The good, the bad, the ugly

Robert Manne’s new anti-Murdoch polemic paints a familiar picture of bias and bullying at the Australian, writes Ramon Lobato. So what else is new?

**Bad News: Murdoch’s Australian and the Shaping of the Nation**
Quarterly Essay 43 | By Robert Manne | *Black Inc.* | $19.95

THE new *Quarterly Essay* is the latest in a long line of anti-Murdoch salvos – and it is certainly the most timely.

The publication of Robert Manne’s *Bad News*, an impassioned 25,000-word critique of the *Australian*, comes amidst a series of headaches for News Corp, including an acrimonious feud with the Gillard government, the announcement of an inquiry into print media regulation, and, of course, never-ending fallout from the phone-hacking scandal.

It’s no wonder that News is feeling tetchy. Manne’s polemic against the “overbearing character” and “unhealthy influence” of the *Australian* has generated a counter-attack from the paper’s editors, who laid into the essay with predictable ferocity. The *Australian* has now declared the discussion closed, but those who missed the war of words can catch up here and here.

*Bad News* consists of a number of case studies focusing on key issues around which the *Australian* has campaigned forcefully – either for (the Iraq war, the US alliance, Keith Windschuttle’s *Fabrication of Aboriginal History*), or against (the emissions trading scheme, the Greens, *Media Watch*). The essay leaves the reader in little doubt as to the *Australian*’s consistent prosecution of a partisan political agenda. Stephen Conroy has recently described the Murdoch press as being in the business of “regime change” rather than reportage. *Bad News* provides ample evidence for this claim.

Manne’s essay also demonstrates the personal and vindictive way in which the *Australian* carries out its campaigns. In recent years we have seen a number of public figures – including David Marr and Simon Overland – become victims of sustained attacks from the paper’s journalists. The systematic character assassination of Sydney academic Larissa Behrendt at the hands of Patricia Karvelas – an episode Manne recounts in some detail – is one recent example.

I found much to admire in this detailed critique of the *Australian* and its lurch to the right. The essay marshals an array of evidence to substantiate the claim that the paper, under editor Chris Mitchell, has mutated into a “national enforcer” of neoliberal/market-fundamentalist values. As anyone who regularly reads the *Australian* knows, the paper has long since abandoned any attempt to weigh both sides when it comes to certain pet issues, and now operates more as what Manne describes as “a remorseless campaigning paper.”

Yet I can’t help feeling that Manne’s analysis, while reaching the right conclusions, has failed to ask the right questions. Part of this has to do with the fact that Manne appears to be more interested in discrediting the *Australian* than understanding how it works. As a result, *Bad News* is heavy on polemic and light on analysis and information. Beyond a few juicy details about the relationship between Mitchell and Kevin Rudd, there is...
relatively little new information on offer here.

Most of Manne’s essay is devoted to telling us, in a variety of ways, what we already know – that the Oz is a bastion of right-wing values, that it adheres closely to Rupert Murdoch’s own beliefs, and that it is a mouthpiece for mining companies, employer groups and conservative think tanks. This is a valuable critique, to be sure, but not an original one. And it leaves a lot of interesting questions unanswered.

For example, Manne does not attempt to explain why the paper continues to prosecute a hard anti-emissions trading scheme line even though Murdoch himself has apparently recanted on his climate change scepticism. Nor does Manne explain how the entire editorial staff of the paper – which includes some of the most intelligent journalists working in Australia today – can be so effectively corralled into toeing the party line day in and day out. After reading Bad News I am still at a loss to understand how this works in practice.

Most serious studies of newspapers would spend more time thinking about such things. But Manne is not really interested in these questions, preferring instead to wage war with the Oz on moral grounds (he even offers a four-page argument for why climate change science is correct – as if such a defence were needed). Perhaps this focus is understandable given Manne’s background. He is, after all, a specialist in Australian politics rather than the political economy of the media – a point made in Tad Tietze’s review of Bad News. Certainly, previous articles about Mitchell’s editorship have covered these questions in greater detail. But eliding the industrial contexts through which the Australian is produced works only to reduce the complexity and depth of the argument and, ultimately, the power of the intervention.

Nor do we get much of a sense of how, exactly, the Australian shapes our public culture and policy. Yes, we know the paper is full of partisan coverage (interspersed with first-rate journalism from the likes of George Megalogenis and Paul Kelly). Yes, we know that “the political class” reads it. But that isn’t to say that they take its campaigning seriously. There is no question that the paper plays a major role in setting the news agenda for the country, but the relationship between the Australian’s content and its impact is not as straightforward as Manne’s essay suggests.

This brings me to what is perhaps a deeper problem. Manne is so focused on the Australian’s role in reproducing right-wing ideology that he all but loses sight of the paper, which becomes a stand-in for the Australian right in general. This means that, all too frequently, Manne is not writing about the Australian; he is writing about the right, and how he feels about the right. Hence, the force of his argument stems from moral and political concerns rather than from the insights that his own analysis might generate.

While the aims behind Bad News are honourable, the essay displays a lack of imagination in terms of how a critique of the right-wing media can be carried out and to whom such a critique might potentially speak. Bad News serves ultimately to lock the conversation about media bias into an old left/right face-off which entrenches these positions as the only possible alternatives. It serves as an effective call-to-arms for Robert Manne’s regular readers to rally against the horrors of the Murdoch press, but it does less to advance our understanding of the problem or how it might be addressed. •