LITERATURE, JOURNALISM AND THE MEDIA

By

Graeme Turner

James Cook University
FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN LITERARY STUDIES

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PREFACE

The Colin Roderick Lectures are delivered annually at the James Cook University of North Queensland by a distinguished Australian writer or scholar under the sponsorship of the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies. The series is named for Emeritus Professor Colin Roderick, MA, PhD, DLitt h.c., FRAHS, Foundation Professor of English at James Cook University. A leading literary historian and editor, with a special interest in Henry Lawson, Colin Roderick has promoted Australian literature as publisher, teacher and critic. He established the Foundation in 1966 and continues in his retirement to play an active role as its Vice-Patron. The publication of the Lectures makes them available to the world-wide literary and academic community interested in the study of Australian literature.

Graeme Turner is Professor of Cultural Studies and Head of the Department of English at the University of Queensland. He has published widely on the media and popular culture, as well as on Australian literary studies. His most recent book, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (Allen and Unwin, 1994), is a critique of the media's constructions of national identity. Professor Turner is also the author of *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (1986), *Film as Social Practice* (1988), and *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (1990). He is the co-author of *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture* (1987). Professor Turner edits *Nation, Culture, Text: Australian Cultural and Media Studies* (1993). He is also co-editor of *Australian Television: Programs, Pleasure and Politics* (1989), *The Media in Australia: Industries, Texts, Audiences* (1992), *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions* (1993), and *Studying Australian Culture: An Introduction* (1994). He is Chair of the Arts Advisory Committee in the Queensland Ministry of the Arts and Cultural Development.

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Chapter 1

LITERATURE AND JOURNALISM

This series of lectures examines the state of, and the relationship between, two central cultural institutions: Australian literary studies and Australian journalism. In the first lecture I discuss some of the current connections between Australian literature and Australian journalism. These connections have changed substantively over the last two decades, raising important issues about the current cultural placement of literature, as well as about the current practice of journalism. My second lecture takes up one of these issues by looking more closely at how Australian literary figures are most likely to be represented in the media today. The objective here is to suggest that Australian writers these days—whether they like it or not—are processed through the same promotional and publicity system used to produce most other kinds of celebrities. Within this promotional system, I will argue, there is little difference between the kind of celebrity (and indeed the level of significance) accorded to writers of literary fiction, competitors in the Ironman competition, and teenage stars of television soap opera. If we are to go on current media practice, to use one particularly egregious example, Kylie Minogue is as likely to be asked her opinion on race relations in South Africa, as Sally Morgan is to be asked her opinion on Mabo. The enclosure of our writers within such

a celebrity system has the potential radically to affect their cultural meaning as well as the construction of their literary reputations, hence the need to scrutinise and take account of how the media exercise this new power.

The issues raised in the first two lectures are provoked by concerns about the relationship between "the literary" and the media, but they are, of course, merely specific instances within a broader pattern of change and influence that has marked the development of the media in Australia over the last twenty years. Consequently, my final lecture will examine the operation of the news media—particularly news and current affairs television—in more general terms, in order to present a critique of recent changes in their industrial structure and operation. The argument is that while the Australian media's power to influence events and perceptions appears to have grown over the last decade, the media's interest in discharging their public and social responsibilities has radically declined over the same period. This produces a worrying disjunction that I believe should be of more widespread concern.

At the core of these lectures, then, is the connection between Australian literature and celebrity: the mechanism, that is, that brings literature and journalism into their closest relation for most Australians. As fate would have it, these lectures were delivered at precisely the moment (22–24 August 1995) when a major furore was developing over the identity of the prize-winning author, Helen Darville—aka Demidenko. This furore—first, over the alleged anti-semitism of Darville's novel, *The Hand that Signed the Paper;* second, over the novel's winning the Miles Franklin Award on what were alleged to be "politically correct" principles (i.e. that it was time to reward a multicultural writer); and finally, over the discovery that Darville had claimed a false ethnic background in order, seemingly, to provide the novel with a degree of authenticity it might otherwise have lacked—demonstrated that while there was a variety of

avenues through which literature could be made to matter to Australians, not all of them served literature well.

