

## Australia

When European settlement began in Australia with the founding of the penal colony at Sydney Cove in 1788, there was a printing press aboard the first fleet. The first newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette*, began rather inauspiciously in 1803 as a government-licensed publication publishing officially sanctioned information. However from the 1820s there were several independent competing newspapers, taking up the rights of emancipated convicts and free settlers, and the principle of press liberty was officially recognised and observed. Soon however some fierce conflicts arose, with some journalists being jailed and one banished and some papers charged with sedition. Soon however the conflicts abated, and the principles of independent journalism with rights at least equal to those in the colonial power, Britain, prevailed.

The bulk of the newspapers formed in this period were very small operations run by a publisher/editor with minimal supporting staffs. Representative self-government came to the colonies from the 1850s. As the gold rushes and agricultural development transformed the colonies' economies, the moves towards Federation and a growing sense of Australian nationalism gathered increasing impetus. The press was responsive to these political currents. Its role in the major cities became more politically important and their editorial attitudes more varied and strongly stated.

The outstanding figure of Australian journalism from the mid nineteenth century was David Syme, editor and publisher of the *Age* in Melbourne, and a strong voice for Federation, and also for tariff protection to allow the infant country's industries to grow. Meanwhile the major Sydney paper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was more conservative, favouring free trade, and less enthusiastic about moves towards severing ties with mother Britain. Nevertheless the mainstream metropolitan press was unanimous in its sense of hope and patriotism for the new nation in 1901.

From the 1920s, the most powerful figure in Australian journalism was Sir Keith Murdoch, father of contemporary global media magnate, Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch senior had become famous and an intimate of political leaders and press barons as a result of his disclosures about the disasters of the Gallipoli campaign in World War I. After the war, he pioneered English tabloid techniques in Australia. Indeed he was nicknamed Southcliffe, the antipodean version of Britain's Lord Northcliffe, with whom he had a close personal association.

At least as important as the journalistic innovations was that Murdoch was a leader in the consolidation of Australian press ownership. The Great Depression brought the collapse of many papers, and most of the survivors were also under financial stress. This facilitated Murdoch's task. By his death in the early 1950s, the company of which he was chief executive officer (but not, much to the chagrin of his son Rupert, the major shareholder) had a central presence in all Australian state capitals except Sydney.

Such concentration has made Australian media proprietors very important in the development of journalism, probably even more so than in other democracies. The trend towards concentration was further enhanced when television started in 1956 because ownership of the commercial channels was dominated by newspaper proprietors, the biggest of whom were also active in radio and magazines.

The 1960s was a time of ferment in Australian journalism. Television had opened up new possibilities, even though in the early days the primitive technology imposed great logistical constraints. Later, a combination of legislative and technological changes, and the emergence of public affairs programs, made radio a more dynamic medium for news. The better use of the telephone and tape recorder allowed more actuality and for the first time reporters' voices, rather than just announcers', became part of radio journalism.

Moreover, the greater competition in speed and audience reach from broadcasting as well as internal developments prompted considerable movement in the press. Overall there has been great stability in Australian metropolitan morning newspaper titles. The majority of today's papers had their origins in the nineteenth century, but the three most recent surviving daily titles all were born in the first half of the 1960s. Two existing titles went daily – the business newspaper, the *Australian Financial Review*, and the national capital's, the *Canberra Times*. Most importantly Rupert Murdoch founded a national newspaper, *The Australian*, in 1964. These ventures set off competition for good journalists, especially among the quality newspapers, changing the balance of power somewhat between the better known journalists and their proprietors. By-lines became more common, as did political columns, which started to go behind the political facades.

