

THE PARLIAMENTARY

PRESS GALLERY – INSULAR, INTRUSIVE OR INDISPENSABLE?

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The question posed by tonight's topic is fairly easily answered. The Gallery: insular, intrusive or indispensable? The obvious answer is "all of the above". But before I delve any further, I'd like to address the context in which this question is posed - the times we live in. If the gallery is indeed indispensable, then we neglect this context at our peril. This is because we are living at the end of a media era, and one of the things we are going to have to come to grips with is that the business model for what we usually call "serious", or "quality" political journalism (all terms which I think need critical examination) in this country is broken.

There are no broadsheet newspapers in Australia that are making serious money. A senior Fairfax executive confided to me recently that while the broadsheets do still make money, it is less than you would make by putting your funds in a term deposit. Nobody knows the breakdown of figures for *The Australian*, but it is public knowledge that it used to lose money, and I don't think it makes heaps now. *The Bulletin* makes a loss. Channel 9's *Sunday* doesn't make money. And so on.

Television and radio make big money of course, but still it is the case that none of the dominant media players can be confident that their business models will survive the next ten years. I am not saying the industry is doomed. I am sure it will change. Some will make the leap to the future, others will fail either to leap or build adequate bridges. What I am trying to highlight is that very fundamental change is upon us, and as the form by which news is delivered alters so too must the content. Form has always both followed and altered function.

Why, since they don't make much money, are the portals of serious journalism still with us? Partly it is legacy and history – although change is upon us, it has not yet played out. Also such journalism has a value above and beyond its money making capabilities, and this is very important indeed. We have been accustomed to thinking of media as the bundle of ads and journalism, but in the new media world these links are loosened, and perhaps broken. We can have ads without

journalism. As most of you will have discovered for yourselves the most efficient way to search for a new car, or house or job these days is not to buy a newspaper. Online ads do the job better. When you find your car or whatever online, it is most unlikely that as a by-product of that process you will find yourself reading Michelle Grattan or Gerard Henderson or Stephen Matchett or Matt Price. So there are ads without journalism.

What is less certain is whether we can have journalism without having the ads. Whether there is a business model that can pay for what good journalists do.

The new media world makes the business model for serious journalism very vulnerable, but it also highlights the obvious point that journalism is *not* media. The media is the business of conveying audiences to advertisers. Journalism has been part of this process, but it has a purpose and an importance different to that of media.¹

And this is part of the reason the portals of serious journalism survive. In the case of News Limited and, at least until recently, the Packer organisation, there have been strong proprietors who for whatever mix of motives are interested in journalism and who have supported it. Many underestimate the importance of this.

Fairfax has lacked such a strong proprietor, and so answers to investors concerned with return on investment. Understandably it is seeking expansion into “media” rather than necessarily into “journalism”. RSVP and the like. Journalism is still important to Fairfax, but as insiders confide the business model to support it has not yet emerged. Perhaps it will. Perhaps not. Perhaps in the future there will be little difference between advertising and journalism. This is one of the possible futures.

But another of the many possible futures in media, (and I don’t pretend to know where the future lies) one possibility is that we are living at the end of the media empires and their emperors. Kerry Packer is dead. Within 10 years, Rupert Murdoch may be dead too. The pressure is for the empires to become companies like any other – answerable first to investors looking to maximise returns. These investors will be interested in media, but not necessarily in journalism.

So if the empires are in their dying days, then those of us who rely on so-called quality political journalism for part of our world view may be entering a post-colonial era. Like all post-colonial eras, this may teach us some of the things the empires did for us that we failed to fully appreciate. I am reminded of that Monty Python film *The Life of Brian*, in which a character says belligerently, “What did the Romans ever do for us?” He is reminded that the answer is – quite a lot. Aqueducts. Schools. Roads. Sanitation. So what did the media empires do for us? Information. Investigation. Discussion. The animation of democracy. Entertainment. Quite a lot.

We will have to think seriously about how these things are to be obtained in the future. In our country, with its small population, entertainment is probably the only one that can be relied on to look after itself.