There are other lessons, however, to be drawn from this instance, one, at least, relating to the enclosure of literature within the exploitation of celebrity in the popular media. In my view, the point at which Helen Darville entered the media's celebrity machine was when her publishers issued what was clearly a "glamour" photograph to publicise her novel. Subtly lit, clearly posed to represent the author's blonde youthfulness as a prominent signifier, this photograph offered the author as herself an object of interest and attraction. The subsequent exploitation of her supposedly Ukrainian background, and Darville's own manipulation of signifiers of the exotic in her dress and behaviour, further collaborated in this highly specific construction of the author as celebrity. Once the controversy heated up, it was again the personality that mattered; in this case, it was the apparent duplicitousness of the author which attracted most media attention and which was used to justify the extent of the media attention. Front page articles in all major dailies, two instalments of reviews in the *Australian Book Review*, caricatures and cartoons, features in the weekend press—the level of attention was (and continues to be) extraordinary.

As head of the university Department in which Helen was a postgraduate, I witnessed the media harassment to which anyone with the remotest connection with her was subjected. Student colleagues, old boyfriends, former teachers, all surfaced (or were coaxed) to offer the media their view of her (and even, occasionally, her book). The hunger for more and more dirt on the "multicultural" author was excessive and ultimately resulted in one Brisbane journalist, David Bentley, blowing the lid off the hoax completely. He revealed that Demidenko was actually Helen Darville, that she was born of English parents and stricken with an insatiable thirst for self-promotion.

Whatever one thinks about the literary merits of the book, or about the wisdom of the strategies for self-promotion employed by Helen Darville, it seems an extraordinary indictment of the values admired within the mass media that Bentley's article was judged to be the highlight of Australian journalism in 1995: he was awarded the Gold Walkley at the end of the year.

More generally, as an index of the cultural placement of the literary, of literary prizes, and of the level of embeddedness enjoyed by the ideologies of multiculturalism, the whole saga raised serious and abiding concerns. These concerns are broad, and they start with the relationship between Australian journalism and Australian literature—also my starting point. Let me begin, then, by quoting a short passage from an article by Ivor Indyk—a former editor of *Southerly* who has resigned both from that magazine and from the Association for the Study of Australian Literature in reaction to the "Demidenko affair"—called "What Happened to Australian Literature?"

> Today, just before I sat down to write this piece, I came across a large advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in which a well-known chain of bookstores asked readers to participate in its month-long "Celebration of Australian Literature." It promised "a lineup of Australian writers, both living and legendary," some of them "world-famous Australian authors." First off the rank was Angry Anderson.
>
> Clearly the concept of "Great Australian Literature" has lost something since the days when its use was reserved to describe the likes of Christopher Brennan, Katherine Susannah Pritchard, Henry Handel Richardson or Patrick White.[1]

Indyk is right. Something *has* happened to Australian literature. What counts as Australian literature in the academy is not necessarily what counts as Australian literature in the media. This, at a time when Australian

literature remains extremely dependent upon its relation with the media industries in general and with journalism in particular. Given the relation between the media and other aspects of culture, it is not particularly surprising that what one cultural fragment thinks is valuable should be misrepresented by another. However, given the history of the long and productive relation between Australian literature and journalism, it is possible to argue that the current state of affairs constitutes quite a significant shift. There was a time when Australian writing was not quite so clearly divided between the literary and the journalistic: indeed, one could regard the fragility of this distinction as among the defining attributes of the legend of the nineties. Certainly, a great many of those the academy would acknowledge as "legendary" Australian writers were also journalists: Marcus Clarke, Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson, are obvious examples. The story of the nineties is at least partly a story of the role played by the press, *The Bulletin* most obviously, in constructing an audience for Australian writing. The complicated, perhaps even contradictory, mission of *The Red Page* was to develop a critical culture receptive to the distinctiveness of Australian writing, while also exposing that writing to the kind of metropolitan criticism that would enable it to develop and "mature." In this narrative of the nineties, however it is told, we have an instance where the press deliberately intervened in the public's conception of what constituted Australian writing in a manner that was productive and enabling. By all accounts the intervention enhanced the cultural significance of, and developed a popular audience for, Australian writing.[2] If this is the case, Australian literature has grown out of a supportive, indeed deliberately nurturing, relationship between writers and the media.

However, there are not many contemporary examples which continue this tradition. We need to acknowledge that there is a qualitative difference between the exploitation of

literary celebrity for news value (as is the case with the Demidenko affair), and the principled promotion of Australian writing because of its national cultural significance. While writers and writing do still figure in the media's view of Australian life, the attitude the media take towards literary issues in general does seem to me to have altered—substantially, significantly, and to our detriment. For most journalists today, I would argue, Australian literature is still a key cultural marker but its interest lies in its politics, its personalities, and its ethical disputes rather than in its cultural significance.

