

1. Defending journalism and the foundations of democracy

ABSTRACT

Even as journalists look forward to the benefits that technology will surely bring to digital democracy and journalism, they need to also reflect on the approaching ‘shadows’. These shadows are cast by three fundamental crises that threaten the free and independent practice of journalism and the very craft of journalism itself. These intertwined crises are: a crisis of press freedom, a crisis of safety and a crisis confronting the way journalists work. These crises are putting pressure on all journalists. But journalists and media workers are fighting back. The two commentaries over the next few pages outline some of these issues from the broad issue of media freedom in the Asia-Pacific region to women’s ‘suitcase’ broadcasting in the Pacific.

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IT is always fascinating, and to a degree alarming, to hear of the concerns of members of the media community in New Zealand and in the Asia-Pacific region at the direction journalism is taking: fascinating because similar things are happening in the media in Australia and alarming because similar things are happening in the media in Australia.

Recent changes to ownership laws in Australia are just being digested. The new laws effectively ease the long-standing restrictions as to who can own what. At the same time journalists are also facing what is arguably the greatest paradigm shift since the end of hot metal—the ‘online age’.

But even as journalists look forward to the benefits that technology will surely bring to journalism, they need to also reflect on the approaching shadows. These shadows are cast by three fundamental crises that threaten the free and independent practice of journalism and the very craft of journalism itself. These intertwined crises are: a crisis of press freedom, a crisis of safety and a crisis confronting the way journalists work.

These crises are putting pressure on all journalists' unions, such as the Media Alliance. But journalists and media workers are fighting back. The scale of the crisis of press freedom is exposed by one simple fact: in almost every country, on every continent, press freedom has been diminished over the past three years. These past few years have been a chilling reminder that freedom does not fly like an arrow, always pushing forward. It demands continued defence.

'Sneak and peek' terror laws

In established democracies, governments are falling back onto national security as the justification for ever increasing restrictions on reporting. Governments, police and courts are driving a global assault on our professional obligations to protect confidential sources.

In Australia, new 'sneak and peek' anti-terror legislation proposed by the Howard government would give security agencies the freedom to walk into newsrooms and seize reporters' phones and laptops, and even plant bugs, without having to tell the subjects of their surveillance.

Meanwhile, two journalists who ran with a story the government did not like, were fined A\$7000 for refusing to betray their source, while another reporter on a national newspaper was forced to go into hiding to avoid a subpoena aiming to force him to name his confidential source.

The shielding laws in Australia to protect against putting journalists in this position are weak and totally undermined by the lack of protection offered to whistleblowers. In less established democracies, many of the gains made in the past decade are being wound back by a spreading neo-authoritarianism. Existing dictatorships are entrenching their power.

Intimidation in the Pacific

Attacks and intimidation against journalists in the Pacific region continue: in June 2007, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) protested against

the detention, deportation and blacklisting from Fiji of Michael Field, a New Zealander covering the fall out from that country's decision to expel the NZ high commissioner. The Fiji military has been implicated in several acts of intimidation against journalists in the past 12 months, among them the detention and threat of deportation against Dr Robert Wolfgramm, editor-in-chief of the Fiji *Daily Post* in December 2006 in the wake of the fourth coup led by Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama. This came a week after military personnel had entered newsrooms across Fiji where they demanded editorial control and threatened several journalists. More recently there has been a crackdown on 'freedom bloggers' (see Pages 47-60). On 14 September 2007, a Fiji civil servant was suspended after writing a blog critical of the military. Earlier, on May 31, another government official, Filipe Nagera, was charged over a critical blog post.

The IFJ deplores the continuing violence against the media in the Philippines, where 53 journalists have now been killed under the regime of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the latest of whom, Vicente Sumalpong, of the government-run broadcaster Radyo ng Bayan, was killed in an ambush in June.

Sixty four separate incidents of violence and intimidation happened against journalists in Indonesia during 2006 and in East Timor mob violence threatened the state-run broadcaster.

As IFJ Asia-Pacific director Jacqueline Park said of Fiji: 'Intimidation towards foreign and local journalists in Fiji is unacceptable and raises genuine concerns about the government's commitment to a free press and democratic society.' This applies throughout the region and the incidents cannot be allowed to pass without the strongest condemnation.

