

16. From crystal sets to the double helix in one journalist's lifetime¹

Peter Thompson

When I was a child in the 1950s, my mother told me that she and other children at her school at Randwick rushed outdoors to see the fly-over of Charles Kingsford Smith on one of his epic voyages to Mascot aerodrome. My father was born in the same decade that the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk. This bygone era of technology so dated my view of my parents that they might as well have lived in the time of fossils rather than in the world that I knew.

Now, I find myself caught in my own time warp. The change that communications technology has wrought has made my childhood experiences a remnant of a long-eclipsed era. I have spent my working life immersed in the technology of what used to be called 'mass media' but which somehow lost the 'mass' bit along the way. I realise now that I too am a fossil. Of the crystal set era!

I first marvelled at the gadgetry of *my* techno-age when I watched boys attach their crystal set radios to the wire fences of the school tennis courts. These ingenious little devices could tune into AM radio using only the power of the station's own transmitter.

The first inkling of my future as a journalist came when I accompanied my dashing Uncle Ray to his work as editor of the yellowish *Sunday Mirror* at the News Limited offices on the corner of Holt and Kippax Streets in Sydney. Could work be this exciting? Long screeds of copy were run back and forth by copy boys, each time bearing new coloured pencil notations and markings. They were handed to the typesetter, after which the apron-wearing compositor would lay out metal blocks of the text and images ready for the presses. I took home a block bearing my name and my destiny was half decided. At home, I laid out the first and last edition of *The International*, circulation: one copy. Later on, I was to find it easier to talk for a living rather than write.

In the school library, as a twelve year old, I read John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* to learn more about the hero president who had been killed the year before. These dramas of former statesmen stirred my own fantasies about pursuing a noble career as a politician. And it must be said I took down copies of parliamentary *Hansard*. How impossibly important to have your every spoken word recorded for posterity! Now, the two consistent pathways in my life began to merge: a passion for journalism (and communication) and an abiding interest in politics.

In the Sydney of my childhood in the 1950s and 1960s, *Cinesound Review* and its competitor, *Movietone News*, were entering their twilight years as the showcases of documentary newsreels that would accompany the 'shorts' before the feature film at the 'pictures'.

An all-newsreel cinema operated in the basement of the grandly ornate State Theatre, in Market Street, Sydney. I went there hand in hand with my parents. It was easy for me to imagine wartime crowds queuing up to get their fill of the latest sanitised documentary footage of conflicts raging in Europe and the near Pacific. Drama and atmosphere were added to the images by the exaggeratedly declaratory voice-overs and martial music. Much of the film work was masterfully shot by brave young cameramen such as Damien Parer, who trudged the Kokoda Track alongside the diggers. The introduction of television into Australia in 1956 slowly killed off the newsreel and ushered in a new communications age.

The television, the communications satellite (first launched in 1963) and the jumbo jet became symbols of a new era of 'speed' and 'access' that tore down the barriers that separated people by psychological and physical distance, mind and body. You could go anywhere in the world in a day; talk to anyone, any place, at any time; or sit numbed by a continuous stream of news, pseudo-news and entertainment on the box (and later on computers and mobile phones and a combination of the two). This transformation in 'connectivity' would help transform cultural norms and was a taproot of globalisation. Over just a few decades, one world had morphed into another. The world at war already seemed far back.

Imagine 1939–45 wartime Canberra and its physical isolation. The Prime Minister, John Curtin, sat in the bush capital, with telegrams still acting as a primary form of communication. A journey to his home town of Perth meant an arduous journey by transcontinental train or by coastal shipping for most travellers. A small coterie of print journalists tapped out the news from the press gallery to their head offices around the country.

Imagine wartime Washington. President Roosevelt had expanded his personal office in the White House to cope with the growing demands of the job. When he became president at the height of the Great Depression, one correspondence secretary was sufficient to handle the flow of mail into and out of his office. Roosevelt had mastered the new medium, radio, and in stentorian tones had delivered his renowned 'fireside chats', which sounded much more like lectures than chats. He made 30 of these broadcasts between 1933 and 1944.

Imagine wartime London. Winston Churchill made his great speeches in the House of Commons but an actor, Norman Shelley, then mimicked Churchill to repeat the same speeches for broadcast on the BBC. As the great American journalist Edward R. Murrow observed, Churchill mobilised the English language and sent it into battle. Television, with its demands for intimate speech rather

than platform oratory, would soon bring down the curtain on the age of rhetoric of which Churchill and Martin Luther King Junior were the last exemplars.