One of the clues to this change in attitude may lie, ironically, in the success of the original project—that of developing an Australian canon and its audience. As a result of various kinds of cultural nationalist support, particularly since the end of the Second World War, Australian literature has largely lost its subordinated status within the academy and its marginal relation to the reading public. The corrective impulse so strong in polemics from the 1890s to the 1950s, the assertion of the need to promote the local against the domination of the large imperial literatures, is no longer needed in arguments about the national literature. Popular Australian writing has recovered an audience as well—reviving such genres as detective fiction. As a result, it is not surprising that the media no longer see the need to champion the cause of Australian writing as they once did.

Furthermore, since the 1960s a specifically academic culture has managed to establish itself around an Australian literary canon that has become an increasingly routine component of school and university curricula. No longer a pressure group of concerned cultural nationalists enthusiastically promoting the national voice, those in charge of the national canon could today be seen simply as professional critics: they make their living criticising Australian texts. The professionalisation of literary criticism has been

widespread, of course, and everywhere it has occurred it has had an alienating effect—not only through the development of "theory" but also through the elitist assumptions implicit in the training of the critic in traditions as different as those of Leavisism and structuralism. Australia is no exception; and in addition it would not be unfair to suggest that as literary knowledges have become more elaborated and specialised, the relationship between literary studies and journalism has become progressively more uncomfortable.

There is a welter of evidence of this in the national press, be it in debates about the influence of "theory" on English teaching or in the lack of generosity evident in much of the reporting of the disputes internal to feminism which erupted around Helen Garner's *The First Stone* (1995). Literary criticism, for so long a central aspect of the promotion of Australian writing, has so comprehensively disappeared from the mass media in Australia that it is impossible to imagine an audience for the contemporary equivalent of the *Red Page.* Critics themselves are frequently patronised, caricatured and derided. It is as if there is no space within contemporary media representations of culture for the critic as we have understood it. What television in particular requires is, as it were, a David Attenborough of literature who can fight a way through lots of furry creatures to pick up the really significant one and say, "Look at this closely. Isn't that interesting?" before going on to suggest why. We haven't found one yet, and the fundamental incommensurability between the discourses of criticism and those of most television programs suggests that this is unlikely to change. The controversy over Helen Darville/ Demidenko's winning the Miles Franklin Award provided the opportunity to ask the judges that most dreaded of literary questions: How did you determine which was the best novel? Their failure to answer this question satisfactorily was offered as proof of the bankruptcy of the whole process. David Bentley, on accepting his Walkley for

revealing Helen Darville's deception, suggested that his work had provoked Australians to question the whole arts grants process as unfair and elitist. If Bentley's acceptance speech is any guide, literary criticism, already held in dubious regard within popular culture, stood revealed by the Demidenko affair as an arcane cargo cult, mystifying its activities in order to protect its privileged role within the community.

Among the effects of new academic perspectives on literary criticism—e.g. the cultural-studies and post-structuralist approaches which have dominated the discussion of literature in Australia for the last decade and challenged the ideal of literary value—was a diminution of the certainty with which literary judgements could be delivered. This was another ingredient in the popular, mass-mediated sense that there was something bogus about criticism and those who practiced it. Even in those parts of the media where criticism is taken seriously, the book-review pages, there are serious deficiencies. In the review pages of the major dailies, weekend papers or magazines, there is little evidence of a coherent policy which might determine which books are reviewed or by whom. Books, by and large, are not necessarily reviewed because they are important. It is a fact acknowledged throughout the industry that publishers cannot tell whether their books are likely to be reviewed in the Australian press. Without a systematic policy, reviewing becomes almost arbitrary and can be slightly mischievous. The history of the *Australian Book Review* over the last decade would suggest that it often saw its primary role as stirring the possum. Certainly Louise Adler, in her time as editor, made this explicit: liveliness and controversy were all—even if they were achieved by deliberately sending books to unpredictable and unsympathetic reviewers. In moments of high controversy, the selected book will be reviewed to a standstill. *The Hand That Signed The Paper* was reviewed when it first appeared, and three more times after it won the Miles Franklin Award.

Helen Garner's *The First Stone* received similar attention. The effect of reviewing in such a context is not to provide an informed overview of what is significant in current Australian writing, but to cash in on newsworthy controversies by abandoning the principles of reviewing practice in favour of the news values of features journalism.