This gives a new urgency to tonight's question – insular, intrusive or indispensable – because the likelihood is that if people are going to want political journalism of the “broadsheet” kind in the future, then one way or another they are going to have to pay much more for it than they do now. Will they be willing to do so in sufficient numbers? For the press gallery it is an urgent and uncomfortable question, I suggest. Because the gallery in my opinion is so insular for so much of the time the only answer can be “no”. This does not mean, or should not mean, that serious political journalism is dead. I think it does mean that it will have to be re-imagined and redefined.

Let me try to explain what I mean.

Reflect for a moment on the journalism leading up to the 2004 federal election. Can you name any single piece of journalism, or even any collection of journalistic efforts which you believe had an impact on the final result? If you are like me, it's quite a challenge. Certainly there are images. The Latham-Howard handshake on the last day, perhaps, may have swayed a vote or two. And all that stuff about the bucks' night video, if you can call that journalism. Fiction or gossip might be more appropriate metaphors. What an unhealthy fever that was, for the Canberra press gallery. Do you need any more evidence of their insularity? Baseless gossip built up such a head of steam that it boiled over into print.

Another candidate might be Mike Carlton's interview with Latham in which the latter declared his intention to bring Australian troops home by Christmas. Possibly, the journalism relating to Latham's personal life was damaging, leaving as it did an impression of a bully who, (while this allegations was never made and I do not believe it to be true) was a wife batterer. And as Stephen Matchett pointed out on the night this discussion was held, there was that final image of timber workers greeting John Howard like their best friend. Only some of this journalism came from the Canberra press gallery of course.

But by and large, I don't think journalism did have any measurable impact on the election. All the surveys and public opinion polls suggest that most voters made up their minds long before the campaign opened. Another sizable minority made up their minds very early in the campaign, and the remaining few were far more influenced by advertising - particularly the ads on interest rates and those showing Latham on L plates. And I would suggest this is the way of things. Ratings for news and current affairs are dropping. In the 1980s and 1990s they led the evening for commercial television. No longer. Newspaper circulations are dropping. Audiences are partially

fragmenting, but for what we are accustomed to thinking of as serious political journalism they are shrinking.

This raises the question – an urgent question not only for the Canberra press gallery but for all journalists. Do people actually want journalism any more? Or another way of asking this question is (a way I much prefer) are journalists providing the sort of journalism that people want? Is journalism *useful* to the majority, or even a minority, of Australians? As I said, these are questions for all journalists, not only those in Canberra. But the Canberra press gallery always seems to represent the pointy end, or the most extreme example, of the pathologies and the strengths of the whole occupation.

I'm not suggesting that, to be useful, journalists should become populists, or reality television producers intent on giving the masses exactly what they want and nothing more. But I am suggesting that if there is to be good journalism, relevant journalism, then journalists will have to address this divide between what they are providing, and what people find useful and interesting.

The problem is not that people aren't interested in politics, although this is often rather glibly claimed. As Murray Goot has found,² and the ANU's consistently excellent surveys of social attitudes show, Australian levels of interest in politics are consistently high by international standards. And yet it is also the case that commercial television news producers well know that whenever they show a picture of the inside of the House of Representatives in Canberra, there is an instant turn-off effect. They can measure these things these days – minute by minute. There is so much information on when people turn on and off that it can, to quote one Channel 7 executive I spoke to recently, "drive you crazy". But the pictures of the House of Representatives are well known as a reliable turn-off.

So what do Australians mean when they say they are interested in politics? And how might political journalists in this new century respond to this, reinvent themselves?

Who can deny that as it stands much political journalism is awfully boring? No more than reports of people saying pretty much what you would expect them to say in a kind of abstract posturing in the public eye. A playing of the game, with well defined rules. Being "off message" is a disaster, even if what you are saying is true and interesting.

It's no coincidence I think, that at a time when current events ratings and newspaper circulations are trending down, that non-fiction books are in the ascendancy. The faux objective voice of much news reporting and analysis has become a barrier in itself, and an artefact of a strange kind of politics which most people find impenetrable, boring and irrelevant.