Back in 1939, the ABC broadcast Neville Chamberlain's declaration of war live via BBC short wave and, soon after, Robert Menzies made a live announcement that 'Australia is also at war'. A 'Department of Information', of which Sir Keith Murdoch was briefly Director-General, censored all news reports.²

Voice was the breakthrough medium of the Second World War, presented with formality by posh-accented radio announcers (as broadcasters were then called). The head of the ABC, Charles Moses, for a long time held the view that announcers should remain nameless.³

Radio began in Australia in 1923 and the ABC came into existence on 1 July 1932 with a vision of helping to unite the continent's far-flung population. In those heady days of the 'wireless', families gathered around the radio console at night to listen to the mix of soap operas (so named because of their soap company advertisers on commercial stations), talks, music and news. Richard Boyer, appointed chairman of the ABC by the Chifley Government and after whom the Boyer Lectures were named, called radio more revolutionary than the internal combustion engine (an ambitious claim; at least it produced less greenhouse gas).⁴

During the war, the ABC still relied for news content on negotiated agreements with wire services and newspapers, although a number of ABC reporters, such as Chester Wilmot and John Hinde, became voices of the Australian war effort. An independent ABC news service was finally introduced on 1 July 1947, a year after the broadcast of Parliament began—an experiment that the politicians of the day were sure would raise the prestige of their debates.

The television era

It's now more than five decades since Bruce Gyngell stood in front of the camera at TCN 9 Sydney and uttered the words, 'Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to television.' When television was introduced into Australia in 1956 to coincide with the staging of the Melbourne Olympics, crowds gathered around shop windows to watch coverage of the games and marvel at the new medium. If a television set was beyond the pocket of the family budget then rental was a popular option. TV's socialising influence would soon far outreach radio's impact. Television spread with enormous speed throughout Australia. By 1960, 70 per cent of homes in Sydney and Melbourne had a TV set, rising to 90 per cent in established markets by mid-decade. The combination of 'live' variety shows, American movies, soapies, comedy, BBC dramas, sit-coms, sport and news proved irresistible to the growing consumer society.

The Menzies Government held in its hands the gift of granting licences to virtually print money. Those licences went to existing media owners after a

royal commission and public hearings by the Australian Broadcasting Control Board. Fairfax got ATN 7 in Sydney; the *Herald and Weekly Times* got HSV 7 in Melbourne; a consortium of the soon to be defunct *Argus*, Syme, Hoyts and Greater Union got GTV 9 in Melbourne; and Frank Packer's Consolidated Press established TCN 9 in Sydney. By 1965, television advertising accounted for 24 per cent of total advertising spent. It climbed to more than 35 per cent after 1980.⁵

ABC— from promise to paucity

The ABC was granted a piece of the action with its own television network. The Australian model was starkly different to the United Kingdom's. The BBC commenced experimental TV broadcasts in 1932 and it took off its training wheels in 1946 when TV recommenced after being suspended during the war. The BBC had a monopoly on television for 20 years and then faced only limited commercial competition (Independent Television or ITV). BBC2 commenced broadcasting in 1964 with a brief to produce more specialist programs after the Pilkington Inquiry had roundly criticised the poor quality of ITV programs.

By contrast, the ABC never enjoyed a head start over its rivals although the postwar Chifley Government had proposed a public television service rather than a dual public/commercial system. In Australia, the weighting of licences in favour of commercial versus ABC was 2:1 then 3:1 after the launch of the third commercial network by 0/10 in 1964–65. In the United Kingdom, the playing field was tilted in the other direction. The BBC's monopoly on radio broadcasting extended far longer, lasting until the 1970s. The British population didn't appear to suffer long-term harm from its diet of BBC. Indeed, the Beeb's long lead time in establishing its culture of broadcasting goes a long way to explain why its cultural content is arguably Britain's most important export. The vision of the BBC's founder, Lord Reith, of building a platform of cultural excellence was more than half a world away from the ABC's founding purpose of helping unite a disparate and far-flung population spread over a continent.

Caution about innovation and looking after the interests of existing players has been the hallmark of governments' approach to new communication technology. Proprietors and politicians alike have a mutual love of exercising power and coexist in a relationship of considerable nervous tension towards each other. The politician doesn't want to alienate the interests of the media owner for fear of being turned on by the press. On the other hand, the media proprietor steps warily around the politician for fear of loss to their commercial interests in the carve-up and regulation of public assets, like access to the airwaves. This softly-softly approach delayed colour television in Australia, it permanently shelved the introduction of a fourth commercial network and it long postponed the introduction of pay TV.