Within the world of the feature article, authors are increasingly represented in ways that disconnect them from their work. Successful writers are offered to us as celebrities or personalities, interesting because they are famous. Forgotten is the fact that writers are interesting not so much for what they think but for the fact that what they think is expressed in a specific form, which is itself worthy of close attention. As a result, form slides off the agenda—displaced again by a features-type distillation of the personality, the "profile" piece. Viewed as a cultural category, authors are also vulnerable to the kind of criticism David Bentley expressed: that they are funded through an arts bureaucracy which rewards elitism and plays favourites. While the arts grants institutions are well established in Australia, it has become almost routine for attacks upon them to suggest less elitist, more democratic ways of funding the arts. The recent review of the Literature Board's funding of little magazines needs to be seen in this context—as a challenge to an idea of the literary culture that the media once vigorously supported.

These, then, are among the symptoms of a breakdown of what used to be a rather close and comfortable relationship between literature and journalism. Not to overstate the case, there are areas where this relationship continues to prosper. The case of literary biography is one. There has been a boom in literary biography in recent years, particularly in biographies written by literary critics. Importantly, the boom in Australia has been marked by a new kind of biography where the boundary between fact and fiction is problematised and where the objectivity of the biographer is explicitly questioned. Brian Matthews in his biography of

Louisa Lawson debates with his alter ego Owen Stephens about the status of the evidence and the power of the writer; Sylvia Lawson's biography of Archibald, which is also a biography of his magazine *The Bulletin*, provides us with an extended textual analysis of its constitutive discourses.[3] Lawson's example is a key one, as it demonstrates the role of biography as a form of cultural history which is extremely alert to the power of the cultural documents it processes. Similarly, David Carter and Patrick Buckridge have talked about using biography, not as a means of recovering the uniqueness of an individual life, but as a means of providing an account of cultural production that is rooted as firmly in social history as it is in literary criticism.[4]

There were good reasons for the boom in literary biography in Australia. I have dealt with them elsewhere in more detail, but a brief version of the argument might help here.[5] It had to do with a strategic response to the boom in literary theory and its effect on the Australian canon which had only just been installed. Literary biographies were able both to critique and support the idea of the canon: they could critique it by *not* taking the idea of the author as a completely uncontested romantic ideal, and they could support it because they were dealing with canonical authors and building up a literature around them which would enable further examination of their work.

Whatever might be thought about such a project now, the development of an Australian canon was fundamental to the establishment of Australian literary studies in tertiary institutions and in the popular imagination. While it took some time, and required negotiating all kinds of invidious comparisons between the representatives of "our" canon and the representatives of (usually) the British canon, the establishment of a quasi aesthetic case for Australian writers was crucial in providing legitimacy for the field. Once the aesthetic case was established, of course, the rest followed: there was a group of writers and texts around which

courses could be built, about which debates could occur, and in relation to which academic reputations could be launched, developed, revised and destroyed. It was not until the dying moments of the 1970s, however, that those working in the field could be confident of its future. The establishment of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) in 1979 is probably the clearest sign of such confidence.

But the timing was poor. Just as Australian literary studies established its canon, just as it achieved some consensus on the aesthetic assumptions according to which the canon's texts could be ordered and studied, the very principles which made the whole exercise possible were called into question. Structuralist and poststructuralist literary theory hit the Australian field in the early 1980s (indeed, one can probably date it as occurring at the Adelaide conference of ASAL in 1982). Just as the Australian team had been accepted into the international league, someone in Europe, it seemed, changed the rules.

Literary theory thus reached Australian literary studies relatively late; indeed, even in 1988 Peter Pierce could write in the *Penguin New Literary History of Australia* that there had been few efforts to date which had attempted to "assimilate such overseas critical fashions of the 1970s and the 1980s as semiotics and deconstruction."[6] He overstates the case (feminism had certainly begun by then to make use of these "fashions" to transform our literary histories, and the idea that they were all imported is dubious, too) but the general point is a fair one: there was a great deal of resistance to these new theoretical positions. One can see why. First of all, the status of "the canon" was questioned from a variety of perspectives: from within feminist and postcolonial critiques, from within marxian accounts of the aesthetic as ideology, and from within structuralism's relentless relativising of aesthetic judgements. The study of literature started to redefine itself in relation to the politics of

representation, and in this guise temporarily displaced the traditional interest in texts and textual/national traditions. Although there was some help at hand in the move towards contextualising the objects of literary study—something one would expect Australian literary studies to have seized upon with interest—there was also disciplinary competition for this territory. Australian studies and cultural studies working with non-literary forms of representation had already staked their claims to the area. Now they claimed textual forms hitherto assumed to be the province of Australian literary studies, as well as the commerce between representation and history. Australian literary studies, having put so much of its effort into valorising the text as a blind for cultural nationalist objectives, suddenly found itself in danger of being barred from the very connections it most wished to explore—between text and context. This was because the new theoretical regime, predicated upon the idea of the culture—not the individual—as "author," had renegotiated the balance of power between "text" and "context"; the new regime favoured the context and thus disciplinary projects other than literary studies.