Think, for example, about what journalists are doing every time they refer to the voters, and how they might think and react, as though the voters were some group of people very different from the ones reading the newspaper or watching the television. There are other abstract terms, too: the markets, the bush, are two in common use. What do they mean? Not much. They're facades behind which the journalists broadcast their own world view. The language appears objective but is anything but. Another example. How many people do you think know who Julian McGauran is? Certainly more than did a few months ago. But, in all seriousness, what would be your best guess? A senior politician I asked suggested 30,000 to 40,000 as a starting point. I think it might be more than that, but I doubt if it is more than a few hundred thousand. If he was a member of the lower house, we might be able to factor in his electorate, but given that the Senate voting system is designed to keep voters in the dark about who they are actually voting for, I don't think we can cut much slack there. How many care who he is? Those that do must care mainly because of the impact of McGauran's defection on the Cabinet reshuffle and the long term impact on the coalition and the National Party. I am not suggesting these are unimportant things, or that they shouldn't be reported.

But look at the acres of newsprint devoted to his defection over the last couple of weeks, and more on Saturday, with very little of this really focussing on the end results. What on earth does the press gallery think it is doing? Can it really believe that this blow-by-blow-how-he-made-the-decision-when-did-he-call-Peter-Costello style of reporting is what most people want and need, when they say they are interested in politics? Only an insular gallery, insular to the point of pathology, and insular bosses back in the state capitals as well, could behave as though this were the political story of most interest and importance that week.

And it is not enough for the gallery to reply, "Yes but what do you expect. We rake over the politics ad infinitum. This is what we are paid to do." There were other political stories that were relatively neglected in the same week. For example, it took nearly a fortnight for any analysis of what Judy Bishop's move to the education portfolio might portend. The first analysis I heard of this move was on the specialist ABC Radio National arts and science programs, rather than in the mainstream of political reporting. And yet most Australians care deeply about education.

The second part of tonight's question is whether the gallery is intrusive. The answer depends partly on what case study you pick, but I think you can argue that it is sometimes not intrusive enough. The example I would choose is that of Laurie Oakes' decision to publish the facts of Cheryl Kernot and Gareth Evans' affair. Now that was

a difficult call, and Oakes agonised over it, to his credit. I think on balance it was a justifiable story. Kernot and Evans had been involved in negotiating key legislation through the Senate at the time of the affair, and later there was Kernot's defection to the Labor Party.

But the story was not broken at this time. It was broken years later, when both people were out of public life. The publication would have been much more clearly justifiable when they were still powerful. Why were the rumours not investigated, and the story exposed, back then? The answer, I suspect, is that when the gallery reports politics, it is reporting office gossip. Like any office, there are subtle and largely unconscious conventions that govern what is permissible behaviour, and what is not acceptable. To have published the details at the time would have been a very rude thing to do. Not at all nice. And the reporter who did it would have to carry on living and working alongside the other denizens of the office. Years later, with one party out of the country and the other out of politics, the heat was considerably reduced.

It is impossible to measure or prove, but I think the gallery's insularity leads to it being *not intrusive enough* at times, because they are simply too damn close to be able to live with the consequences of intrusion. Nevertheless, I do think the Canberra Press Gallery is indispensable. We do need people up close. We do need a window on the gossip in this most important of offices. But we need more as well. In the post-colonial era, I would suggest that we need to redefine what we mean by quality political journalism.

Historically, when idealistic journalists have talked about journalism's role, they have used light-based metaphors. Journalism, it is said, is a mirror on society. It is about reflecting society back to itself or as the journalists' code of ethics puts it, describing society to itself. "Shining light into dark corners" is another phrase often used. But in the new world I think other metaphors may be more useful. I like the one suggested by Jay Rosen, the New York University journalism academic, on his trip to Melbourne last year. He suggested that journalism was best understood not as a mirror, but as a map.