My first appearances on television, mustering all the authority of a nineteen-year-old Walter Cronkite, were in black and white. Colour television was finally switched on in 1975, more than a decade after its introduction in the United States and eight years after Britain. The network owners wanted the competitive advantages of colour but sought time to gear up for the change.

Sadly, the legacy of 50 years of Australian television is a notable underachievement in creative output. This is not to say that our talent pool has been lacking. Far from it. There have been many flashes of outstanding drama and miniseries such as *Brides of Christ* and *Changi*. There has been genuinely brilliant natural history and wildlife documentary making, especially in the hands of David and Liz Parer. Cop shows turned out by Crawford Productions such as *Homicide* (500 episodes), *Matlock Police* and *Division 4* had their heyday. Closer to the bone were shows such as *Blue Murder*, *Phoenix* and *Wildside*. Soapies such as *Bellbird*, *The Sullivans*, *A Country Practice* (a 12-year run), *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* have done well for domestic audiences and in some cases as exports. Variety had *Mavis Bramston*, Graeme Kennedy and *Hey, Hey It's Saturday*. Children's television has enjoyed the consistently strong backbone of *Play School*. Comedies such as *Frontline* and *Kath and Kim* have tickled audiences. And the reality television era made its dubious debut with *Sylvania Waters* in 1992. And, who could deny the value of the invention of one-day cricket as a television product?

Yet, all in all, audiences have been fed a 50-year diet of mostly American junk TV. Local content rules brought about the production of cheap product such as game shows, sport and low-end variety and did not so much raise the bar of quality as produce a lowest common denominator response to meet the minimum required hours. Alas, the failure of Australia's television industry to achieve much of its cultural potential has been a missed opportunity in the nation's social development.

The creative arts are the mirror and conscience of a nation. It is through our stories that we come to know ourselves and what we stand for. Perhaps it was a manifestation of our notorious cultural cringe in the foundation years of television that such an opportunity to develop our cultural industries was stillborn.

The founding of the National Institute of Dramatic Art in 1959 and the Film and Television School ('Radio' has been added to its title) in 1973 were important steps in the direction of developing a talent base on which to build a robust performing arts/media industry. The renaissance of the Australian film industry in the 1970s and 1980s created brave hopes that it might nurture and sustain the excellent credentials of filmmakers, but it turned out to be more like a short-lived gold rush to pour money into the 10BA tax scheme. It was a policy

tragedy: a combination of good intentions to support an industry and a tax rort that was bound to draw adverse attention to itself.

A serious blow to the ABC was the scrapping of the television and radio licensing fee by the Whitlam Government and substituting direct funding from the federal budget. It was a popular move at the time and supporters of the ABC were blindsided by the temporary largesse of the government. The licence fee was a nuisance for consumers to pay and for government to collect. But the licence had the virtue of making funds for the ABC quite an explicit commitment. Funding has been on a gradual downhill slide ever since and the blood flow wasn't staunches by David Hill's 'eight cents a day' campaign. Now, the BBC, still paid for by licence fees, enjoys nine times the income of the ABC.

A flickering bright moment in the history of television came with the introduction of SBS by the Fraser Government. Its TV service was launched in October 1980 to serve Australia's ethnically diverse communities. It has been one of the more visible examples of our multicultural society at work. More than half of its broadcasts are in languages other than English. Always under-resourced, SBS has in recent years been playing with the devil by introducing commercials in the hope that government will still feed it basic funding.

The decline in the output of Australian drama by the ABC has been alarming. In 2001, the ABC produced 102 hours a year but this had fallen away to 21 hours in 2004 and it continued its decline in 2005 when it produced barely a dozen hours a year of new TV drama. This decline has been echoed in the independent television sector, where in 2004–05 the number of productions was just 33, the second lowest in 15 years.⁶

This feeble contribution to the nation's culture was the legacy of a federal funding squeeze on the one hand and the extension of new services such as online, ABC 2, NewsRadio and digital radio networks on the other. The Howard Government continued to pare back ABC funding, following the lead of the Keating Government, which had conspicuously ignored the ABC in its boost to arts funding under the 'Creative Nation' program of 1994.

Radio

FM technology brought a high-fidelity breakthrough to radio. First patented in 1933, FM became widespread in the United States in the 1950s. FM radio was one technology where the ABC did get a break on the field. ABC FM, now Classic FM, began broadcasts in January 1976 to Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney. A year earlier, the ABC had launched its 24-hour-a-day youth station, 2JJ (later Triple J).