In the light of these theoretical trends, the development of an Australian canon looked anachronistic and old-fashioned even though there was still a clear need for some consolidation of the achievements of the 1970s. Consequently, during the 1980s, Australian literary studies divided over attitudes to "theory," and the criticism it produced bears the signs of this division. Some entirely ignored the European "critical fashions" and pressed on regardless; but it has to be said that, by the late eighties, this critical tactic was in decline. More debilitating, however, was the fact that even those who were interested in new approaches found that their training had left them ill equipped to perform the new tasks. Textual critics had to come to terms with the provisionalisation of the idea of the

author and the integrity of the text, and with the discrediting of the evaluative gestures of most critical writing. Paradoxically, those more conservative critics who had embraced a reflectionist explanation of the relation between literature and history in the 1960s and 1970s turned out to be unlikely beneficiaries of the new fashions. Their habit of contextualising their readings through reference to versions of cultural history meant that G.A.Wilkes could produce *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn* in 1981, a book which almost seemed to have applied some of the new lessons to literary history. That this book was simply an exercise within an already established conservative critical paradigm was a little hard to discern at the time. The ironic consequence was that quite sophisticated textual analyses could still look as if they were old-fashioned prestructuralist activities, while relatively primitive connections between literature and history found themselves a new theoretical alibi.

Most strident and, to many, most irritating was the call to "theorise" Australian literary studies.[7] There were at least two responses to this call. The first was to plunge headlong into pure, or abstractly applied, theory: performing analyses and developing arguments which effectively subordinated the text. These performances—and witnessing them at conferences was a common experience in the 1980s—were guaranteed to infuriate a significant portion of the audience. There were many within Australian literary studies whose motivations were historicist and nationalist; they were never going to share the objectives of the poststructuralists. The papers they liked to hear at conferences were of an entirely different kind: typically, they mounted an attack on "theory" and a spirited defense of common sense, facticity, history and—most importantly—value. Pluralist to its core, ASAL tried to accommodate both camps with the result that everyone could rely on experiencing a period of alienation at every conference.

What eventually developed was of course a gradual appropriation of useful theoretical concepts and a transformation of Australian literary criticism. This was not the only consequence of the "theory" debates, however. The most unexpected product of all this was an increased interest in literary biography. Literary biographies represented a highly strategic resolution of contradictory intellectual and institutional pressures: to perform critical work which would properly acknowledge context, which would deal with but not valorise individual texts, and which could help consolidate the forming canon while acknowledging the role of cultural determinants in literary production. Such a project had clear continuities with earlier traditions of Australian literary history and criticism, it was also in some respects the avowed product of the contemporary intellectual moment. Few of the consequent crop of biographies would treat either history or the text with reverence; postmodern as well as poststructuralist, they admitted their participation in the process of representation and provisionalised what they did. The theoretically canny, deconstructive biography engaged in by Brian Matthews and Sylvia Lawson was anything but naive about the act of construction in which it was engaged: hence Matthews' playing with the competing categories of biography and fiction, and Buckridge's and Carter's attempts to redefine biography as, respectively, anthropology and cultural history.

Such strategies aligned the new biographies with some elements of "theory." Certainly, one could not perform in this genre without being able to theorise what one was doing. On the other hand, while the specific performance within the genre might not have pleased more conservative critics, biography was still a genre which was close—critically and ideologically—to the heart of those in the "anti-theory" camp. Furthermore, while these biographies might in one sense work deconstructively on the myth of the

authors with whom they were dealing, their mere existence served to maintain the cultural mythology of the author and thus further consolidate, even popularise, the Australian canon. As Luke Slattery has suggested, "Australians are more likely to read David Marr's magisterial life of Patrick White ... than any of White's novels." While on the one hand the biographers contextualised their subjects' work and thus injected an element of contingency into their canonical subjects, on the other hand the existence of the biography actually advanced a claim for canonical status, and for the tradition within which that canonicity was defined.

Biography enabled Australian literary studies to sidestep the division over theory. Writing one of the new literary biographies acknowledged the importance of the reconfigurations of literary theory without producing the radical shift in practice that a more direct response to these reconfigurations would have necessitated. It also had a much better chance of being published. Australian publishers have been slow to understand the interest in literary theory, and extremely cautious in their development of a body of critical monographs dealing with Australian writing. Publishing orthodoxy is that students do not buy critical texts, and since students are the major market there is little point in publishing critical texts. For Australian academics wishing to publish within the field of Australian literature, there are strong pragmatic reasons, therefore, why biography is a good career choice. Consequently, it is not surprising that so many of the new biographies were written by critics rather than historians or biographers. Hazel Rowley,[8] Patrick Buckridge, Brian Matthews, David Carter would all have been regarded as established literary critics before they produced their biographies.

