "GOUGH CAN'T SWIM".

Mr Whitlam's relations with the media only seriously declined in the last year of his government. He is no longer a target and has taken his rightful place as a, if not the, national treasure.

Today there are other targets. Foremost among these is the current Prime Minister, who must be the most media vilified Prime Minister in living memory. And when the journalist wants to be subtle, R.G. Menzies is always a convenient surrogate for John Howard. We now almost always see or read of Menzies through the use of two and only two glimpses. One is the poem "I saw her but passing by...." The other shows Sir Robert in the uniform of Warden of the Cinque Ports. As if those two vignettes

could possibly summarise the life and times of Robert Gordon Menzies. They are used to create a caricature of the man. How many times did we see and have reported the fact that John Howard stumbled while leaving a podium in the 1996 election. Why is he the only Prime Minister where reference to his size (average or close to average, rather than small) is a fact regurgitated *ad infinitum*. Yet when the New Zealand Prime Minister quipped “It’s not over till the fat lady sings!” a wave of furious condemnation swept through the nation. Every time a journalist refers to the Prime Minister’s height he goes down one notch in credibility. (Strangely journalists remain fascinated by Mr Keating who thinks so little of Australian journalism that he says “it consists of fourth rate minds feeding third rate newspapers – still spewing out bile”: *Weekend Australian* 25-26 April 1998.

It was fascinating to watch last year’s *Andrew Olle Lecture*. The audience, mainly the media, was so happy at the beginning, so generous in its applause. Gradually this warmth turned into a certain *froidueur*. The applause became, well, polite. The smiles disappeared.

Especially when Mr Alexander referred to a trend he found disturbing: “The media as participant”.

He noted one journalist’s question about Pauline Hanson’s progress – “What are we doing about these people?”

To quote John Alexander: “We?” ..... “These people?”

There are many examples of the media as participants, driving the news to fit preconceived opinions. Of course I am not saying *all* reporting does this. But the following were significant stories. For example some reporting of the process leading up to the Kyoto environmental summit would have left you with the belief that we were about to be isolated as an international pariah. We were not. The reporting of the finances in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs some years ago would have left the suggestion that this was a ‘no-go’ area where the usual rigour of the press did not apply. You could have thought the same about “Women’s business”.

And you might have thought the *Native Title Act* was perfection itself.

Did not the gallery stand and applause its passage through the Senate?

You might have thought that there were not conflicting lawyer driven and less worthy claims under the Act. And you may not know the industry's claim that there is now more Australian mineral exploration overseas than at home. Would that not be of interest to those concerned about the future of the country?

Last summer one of our broadsheets must have actually persuaded itself it already knew the result of this year's referendum.

Over several days it headed its news pages on this with the large banner

*"Towards the Republic"*

Towards the republic? Is this news? Did the same paper lead its news pages in 1951 with this heading: "Towards the dissolution of the Communist Party". Or in 1967: "Towards the end of the Nexus between the Senate and the House of Representatives". Just as well they did not. Both referendums were lost!

In obtaining the most correct intelligence, journalists must be objective. The penalty that flows from not being objective is a loss of credibility with the public. The same fate can befall whole newspapers and journals, programmes and stations. And the public, fairly or unfairly, more and more loses confidence in the media as a whole.

Is it time for the media to keep subjective comment to editorials and a selection of the best opinion programmes and columns? Perhaps we could return to newspaper pages with fewer bylines, and radio and television without the degree of mediation by the commentator, with fewer interviews of journalists by journalists.

Apart from letting prejudice determine newsworthiness, and intermingling fact and opinion there is also a danger that a new orthodoxy is stifling the media. Mick Hume warned of a new "emotional correctness" where the media tells you not only what it feels, but how you should feel too. I am no conspiracy theorist but there does seem to

be a great degree of “conscious parallelism”. Editors and journalists are entitled to their views. But why do they hold some truths to be “self-evident” when no one ever thought about them a few years ago.

One example is free trade. Now most of the elite (dare I say, most of *us*) are now persuaded this is the correct path. I suspect there is a good body of opinion among the general public who just do not agree. Some months ago I chaired a seminar on trade. Paul Kelly was the keynote speaker. He said something which I think shocked many in the audience. He said there was one person in the media who from an intellectual, well researched position was strongly opposed to free trade. And whose programmes were compulsory listening. That was Alan Jones. Now if you say you listened to Alan Jones in some circles you will be greeted with at least polite silence and, more likely, outraged disapproval.

Another subject is the debate on the Constitution. With all the beating up of the issue for years, change to a republic still remains a very low order issue to the Australian public. Another example of the wide discrepancy of opinion between the public and the journalists?

Incidentally, just as I have my own views on free trade, the constitutional debate is a subject on which I have to admit I have an interest. Recently I attended a debate on this where I argued the ‘No’ case robustly. (It was a debate). The editor of the *Dubbo Liberal* Mr Richard Lawson did not like it, (although I suspect the majority of the 1100 or so people present did.) The *Dubbo Liberal* thundered about me:-

“His speech was mischievous, misleading and insulting.

And he should have known better.

Professor Flint is a former chairman of the Australian Press Council, the organisation which monitors the performance of the printed media. During his time with the council Professor Flint was responsible for upholding certain standards by which newspapers and magazines operate including issues of fair and balanced reporting.



Yesterday it was incumbent on Professor Flint, given his academic training and background, to provide the conference delegates with a well-reasoned argument, based on fact, to support a constitutional monarchy.

Instead his argument was based on a number of misconceptions and even more myth about a republic.”

In an immodest moment I was reminded of the provincial newspaper at the turn of the century which began its editorial –

“WE HAVE PREVIOUSLY WARNED THE CZAR.”

No doubt in the Kremlin the Czar trembled.

### Conclusion

So was there ever a golden age? There certainly was. In terms of public confidence in the media. They might have agreed with the editorials, and the radio commentators.

Our fathers and mothers weren't gullible fools. Just because we have more gadgets and more paper qualifications doesn't mean we are endowed with greater wisdom.

Our fathers and mothers, and our grandparents voted against conscription when that was right. And then they agreed with Curtin that they had to change. They put Curtin in, and Menzies out. And then they put him in -. Each time when it seemed right. Both then and in retrospect. They voted against banning the Communist Party. But they wouldn't let Chifley nationalise the banks.

And when they disagreed with the editorials, they accepted that the editorial was the editor's place to put the paper's views. They still had confidence in the media.

Today, if trends are any indication, that level of confidence is in danger of evaporating. What is truly extraordinary is that media practitioners seem indifferent to this trend. And the problem won't be solved by proliferating the means of delivery.

The media's role is part of a bargain, a compact with society. It's in return for its power, for its responsibility. That needs to be understood, contemplated and pondered. In the university and in the profession. And applied. Saying sorry is a first step.

The simple fact the media has to face is that the public thinks that the bargain, the compact is not being kept. In brief, the public believes they are being let down.