The launch of FM led to a migration of music formats to the new band and a consolidation of talk radio on AM. In the case of the ABC, the reorganisation led to the birth of Radio National, which replaced 'Radio 2' in 1985. Over the next

decade, the service was extended to more than 300 transmitters throughout Australia. Radio National developed a fiercely loyal audience and fulfilled ABC obligations to provide specialist programs that were culturally diverse and educational. Australia is lucky to have such a culturally rich resource.

The commercial launch of FM came in 1980 with the inauguration of 3EON (now Triple M) in Melbourne. The existing AM proprietors were understandably frightened of the competitive threat posed by FM and poured lobbying efforts into protecting their interests. The new licences were auctioned for big sums.

The potential of pay television to wrest market share from the free-to-air networks rattled vested interests too. Cable television was introduced to the United States in the late 1940s. Yet again Australia lagged behind, holding up the introduction of pay TV until 1995. It's now in about 25 per cent (1.27 million) of Australian homes, a low penetration rate compared with countries such as Canada, where there is 70 per cent connection. Pay's early years were marked by the madness of a duplicate roll out of cable across suburban Australia by Telstra and Optus as the telcos competed to take big equity positions in the converging world of telecommunications and media. The slow take-up and big investments squeezed both players until ultimately the Telstra-backed Foxtel won the competitive game. Its digital service, introduced in 2004, now offers 100 channels. Fearing a backlash from viewers/voters who stood to lose free-to-air access to major sporting events, the government drew up a long list of events that would be protected from 'siphoning' to pay TV.

The long battle waged by the old media proprietors to protect themselves against the onslaught of new media has prompted a reordering of investment priorities. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation has poured capital into upstart digital services such as MySpace while James Packer has turned his attention to gaming. Of the big players, Fairfax is the only one that still looks like a traditional media company, though it has made some costly investments in the digital world.

Decline of newspapers

In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 2005, Murdoch reminded the audience that while four out of five Americans read a newspaper every day in the mid 1960s, only half that many did today. The figures for younger readers are far bleaker:

One writer, Philip Meyer, has even suggested in his book *The Vanishing Newspaper* that looking at today's declining newspaper readership—and continuing that line, the last reader recycles the last printed paper in 2040—April, 2040, to be exact. There are a number of reasons for our inertia in the face of this advance. First, newspapers as a medium for centuries enjoyed a virtual information monopoly—roughly from the birth of the printing press to the rise of radio. We never had a reason to

second-guess what we were doing. Second, even after the advent of television, a slow but steady decline in readership was masked by population growth that kept circulations reasonably intact. Third, even after absolute circulations started to decline in the 1990s, profitability did not.⁷

In Australia, the first newspaper to go after the advent of television was the Melbourne *Argus*, founded in 1846. In the classic mogul style of smothering competition, the *Herald and Weekly Times* bought the *Argus* and the parcel of shares it owned in GTV 9 (the *Herald and Weekly Times* already controlled HSV 7) and soon onsold the shares and closed the paper in 1957.

The arrival of the bright new national titles, *The Australian* in 1964 and the *Australian Financial Review* (weekly 1951, twice weekly 1961, daily 1963), marked an important stage in the development of more specialised political, industrial relations and business reporting in Australia. Also, for the first time, newspapers were starting to reach over state borders and take a national perspective on public affairs.

Almost inevitably, television's octopus grip on leisure hours made life unsustainable for afternoon papers. They still limped on for quite some time. The Sydney *Sun* was closed in 1988. Even Canberra had an afternoon paper, *Canberra News*, a Fairfax publication from 1969 to 1974. Perth's *Daily News* ceased in 1990. Brisbane's *Sun* closed in December 1991 (it had been a morning paper from 1982 to 1988). The closure of the *Adelaide News* in 1992 brought down the curtain on the last afternoon paper in the country.

Valiant efforts were made to save the nation's most successful afternoon paper, the Melbourne *Herald*. It had been published in the evening since 1869 and, with Keith Murdoch as editor-in-chief after his return from being a war correspondent at Gallipoli, it became the largest circulation newspaper in the country. It reached a peak of 500 000 in 1964.⁸ Energetic editor Eric Beecher pushed the *Herald* upmarket in its final years but the venerable masthead went down. A limp attempt was made to create multi-edition '24-hour' newspapers with the closure of the Melbourne *Herald* and Sydney's last afternoon paper, the *Daily Mirror*, but this was really a smokescreen for morphing the titles into their morning stablemates, the Melbourne *Sun* and the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*.