Strategic it might be, but there is also a deep ambivalence at the heart of this exercise. In it we can detect some congruencies with the way in which the resentment of

contemporary journalists at the ascendance of the professional critic has competed with their residual nationalist interest in promoting the Australian product. Perhaps as a consequence, literary biography is virtually the only form of writing about Australian literature that is routinely and respectfully reviewed in the media. It is also, one has to say, the only academic writing about Australian literature that tends towards regarding writers as cultural products, as personalities, as figures who excite public interest through their celebrity or notoriety rather than through their specific skills or artistic credentials. Which now returns me to my central theme.

Let me give an example of the kind of media treatment of the author/celebrity I have in mind. When Helen Garner appeared at the Sydney Institute in 1995 to present her most elaborated defense of *The First Stone,* it was a media event. The controversy around her book had developed to the point where a lengthy argument was required in response and she chose the Sydney Institute, a right wing institution, to present it. Inside *The Australian* that day, the full text of her speech was reprinted, attacking late feminism and those who had misunderstood her book and its objectives. On the front page was a photograph of Garner herself which dramatically reveals the nature of the paper's interest in her. While her speech was, in a sense, a news event, the illustration was not. Posed theatrically and tragically, three-quarters to the camera, Garner stands against a deep red background wearing a long black coat, black gloves, and a seriously reflective expression. It is a severe and dramatic portrait of an embattled woman defying her critics. For a newspaper, portrait photography on the front page is most unusual as it foregrounds the personality, not the event. The choice of such a photograph indicates the nature of the *Australian*'s interest in Helen Garner at this time. (An interesting point of comparison is the same paper's front page picture of Helen Darville after she had made the

transition from celebrity to news. Darville is captured, apparently against her will, and, unlike the posed portraiture accompanying her earlier celebrity, this photograph depicts her in flight from the media; hiding under a battered Akubra, her hand is in front of her face, her celebrated hair in unglamorous pigtails. This picture tells a story and is clearly news. No longer interesting as a personality, Demidenko has become a news story—someone who has perpetrated a literary hoax.)

The argument I am making maintains that it is the Garner treatment that has recently become more customary. Australian writers now have to find their place within the broad domain of lifestyle-fashion-culture-arts journalism (the mere fact that there is no longer a strong distinction between any of these categories is itself revealing) and within that domain they must function as personalities or celebrities. What is written about them is gossip regarding their favourite food, their sexual preferences, their houses, whether what people say about them is true. What is not often discussed is their ideas on their craft, the details of their work—as if this was too specialised for the mass audience which is really only interested in knowing about these people because they are already famous.

Admittedly, this is a phenomenon by no means confined to the representation of writers. Painters, for instance, are not likely to be asked about their art; film makers about film. What is surprising is the extent to which this has happened to writers over the last five or six years. There has, it is true, been a dramatic expansion of lifestyle programming in television and some expansion of lifestyle features in the print media over this period. These are voracious media which require a continuous supply of material; maybe we are just witnessing the widening of the net to provide content—another celebrity gardener for *Burke's Backyard.* But there has to have been some shift in the cultural meaning of the writer for this to occur. It is hard to imagine

twenty years ago Patrick White being quizzed about his favourite restaurant or his sexual preferences. Firstly, the media would not have been interested—he was a writer, that's all, and secondly, White would presumably have refused to cooperate. Such fastidiousness would be something of a luxury today.

The conclusion I draw from these, admittedly very generalised, impressions is that where once Australian literature was an important, if undernourished, craft supported by the media for its own sake, literary production is today just another cultural activity, its importance and public profile at the mercy of ratings, fashion, news values and all the other considerations that determine "what gets a run." From one point of view, one can see how difficult it is for cultural producers in the mass media today to observe any rational order of priorities in the menu they offer to their viewers. To produce an episode of an Australian current affairs show today is to decide (for instance) between a story on the mother who murdered her two infant sons in North Carolina; Jenna Mead's response to Helen Garner's response to Jenna Mead's response to *The First Stone;* how designers of supermarkets force you to buy things you don't want; Carmen Lawrence's attack on Penny Easton's mother; Nicole Kidman's performance in the new *Batman* movie; the selection of David Campese in the Wallabies ... and on it goes. Little wonder there is some difficulty in making sense of that range of possibilities.