The greater vigour in journalism that these changes brought was reinforced by a period of political change. The long reign of Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies came to an end in 1966. His dominance of the political environment – the relative one-sidedness of the electoral competition, the stability inside his conservative government, the economic growth and rising prosperity, and not least his close relationship with the major press proprietors – allowed him to achieve news coverage and editorial commentary largely supportive of his government. As divisions appeared among his successors, and the electoral initiative passed to the Labor Party, a new generation of reporters in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery also came to the fore, many of them university graduates, more vigorous and competitive and with more contemporary outlooks than the generation they were displacing.

Once television became established, and the newspaper competition stabilised, Australian media ownership was for some decades marked by stable and entrenched oligopoly. Four companies dominated the major TV channels, the daily press, and were important players in other media as well. Changes to media policy by the Hawke Labor Government in 1987 stimulated a radical transformation of media ownership, but one in some ways even more concentrated. In less than a year, twelve of the then 19 metropolitan daily newspapers changed owner, three of them twice, while one closed. Eleven of the 17 metropolitan television channels changed owners, two of the twice. None of the four companies which had dominated Australian television in November 1986 were still involved a year later. All had sold out at a handsome profit, as new aspirants, thinking this would be the last opportunity to buy into television, laid out vast amounts of money. But the debts they incurred were too great and within a few years all had to exit the medium.

In the 1990s, television stabilised and returned to its traditionally high profit levels. However it is arguable that the financial crisis changed industry attitudes towards journalism. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s television journalists had had a very tangible sense of improvement in their work. This stemmed most tangibly from technological changes. Colour TV had come in 1974, and daily satellite transmission soon after. There was an increasing capacity for 'live crosses' to outside locations, and the introduction of ENG (Electronic News Gathering), which made gathering film easier and the editing of it much quicker. As a result TV news could cover stories closer to their deadline, could cover stories from a much wider range of locations, and could edit more elaborately – with the result that although each sound bite became shorter, the number and variety of them in each story increased greatly. At the time also television schedulers thought that capturing audiences for the prime time news, which often began adults' viewing for the evening, was a key to ratings success more generally, and so both for reasons of prestige and strategy were prepared to invest in their news programs. However, the shake-out in ownership following the debt crises changed these attitudes, and – in journalists' parlance – the accountants and marketers became more dominant, making for more financial stringency and for the commercial networks to move 'down market' in their news priorities.

The financially straitened state of the media industry was a factor weakening journalists' power in the 1990s, especially given the large loss of jobs, for example with all Australia's afternoon newspapers going out of business over the next few years. Although the Australian Journalists Association (AJA), later to become incorporated in the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) as many trade unions amalgamated in the 1980s to maintain their strength, was one of Australia's first white collar unions, its bargaining strength has always been limited. To some extent there has been a buyer's market. Both the narrowness of ownership and the limited outlets in any city limited job mobility. Moreover to some degree the individualism of journalists and the variety of their career routes also limited the capacity for collective action. Just as Walter Lippmann described journalism in Australia as a refuge for the vaguely talented, the founder of the AJA, Bert Cook, thought it attracted 'that frayed type of somewhat cultured mankind who had fallen to the temptations of the wayside'. Another major recruitment pool was from the talented upwardly mobile, often individualistic but eager for opportunity and so wishing to please their employer.

Probably nowhere in the world does journalism meet the requirements to be called a profession. The highest status and most traditional professions, medicine and law, enjoy high social status, their practitioners undergo a sustained period of tertiary training, and share a monopoly in the performance of their work. Fewer than one in five Australian journalists have had tertiary training in journalism, although journalism schools have been going for more than 40 years. No professional body controls entry. While the traditionally high degree of nepotism in entry has greatly decreased, recruitment processes (and training and induction) are still extremely varied. No association has the power to enforce observance of professional standards. Journalists are employees with no direct relationship with their clients, with whom they interact only as consumers of the larger product to which they contribute. Moreover as employees they have limited control over their own professional output.