Internet

The sunset year for the Melbourne *Herald*, 1990, marked a key moment in the dawning of the Internet age. Tim Berners-Lee created a hypertext system for use among scientists. Two years later, the offspring of this technology, the World Wide Web, was born. The idea of networking had first been outlined in a series of memos written by J. C. R. Licklider at MIT in 1962. He imagined a 'galactic network' of linked computers that could instantly access data and programs

from other computers.⁹ With the Internet, like many advances in science and technology, effort was poured into developing the ideas as part of the US response to the Russian lead in the space race and as part of efforts to improve command-and-control systems of nuclear missiles. What's been called the first 'hot' application of the technology was sending emails in 1972. Another breakthrough idea that shaped the Internet we enjoy today was Bob Kahn's notion of an 'open architecture' Internet protocol, which meant there was no international controlling body that operated the system.

The giddy potential of the Internet for information exchange fuelled the dot-com bubble on Wall Street that burst in 2001. Amid the hysteria, many back office staff of internet companies became overnight paper millionaires after stock market floats. The absence of sustainable business models that could generate revenues to match the burning of cash was something of a problem.

Despite the excessive exuberance on the part of crazed investors who could see only dollar signs in their eyes, the Internet did go some way to rewriting the rules of commerce. From banking to ordering and distribution services, to knowledge industries and media, the Internet was revolutionary. Names such as eBay, Google, Amazon and YouTube grew from minnows to whales in the digital pond.

The Internet and digital revolutions posed two dilemmas for traditional media companies. How could they beat the anywhere, anytime accessibility of the Net and digital space? And, how could they staunch the flow of advertising dollars to the new media?

In Australia, companies such as Fairfax were especially vulnerable. They had built revenue models heavily dependent on classified advertising. Even though the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* were easily outsold in their markets by rival newspapers, they held sway over the classifieds. It would no longer be so easy. Competitors emerged with internet classifieds in the key areas of housing, cars and jobs. At Fairfax, incoming CEO Fred Hilmer was set the task of taking \$40 million a year in costs out of the business to meet dwindling revenues. A wave of journalists or, as Fred called them, 'content providers', went. Then, as part of the company's positioning in the dot-com business, Fairfax paid \$625 million in 2006 for New Zealand's net classified site, TradeMe.

Internet technology was decoupling the nexus between the news business and advertising. News was expensive to gather, with the bigger newspapers and the ABC each employing hundreds of journalists. Its high cost base demanded sizeable revenues to sustain. If advertisers had a dwindling need to use old media 'channels' then it followed that their business models were at risk.

Step into the ABC's compact online news operation in Brisbane and glimpse the future. A journalist writes a story and instantly edits the text, walks a few metres

into a studio that's little more than a telephone booth in size, dabs on a little make-up if their vanity demands it, switches the camera on, records the story, steps outside to edit it, then presses 'send' and it's all but ready for viewing by a global audience. No waiting for the seven o'clock news anymore. In 2006, the ABC web site averaged 22 million page views a week.¹⁰

Newspapers are catching on. Their web sites are rapidly becoming interactive, boundary-less news operations, featuring written text, audio and video clips as well as blog sites and mini-polling stations that invite people to express attitudes about news of the day. Visits to these sites are growing rapidly. In the year to June 2006, smh.com.au grew 30 per cent, theage.com.au was up 32 per cent and news.com.au visits rose 31 per cent. The awkward issue for the accountant seeking to balance the books at traditional media organisations is that audiences see little need to pay for any of these basic services.

Some theorists of the new communication technology claim that the Internet has profoundly shifted power relationships in the media towards consumers. They equate 'connectivity' with 'control' and envisage an unstoppable democratisation of the Net. In this model, everyone becomes a journalist. There are famous examples of where previously anonymous individuals have gained worldwide attention through blogging. Remember the diary 'Where is Raed?' by the blogger using the name 'Salam Pax' that chronicled day-to-day existence in Iraq after the invasion of 2003? Of course, if you do know about his story, chances are you learned about it through traditional media.

China makes an interesting case study in government efforts to retain censorship controls. The Net is widespread in China. Next to Tsinghua University, Beijing's version of MIT, the multicoloured Google logo stands on top of a technology park building adjacent to the campus. As their price of admission to the lucrative Chinese market, Google and Yahoo have done deals with the central government restricting access to certain topic areas. You won't find reference to Falun Gong in a Chinese search engine. Access to sites on the Tiananmen Square uprising of 1989 is limited. The big net companies have been just as willing to bend to China's whims as Rupert Murdoch did when his publishing house dropped the book *East and West* by Hong Kong's last governor, Chris Patten. The risk to his Star TV satellite rights was too great.