It is a range of possibilities, however, within which literary production has to battle for its place. Rarely does it win—indeed, it is only through the kinds of controversies seen in 1995 that it has much chance at all. The menu of media possibilities has its effect, though, on a crucial aspect of literary production: the construction of literary reputations.

The academy would prefer to believe that it still had control of the formation and establishment of literary reputations. But, as Ivor Indyk's horrified encounter with

Angry Anderson suggests, this is becoming harder to sustain. Literary reputations have for many years been the property of a very small number of people who exercised diffused but definite power. That is set to change as literary reputations become the concern of newspaper editorials and of features by the likes of Luke Slattery, Greg Sheridan, Gerard Henderson—none of them literary critics. The literary reputation is also an effect of profiles in glossy magazines, lifestyle interviews in the fashion press, and classy photo shoots in the weekend magazines. In response to such an environment, one can hardly blame publishers for seeing literary reputations as within the grasp of their publicity departments, a product of the coordination of promotion and publicity strategies. (A recent example in point would be the way that the fashionability of the so-called "dirty realist" writers was at least as much a product of the weekend magazine profiles and newspaper features as it was of academic discussion.)

From one point of view, it might be reasonable to say that it is a good thing to have released literary reputations from the grasp of a small coterie of established critics. This would be true if one could ignore the way the media treats its celebrities. It is to this issue I shall turn in my second lecture in order to investigate the implications of the enclosure of the literary within the celebrity system of the mainstream media. This will be an investigation, too, into what may turn out to be a fundamental cultural shift: the movement of Australian literature into a new location, popular culture.

1. Ivor Indyck, "What Happened to Australian Literature?" *Voices*, 4: 5, Summer 1994–1995: 86.
2. There are, of course, many versions of this history and of this relationship but Sylvia Lawson's biography of Archibald and the *Bulletin, The Archibald Paradox* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1984), remains the most useful and persuasive.
3. Brian Matthews, *Louisa* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1987). Sylvia Lawson, *op. cit.*
4. David Carter, "Biography, Politics, A Novel: Reading Judah Waten," *Southern Review*, 22: 1, March 1989: 4–16.
   Patrick Buckridge, "Biography as Social Knowledge: An Anthropological Perspective," *Southern Review*, 22: 1, March 1989: 35–52.
5. For a fuller version of this argument, see my "Reviving the Author: "The 'boom' in literary biography," in Irmtraud Petersson and Martin Duwell (eds), *"And What Books Do You Read?" New Studies in Australian Literature*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996): 196–205.
6. Peter Pierce, "Forms in Australian Literary History," Laurie Hergenhan (ed.), *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988): 88.
7. I collaborated in an early version of this "call to theorize" in a paper that Delys Bird and I delivered to ASAL in Adelaide in 1981, "Australian Studies: Practice without Theory," *Westerly*, 27: 3, 1982.
8. Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993).

Chapter 2

LITERATURE, CELEBRITY AND THE MEDIA

My starting point in this lecture is the relationship between a new genre of celebrities—Australian writers— and the media. I will be drawing on some of my own work about the highly public literary career of Peter Carey before moving into a more general discussion of how the process of celebrity can either expose public figures to criticism or protect them from it. For examples of the latter, I will be reiterating some of the arguments made in my most recent book, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture*[1], which analyses the career of Alan Bond. My focus in this lecture, then, begins to shift to the media in general and the practices of popular journalism in particular.

The media, of course, depend upon a steady supply of celebrities—preferably through a stable and predictable industrial mechanism. While they like to appear as if they are ever-alert, waiting for the news to happen, the fact is that many of the industrial and institutional arrangements which enable the media to operate are also designed to make news as predictable as possible. The media prefer to predict the news rather than react to it because this greatly facilitates the processes of gathering and treating the raw material. As the media industries have developed over the last two decades in Australia, a celebrity "industry" has developed along with them to provide the "talent" in an organised

manner. Where once Australia was simply at the far end of a promotional chain that began either in Britain or the USA, today there is an indigenous promotions industry devoted to getting Australian "faces" on television, on radio, in the newspapers and in the magazines.

John Hartley has coined a nice phrase to describe the promotions industry: "the smiling professions."[2] Although he does include journalists within this category—noting that journalism has had to adapt to operating in a "post-truth" society—Hartley is primarily referring to those who supply journalists with their information in the first place and who encourage them to use it in particular ways. Hartley suggests that "the smiling professions" have grown of late, and this is certainly true of Australia where the promotions and public relations industries expanded dramatically during the 1980s. In concrete terms, our news and current affairs programs, our women's magazines and our radio talk shows have become increasingly dependent for their raw material upon the supply of local celebrities. Consequently, where once Australia *had* no celebrities, today we have more than we can handle.