I particularly want to mention another two colleagues who remain in detention despite strenuous efforts to secure their release: Ching Cheong, the Hong Kong-based correspondent for the *Straits Times* newspaper, who was jailed in 2006 on spurious charges of spying, and al-Jazeera cameraman Sami al-Haj, who sits in Guantanamo Bay, having fallen foul of the other world superpower. He has been there since being abducted from Pakistan late in 2001, designated as an 'enemy combatant' despite his obvious professional accreditation and—like his fellow detainees in America's Gulag—has yet to be given the chance to defend himself in court.

Journalists must continue to fight for these two men, and the many other

journalists who are being held in captivity around the world, simply for doing their jobs.

The safety crisis is the most heart breaking. Year after year, there are new records of the number of journalists and media workers killed. The extreme manifestation of this crisis is in Iraq. But the same contempt for journalism applies in too many countries—and in too many countries, the killers are getting away.

The crisis at work

The crisis at work is challenging the nature of journalism. Those with full-time jobs report they are working harder than ever. Yet more and more journalists are engaged in some form of contingent work: freelancers, casuals, contractors.

The employers seem to be losing confidence in journalism, to believe that media are short-term investments. Corporate strategies are more about maximising short-term profits through cutting costs than making the long term investments in quality that are crucial to the survival of our industry and our craft. These changes are reinforcing inequalities in journalism, particularly the historical patterns of discrimination against women. They are driving employers to be more aggressive in challenging settled social compacts, to attempt to wind back long won and settled rights.

In countries from south Asia to northern Europe to Latin America, employers are using individual contracts to undermine collective agreements and the independence of journalism.

Critical components of the creative process of journalism are being devalued and outsourced. This is highlighted in Tony O'Reilly's recent decision to subcontract subediting duties on his newspapers to Pagemasters, an Australian company. It could be argued that this is an inevitable by-product of the continuing gradual consolidation of media ownership, which is challenging democracy—not just in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific but around the world.

The more concentrated media ownership becomes in any one market, the more powerful its barons become—and the more likely it becomes that the same barons will be given the chance to own yet more of the media cake in the future.

Australia is awaiting a federal election, which will probably take place towards the end of the year. And so the political pundits are playing the game

of ‘Which way will Murdoch jump?’ It happens before every election and is often preceded by pictures of Murdoch’s lieutenants visiting either the incumbent or his challenger and is inevitably followed, once the dust settles on the poll, by one or another concession, usually in terms of the deregulation of media ownership.

Media ownership regulations

After humming and hah-ing over media ownership regulations, the present Australian government relaxed the laws late in 2006. Announcing the changes, the Minister for Communications, Helen Coonan, argued that the rise and rise of new media would effectively render ‘old’ media regulation redundant—in other words, government controls would be like the proverbial Dutch boy with his finger in a dyke which is increasingly being breached by the growth of blogs providing a vast array of independent voices.

But this is by and large a red herring. How many Australians get their main news and opinion from blogs? Not many, I’ll warrant. Overwhelmingly, newspapers remain the major conduits of news and opinion in Australia and most of the most visited news websites are owned by ‘old’ media companies in any case.

So the new landscape looks like this: in any given market at any given time, the number of media ownerships must add up to make five points: therefore, in Sydney say, News Ltd’s vast newspaper, magazine and Pay TV holdings make up one point. Ditto Fairfax, PBL, the Seven Network, Macquarie Media.

Did the proprietors like the changes? You bet. In the weeks following the lifting of restrictions there was a flurry of deals that continues to this day. News Corp spent \$175 million to buy the 25 titles in Federal Publishing Company’s magazine business from Sydney’s Hannan family making it the third largest magazine owner with ten per cent of total readers. Number two on that list is Pacific Magazines, which, incidentally, is owned by Kerry Stokes’ Seven Network, which recently bought out Time Inc’s lifestyle stable, including *Who* magazine.

Kerry Stokes has been particularly busy of late: he also bought just under 15 percent of West Australian newspapers, for \$193 million and 5 percent of Fairfax. His voice, and influence, grows ever stronger—you might have seen him delivering the vote of thanks to mark John Howard’s ten years in power—it has been a good ten years for Mr Stokes, despite a recent spot of legal bother over C7.