As an occupation Australian journalism is surrounded by apparent contradictions. Although public surveys show it consistently ranks low compared with other occupational groups, it is one of the most sought after careers with typically far more applicants than vacancies. However, the occupation which is so difficult to break into has a very high voluntary departure rate. This is despite the fact that from quite early in their careers, journalists may gain a public profile through their bylines in print or their on-air reports in broadcasting. But this upward mobility often plateaus. The high exit rate from journalism is partly because of increased opportunities elsewhere. Cognate occupations, most especially public relations, have grown much faster than mainstream journalism itself, and frequently they offer more pay, more security and better working conditions. 'Push' factors in the nature of journalistic work itself are also pertinent. Many tire of the daily pressure involved in meeting deadlines. What produced an adrenalin surge early in their careers may later just become tiresome and stressful.

While Australia's media entered the 1990s in a battered state, the period since has continued to be a dynamic era of expansion and innovation, stimulated by technological change, globalisation, and the seemingly ever-expanding variety of media markets. This dynamism, wedded to changing patterns of employment in the economy generally, has changed many of the assumptions that marked journalistic careers and management practices. At an ever accelerating pace, there have emerged far more individualistic and various career patterns. The capacity of the media to manufacture 'stars' in journalism as well as entertainment gives those individuals much more leverage with potential employers, as well often of an increasing sense of their own worth as commodities. The increasing number of niches and individual outlets has broadened the talents that are rewarded. The ranks of journalism have become more socially diverse. (The 1970s was the crucial decade for women to break into the occupation in large numbers, and in the time since successive glass ceilings have been broken.)

As in most other advanced democracies, the forms of journalism are becoming ever more various. There are increasing outlets which are somewhat journalistic, but without necessarily having the disciplines and accountability mechanisms ideally associated with its pursuit. There are increasing numbers of infotainment outlets, which are tied up in ways invisible to the audience with advertising and public relations transactions, and which do not necessarily aim at balanced or penetrating accounts. Travel programs which show the sun but not the sunburn, for example. The magazine industry, especially perhaps women's magazines, are increasingly linked with public relations exercises, especially involving stories about celebrities.

The Australian journalistic tradition has always been closer to the Anglo-American straight news, objective reporting model than to continental journalism of opinion models. Television was required to be impartial through the licensing system, but more importantly the audiences of the major networks are split down the middle in terms of partisan affiliation, giving them an incentive towards balanced presentations. However there are an increasing number of areas which reward opinionation more than accuracy. As in the United States, there has been a great increase in columns in newspapers, overwhelmingly skewed towards the conservative end of the political spectrum.

Another area is the growth of talk radio. In commercial radio, these have become vehicles for strongly opinionated presentations, often conducted with a minimum of empirical discipline. Some years ago some of the most famous presenters were found by the Australian Broadcasting Authority to have accepted 'cash for comment', but although the cases received intense publicity, their careers continued almost uninterrupted. One central figure, John Laws, told the inquiry he was an entertainer not a journalist, so there was 'no hook for ethics'.

As elsewhere the internet has seen huge growth in Australia over the last decade, and a large number of people now seek information, including news from it. The major providers in Australia are still the established, 'brand name' organizations, although some new, smaller businesses have arisen. Australia has not yet seen 'bloggers' arise as an important part of the political environment.

With the multi-channel environment fragmenting the broadcasting audience, with newspaper circulation in a slow but clear long-term decline, and with advertising, especially advertising moving to other areas, such as the internet, with the public service broadcasters increasingly squeezed by governments for funds, and with major media proprietors increasingly preoccupied with achieving profit levels, there are increasing issues about how quality journalism will be funded in future. Even as media channels proliferate, there are questions about who will bear the cost of independent and active reporting, or whether there will be increasing reliance on what official channels and other groups seeking publicity make available.

It would be wrong to jump to dystopian conclusions. There was never a golden age of journalism in Australia, and there are many contradictory trends at present. But the many forces for change suggest that in coming decades Australian journalism, and the role that it plays in society cannot be predicted with confidence.

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