Maps tell you where you are, but they also tell you how where you are connects to everywhere else. You can have all kinds of maps. You can map demographics, streets, sewer systems. The key question is not "is this a biased map", or "is this a map with the correct values". The user of a map asks only "is this a useful map?" Does it explain the world to me in a way that makes sense of where I live, and my connection to others? Can I use this map? Does it give me the power to move around and explore? (Obviously an extremely biased map, with relevant bits missing, out of place or distorted, would not satisfy any of these tests).

But enough of metaphors. What do I mean in concrete terms? One of the reasons journalists are so despised is surely because so much of what they do has a corrosive effect. Journalists themselves tend to talk about the highest aspirations of their craft in negative terms. Good journalism, it's said, is that which scrutinises questions, picks apart and exposes. Journalists are spoken about in canine metaphors: they're watchdogs, or attack dogs, they hunt in packs, and they sniff things out. Deeply embedded in this jargon of journalists is a largely unconscious view of themselves as hard, unlovable and driven characters. The language of the news room is full of quite hilarious male sexual metaphors. The kinds of stories that go on the front page of newspapers are hard news. This is urgent news that must be conveyed straight away. Human interest is soft and usually regarded as less important.

A good story is said to be sexy. There's no room in that sort of world for the amorphous, the uncertain, the mysterious; little room for the local, the family oriented, the private. Secrets exist only to be exposed character only to be divined, the murky only to be illuminated. Seen this way, journalism is an intensively *corrosive* profession.

But there is another way of looking at journalism. Much more important than journalism's corrosive effect is the way in which it connects and builds. Journalism is predicated on an assumption of social cohesion. News organisations assume that there are some things that interest us all, or ought to interest us all. Every time an editor or a producer decides on the content of a front page or the lead story in a television bulletin, they're heeding some innate and largely unquestioned sense of the common concerns of the community. So journalism, almost despite itself, has a nurturing, building role, and this too is caught in the language of the news room. Journalism, when it works, is a statement of what concerns we have in common, and it is necessarily constructive in this way. And it's in this direction, an increased appreciation for the linking, and building role of journalism that the future must lie. Those who already use the Internet to get information will readily appreciate the relevance of these words to how the Internet works. Linking. Connections. Constructing.

We need to have the courage to reinvent ourselves and to go back to root purpose. Rather than put material out that we think people should want, and expect it to find its audience, (which is what the Canberra Press gallery does most of the time, and also what the new alternative publications, such as *The Monthly*, and *New Matilda* are mostly doing), we need to go back to the roots of journalism. We need to find audiences and discover what they need in the way of journalism, and start to give it to them. I like to think of it not so much as building bridges between the political insiders and outsiders, as making inside bigger, more dispersal of power, more channels through

which information and power can flow, and surely these have always been the characteristics of the best journalism.

In the world of the future we will have smaller audiences, but they will be intensely and quickly networked. Connections will be powerful. And this intensity of connection might well mean that people are prepared to pay for their information. And the intensity of the audience engagement may well mean that these publications of the future are attractive to advertisers. This kind of journalism – local not necessarily in a geographic sense, but certainly in the sense of serving audiences with common interests – needs to become the repository of the best journalism, the most intense investigation. It needs to be treated with the sort of seriousness of purpose which in an earlier age was lavished on the work of the nation's broadsheets.

To the extent that political journalism remains insular, it will increasingly be confronted with what is already the fact: that the office gossip of Parliament House is riveting only to those who are part of that club, and perhaps a very few rather weird outsiders. This is an audience to be sure, but serving it has a very limited effect. What the rest of us need is a map that is useful, compelling and indispensable. A map that starts with what is happening at the local school or hospital, and shows how this is connected to the big ideas and the big tides of politics. We need to know what politics means for the connections we make, the services we need, the aspirations we have.

Endnotes

- 1 I am indebted for this insight to Jay Rosen's "Press think" blog at <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/>, and also to conversations with Rosen during his visit to Melbourne for the Alfred Deakin lectures in 2005.
- 2 See Goot's essay in *The Prince's New Clothes: Why do Australians Dislike Their Politicians?* Edited by David Burchill and Andrew Leigh and published by UNSW Press.