New genres of journalism

Inevitably, the emerging technologies have brought with them new forms of journalism. The ABC introduced *4 Corners* in 1961 based on the BBC's *Panorama*. Early programs that questioned venerable institutions such as the RSL soon upset the establishment but the genie was out of the bottle. *4 Corners* programs would often take many weeks to research and this particular culture of long-form journalism made challenging demands on reporters and producers. Chris Masters,

the doyen of the art, joined in 1983. Two of his programs had profound political repercussions. His very first report, 'The big league', led to a prosecution of the chief stipendiary magistrate in New South Wales and a commission of inquiry during which the Premier, Neville Wran, stood aside from office. 'The moonlight state' shone the torch on police and political corruption in Queensland, led to the Fitzgerald Commission of Inquiry and was a factor in a change of government after decades of National Party rule.

Pilots for a possible nightly program on the ABC began in the mid 1960s. The unfortunately named *Week* created nightmares for the promotion department when announcements were made to the effect, 'Next week on *Week*'. *This Day Tonight* began broadcasting in 1967 and rapidly had its impact on the nation's political culture. For the first time, politicians were subjecting themselves to tough cross-examination from a new breed of self-assured journalists. There were many celebrated incidents in the program's early days, such as federal police storming a studio in pursuit of a draft dodger conducting a live interview. He was spirited out the rear door.

The arrival of nightly current affairs programs put politicians into lounge rooms in a way that had not occurred before. Inevitably, it enhanced the fortunes of political actors who were quick on their feet, looked good on television and could sell a political message in quick grabs.

The coaxial cable, laid between Sydney and Melbourne in the mid 1960s, made possible simultaneous network broadcasts between the two major cities. Prior to the cable, television film was flown in the TAA and Ansett ANA fleet of Electra turbo-props and would need to leave one city early in the afternoon to make the evening news in the other.

Before the introduction of microwave technology, Tasmania remained dependent on air shipping of film. For example, Gough Whitlam's short-lived weekly news conferences were held in Canberra on Tuesdays and made the TV news in Tasmania on Wednesdays.

Commercial television was not far behind the ABC in introducing nightly current affairs. Mike Willesee, the talented presenter of *4 Corners*, created a start-up show for the Nine Network, *A Current Affair*, that brought a tabloid feel to its content in order to generate audiences. Politicians such as Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke and Keating would make appearances on *ACA* in days gone by, but *A Current Affair* and its imitator on Seven, *Today Tonight*, have exited the field of politics altogether in favour of a line-up of stories dominated by diets, celebrities and rip-offs.

60 Minutes brought a new style to journalism. Its founding philosophy, unchanged to this day, was to personalise stories so that an issue could be explored through the experience of one person. This produced a time-honoured

maxim that journalists needed to 'forget the flood and find Noah'. A clever formula of creating celebrities out of its team of reporters and its populist story selection built and sustained an unrivalled Sunday night audience for the show. Where necessary, *60 Minutes* gets out the chequebook and buys access to sensational stories such as the sky-high dalliance of actor Ralph Fiennes and the airline stewardess.

An amendment to the law allowing broadcasting of telephone calls in the mid 1960s, so long as they were accompanied by a beep or pip, changed the direction of radio. Talk radio was born. Some of the top personalities of radio turned their talents to the new genre. Ormsby Wilkins, Claudia Wright and Norman Banks at 3AW in Melbourne built strong audiences by tackling topical issues, as did John Laws in Sydney. John Pearce discovered that calling an irritating caller a 'nitwit' or other insult created controversy that attracted rather than repelled most listeners.

In the later 1960s, a number of serious journalists entered the commercial radio world as presenters and set a high standard of discussion and debate. Brian White pioneered a news-talk formula at 2GB and Anne Deveson brought a then rare female voice to her *Newsmakers*. At 2UE, Steve Liebmann broke similar ground. Their work was an inspiration to me and I somehow convinced the management of provincial 7LA in Launceston to allow me to try a similar format by calling guests to discuss the day's events.

In 1967, the ABC introduced *AM*, followed by *PM* in 1969. Their arrival marked a coming of age for radio journalism in Australia and they soon set the standard for reporting and analysis on the medium. A listener to the programs today would be quite shocked to hear the scratchy sound quality of 'circuits' that carried reporters' voices in those early days. The content has changed too. In the 1970s and 1980s, *AM* would regularly carry stories of high drama in the House of Commons and BBC reporters were often heard from places where no ABC journalist had reached. *AM* was short and snappy with items not often exceeding two minutes. Reporters were given a razor blade and editing block on their first day on the job and learnt the art of fine cutting audio tape. Office floors were festooned with miles of discarded tape. Today, everything is edited digitally.