Private equity ownership

There is also the rise and rise of a new breed of media owners, venture capitalists and private equity consortiums such as Macquarie Media, which has made an aggressive play in our radio market and CVC Asia Pacific, which has bought 75 percent of the old Packer media empire. In New Zealand, Canada's CanWest sold its 70 percent stake in MediaWorks NZ, a company owning TV3 and other radio and television assets, to Australian private equity company Ironbridge Capital. Ironbridge also made a takeover offer to the company's minority shareholders, but the latter bid failed to win acceptance from 90 percent of shareholders.

Not much is known about private equity ownership of the media, except that the shareholders tend to be more concerned about the bottom line than such nebulous and unprofitable concepts as 'quality' and 'integrity'. Cost-cutting to boost short-term profits, rather than investing for the long-term, is a hallmark of the private equity owner. It remains to be seen what that effect that has, but I'm not overly sanguine.

While adjusting to the new ownership landscape, journalists must also adjust to the changes that the new kid on the media block—the internet—has wrought and will inevitably continue to bring. There is no doubt that the internet is an increasing force in the dissemination of news and opinions. Around the world, newspapers are reordering their operations to create their versions of the newsrooms of the future, in which their online operations are as important—more so, if you believe some people—than the printed copy.

Britain's *Guardian* newspaper was an early adopter and remains one of the most adept at managing its print and online editions. It was the first masthead to start running news stories online as they broke and one of the first to hire dedicated online reporting staff. Others are fast following suit.

In Australia, it was Fairfax that made the early running on the internet. *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* newspapers were, for a while, way out in front of the rest in the quality and depth of their internet sites. But, for the past six months or so, News Ltd is playing catch up and is ploughing huge amounts of money into the online operations of its newspapers.

Online advertising revenue

The pot of gold is a predicted \$5 billion in annual online advertising revenues within the next five years. Beyond that it won't be long, surely, until online

advertising way outstrips print. Journalists are watching keenly to see how quickly classified advertising, once known as newsprint's 'rivers of gold', will move exclusively online.

The result is two-fold. Firstly, as I have recounted, the dream of the media scene being a brave new plurality of small and independent voices using this wonderful new means of production to get to the masses remains just that, a dream.

For Fairfax and News Ltd, meanwhile, the imperative to get out in front and ensure themselves pole position in dividing up that pot of advertising gold, is driving them into huge commitments to their online presence, commitments which are beginning to outstrip the ability of their staff to fulfill them.

The Media Alliance in Australia is now hearing regular complaints from journalists that new tasks are being heaped on them in addition to their full-time jobs, reporters and section editors who are being asked to run 24-hour blogs while still covering their patch or producing their section.

The pitfalls are obvious—and could prove very expensive. News Ltd's *Daily Telegraph* has fallen foul of an expensive defamation suit. It has cost the *Tele* nearly half a million dollars and a lot of egg on the face, after comments on an ill-moderated blog accused a bunch of private citizens, whose crime was to provide character references for a public prosecutor accused of possessing child pornography, of being 'perverts' themselves.

So, the risks involved in the runaway adoption of new technology without upholding journalism's traditional—and very necessary professional safeguards—is clear. It is all very well to trumpet the virtues of 'citizen journalism' but in their zeal to provide content without cost, proprietors must not overlook the key role of professional journalists.

So, in conclusion, those in Australia who are interested in the future of quality news—and those who gather it—are concerned about the future and are worried that instead of a healthy—and democratic—cacophony of voices providing for a range of news and opinions, successive governments in Australia have pandered to the powerful by allowing a handful of companies to dominate the media landscape.

It is a worry about what this means for quality. The Alliance remains committed to protecting, not just the jobs of its members, but their well-being and sense of meaning. This means a long and intense struggle ahead.

MEDIA AND DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

Chris Warren is federal secretary of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and past president of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). This commentary has been revised from a speech to the Journalism Matters conference on the future of the media and democracy at Parliament in Wellington, New Zealand, on 11-12 August 2007.

Media Movement for Democracy campaign in New Zealand:
www.ourmedia.org.nz

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