Skilful politicians such as John Howard have exploited the opportunity offered by talk radio to the full. In a keynote address to the centre-right parties' International Democratic Union in Washington in June 2002, Howard shared his thoughts about the power of the medium:

The Australian experience with the media is instructive. Like all democratic nations I guess, Australia is no different in the sense that there is a greater preponderance of people in the media of a...how should I put it mildly and gently and diplomatically...of a gentle centre left

disposition. Talk back radio is tremendously important in Australia. Enormously important. It has played a greater role in shaping and determining the outcome of elections over the last few years than perhaps has been the case with other sections of the media. I was having a discussion with Ian Duncan Smith [then UK Conservative Party Leader] earlier and I said to him that radio in Australia I found to be the iron lung of Opposition. We would always get a run. There is so much of it. And you couldn't devour enough of it. And whether that is the same in all of your countries, you individually will know.

John Howard was certainly a welcome guest on *Radio National Breakfast* during my eight years at the helm. Covering politics was central to our program brief and our audience's expectations. In the final two years of my tenure, 2003–04, I worked with the talented producer Jacquie Harvey, who was a veteran of commercial current affairs programs (3AW and Mark Day in Melbourne) and of ABC programs such as *Lateline* during Kerry O'Brien's period as host. We wrestled with a dilemma to which there was no easy answer. While we remained fully committed to covering politics, we worried that audiences were bored by the utter predictability of politicians' spin where virtually everything was said for its effect rather than enlightenment.

So, instead of covering politics mostly by talking to politicians, we experimented with a different approach. First, we overturned a convention that all breakfast segments must be short in duration and introduced long debates on the salient issues of the day, often of 20 minutes or more. Though politicians were not disqualified as guests, we much preferred talking to people at least one step removed from the frontline. Following John Maynard Keynes' aphorism that 'even the most practical man of affairs is usually in the thrall of the ideas of some long dead economist', we searched out people at the source of ideas that were shaping political actions. Often we would seek policy wonks or leading global thinkers on issues.

Audience response was overwhelmingly positive. For the first time, *Radio National Breakfast* achieved its peak share of the market after 7.30am, just when we ran these debates. What explains its apparent success? It certainly convinced me that there is a substantial audience hungry for a high-calibre discussion of public affairs that goes beyond the banalities of much political discourse. Go to writers' or ideas festivals around the country and you get the same sense. People want to engage with ideas.

Sadly, at the other end of the spectrum, there's money in muck. From the early days of the 'top 40', Australian commercial radio was always derivative of trends set in the US market. Radio programmers would make the pilgrimage across the Pacific to air-check new formats and DJs. In time, the emergence of a nasty brand of 'shock jock' radio in the United States was imitated here. To be charitable,

you might call the offerings populist. It's closer to the truth to say that they are often bullying, vindictive towards vulnerable groups and individuals and just plain ugly. Technical gizmos ensure that the shock jock can override the voice of any incoming dissident caller and, of course, they can choose to terminate the conversation at any time.

Talk radio has been lorded over by demigods with inflated egos and a tiresome sense of self-importance but it has also operated as something of a release valve for public pressure. It has become a sort of permanent 'vox pop', the modern-day equivalent of neighbours yakking over the back fence.

In 1999, the lucrative commercial arrangements that greased the incomes of radio millionaires such as Alan Jones and John Laws were exposed in the notorious 'cash for comment' affair. It worked like this. If a sponsor wanted favourable comment on their business, they paid up. In return, they received not advertisements but favourable editorial mentions. Banks, for instance, which had been under sustained consumer pressure for years for closing branches and offering terrible service, suddenly became the subject of friendly editorial comment. Telstra was another case in point. One moment it did no end of harm. In the next, Telstra was praised as a good corporate citizen after all. Too bad if these inconsistencies were confusing to listeners. There was big money at stake. Expensive lawyers for all the main players argued out the issue before the Broadcasting Authority and it was decided the arrangements could stay so long as the presenters made occasional mention of their friendly sponsors' names.

The talk phenomenon plays best when presenters work themselves into a lather of righteous indignation. Taking a populist 'moral' position on a highly charged emotional issue is a ratings winner. This 'opinion-led' journalism on radio soon began to infect newspapers. Pick up a smartly edited tabloid paper and you'll find no absence of moral guidance about how to interpret the leading story of the day and you won't have to go to the opinion page to find it.

A sample of weekday front-page headlines of the *Daily Telegraph* amply demonstrates the point. In the space of just over a week in January–February 2007, on Tuesday: 'Save our state. Cut property taxes now—or ruin the next generation of young homebuyers.' On Thursday: 'Drug barons: sick Aussies ripped off as pharmaceutical companies create sham medicine shortages.' On Friday: 'Two years of total chaos. Exclusive: what Labor didn't tell you about its water desalination plant.' And, on the following Tuesday, 'All torque. What has 904 wheels, 226 fuel tanks, 1356 cylinders and exposes our MPs as climate change hypocrites?' And, on Thursday: 'Road to ruin. Tunnel's final disgrace: \$60m lost from public servants' superannuation fund.' Are you feeling happier about the world after reading that litany? The headlines all work to provoke a high emotional response in a low-trust environment about the perceived sins of big government and big business.

It is still early days for journalism on the Net. In the United States, the *Drudge Report*, originated by Matt Drudge about 1994, achieved notoriety by being first with the scandalous Monica Lewinsky story that by a long chain of events led to the impeachment of President Clinton. In Australia, Stephen Mayne, a former (unsuccessful) political minder to Jeff Kennett, began *Crikey.com*, a site that is a mix of gossip and titbits.

In the United States, there has been a migration of some serious journalists to the Net, including John Harris, national politics editor of *The Washington Post*, who has joined a subscription web site, *The Politico*, which is building a reporting staff of 30 journalists.¹¹ Sites such as Salon.com offer serious commentary and analysis and are a bright alternative to the mainstream press.

Efficiency is the great advantage of accessing news on the Net. It is available anywhere, anytime. There's no need to wait tiresomely for the next radio or television news bulletin and then find that it doesn't cover the item you are interested in. And good sites make for quick and easy navigation to the stories of interest. Radio and television, which had the great advantage of immediacy over newspapers, are now the slow coaches.

Double helix

What can we say about how 'the media age' shapes politics? In turn, how does politics shape the media world?

A metaphor from biology seems appropriate. In 1953, just as the nascent television industry in Australia was gearing up for its launch, two scientists, James D. Watson and Francis Crick, offered the world the image of the 'double helix' to describe how DNA was constructed. Watson was supposedly on an LSD trip when he saw the vision.

In many respects, the 'double helix' fits the media/government relationship, where both strands twist together to form its DNA. Like the image of the double helix, both spirals engage in a dance around each other, centred on the same axis. Neither strand manages to fully dominate the other.

One strand contains 'money' elements of the relationship, the other the 'black box' of content. The 'money' thread holds the 'legislative' codes that have unlocked the enormous market power of the technological revolution that is modern media. Government paced the introduction of key technologies (where it could) and bestowed favours on media proprietors through regulating the playing field. It is the politicians who enact the laws. So, appearances give the impression that the government is the dominant force in shaping the structural thread but the reality is somewhat different. No government idly transgresses on the commercial interests of the handful of owners. Indeed, a media proprietor expects his calls to the Prime Minister to be returned. As former NSW Premier

Bob Carr remarked, the only thing that separates Jamie Packer from the other dozen billionaires in Australia is that he has media interests.¹²

The 'black box' thread of the DNA contains the 'editorial' codes of data and information that make up the daily news agenda. It's the journalists who write the headlines, present the news, interview the politicians and pen much of the commentary. So, appearances give the impression that this role makes journalists the dominating force in the content thread. Again, the reality is somewhat different. Journalists and politicians live in a tightly woven relationship of co-dependence. Both sides are busy 'framing' the news to put their own interpretation on events. Neither side wants to yield to the other's version. A prime minister expects his or her calls to an editor to be returned. The editor will call, but if they are worth their salt, will not necessarily buckle.

The helix shape, of course, corresponds to a 'screw' and perhaps that is the more fitting image, as both sides of the relationship seek to screw down the other, fastening, keeping in check, protecting their source of power as they play the great game of politics and media.

ENDNOTES

¹ This essay was prepared for the ANZSOG Strategic Media Management Workshop held on 22 August 2006.

² Inglis, K. S. 1983, *This is the ABC*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 78.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁵ See < www.freetvaust.com.au <http://true/truwww.freetvaust.com.au/true> >

⁶ ABC submission to Review of Australian Government Film Funding Support, August 2006.

⁷ Murdoch, Rupert 2005, Speech to American Society of Newspaper Editors, 13 April 2005.

⁸ See <Ketupa.net>

⁹ See Internet Society's history at < www.isoc.org <http://true/truwww.isoc.org/true> >

¹⁰ ABC submission to Review of Australian Government Film Funding Support.

¹¹ Button, James 2007, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13–14 January 2007.

¹² ANZSOG Media and Government Seminar, August 2006.