The signs of this are everywhere, and it is difficult to work out if the celebrities are themselves influential factors on our media landscapes, or effects of a change occurring elsewhere within the promotional and media cultures. The change in the character of Australian mass marketed women's magazines is a case in point. There would be little disagreement in the proposition that there has been a dramatic change in Australian women's magazines since the early 1980s. Titles such as *New Idea, Woman's Day* and *The Australian Women's Weekly* always included some reference to royalty and film stars in their contents, but they were not in any sense dependent upon such stories for their appeal. Judging from their contents, the target market for these magazines in their heyday in the 1950s was a middle-class, middle-aged woman, interested in the home and family, to

whom the merest hint of sensationalism seemed vulgar and unnecessary. As the market tightened during the 1970s and 1980s in response to a redefinition of women's social roles, many of these magazines sought to boost circulation figures by going downmarket. What occurred was the "tabloidisation" of the women's magazines to the point where they are now almost totally dependent on sensational stories about celebrities—often with a sleazy exposé feature ("Julia's secret nude snaps"!). Tantalising and occasionally "naughty," these stories are a form of institutionally produced gossip. Indeed, *Who* magazine, a relatively late starter in these stakes, defines what it does explicitly as "gossip" in its advertisements (interestingly, it says it also offers "truth," which admits they are separate categories). Whether this reorientation of the women's magazine market has occurred because of a change in the supply of "celebrity" material, an ideological shift in the definition of the market (the effect of feminism, for instance), or is related to the decline in tabloid newspapers, is very difficult to say.

The word "tabloid" usually refers to the dependence on sensation and exposé, and on gossip about public figures, "freaks" and crime, identified with the western world's tabloid-size newspapers pitching for a downmarket readership. The exploitation of celebrity plays a central role in this genre. Over the last decade the discourses of the tabloid have migrated from the newspaper sector (where they are almost extinct in Australia) to magazines and television. In television, current affairs programs have embraced the label of tabloid to indicate they "are not afraid of being entertaining" as one egregious defence would have it. *Hard Copy,* for one, makes direct allusion to this print tradition in its title. The influence of tabloidism is not confined to the unashamedly crass, however; we can see it to a greater or lesser degree in all Australian current affairs television—in the choice of stories, the mode of journalistic pursuit (the foot in the door, the confrontation in the carpark

and so on), the dependence upon the personality profile. The search for sensation and entertainment (and it is debatable whether this is the audience's or the producer's quest) has assisted in reducing the proportion of current affairs airtime given over to politics throughout the sector. Studies have been made of how a program such as *A Current Affair* is structured, and analyses done of the proportion of local stories versus international stories, of personalities versus politics, that it carries.[3] Surveys of the figures for 15 years ago compared to recent figures show that the proportion of prime time current affairs content given over to political or social issues has declined dramatically on all channels. Correspondingly, the proportion given over to celebrities and personalities has increased. Among the reasons usually given for this is the simple fact that many television viewers find political debates boring. In the push for ratings, according to this view, few current affairs producers can afford to prefer an interview with John Howard over a chat with Madonna. Such shows are flagships for their networks and their ratings are treated very seriously. Lately, these ratings have been under significant pressure. The youth audience for news and current affairs has declined dramatically and television has so far failed to modify its programming in ways that help reverse this trend. Recently, there have been significant changes in some of the macro relationships between the various media industries (I will discuss these shortly) which have further increased current affairs television's sensitivity to movements in ratings. As a result, television journalism has undergone something of a redefinition in response to a perception of what will rebuild its audience; it is a redefinition that many working in the industry regret.

A significant factor in the local production of celebrities over the last two decades has been the establishment of local media and entertainment industries which could

systematically produce local stars. Film and television are the obvious examples here, but one should not overlook the professionalisation of sport. The revolutions in the administration and marketing of tennis, cricket, rugby league and most recently rugby union, have dramatically multiplied the number of people requiring promotional services, public relations advice, "spin doctors" who will manage a personality's access to and exposure through the media. Merchandising agreements, sponsorships and other kinds of promotional strategies have become fundamental components of the successful sportsperson's income, and they are made possible by the kinds of enterprise structures I have been describing.

At the same time as the supply of local celebrities has increased, the level of profitability in all the media industries has fallen. Over the period of the big media shakeout in the latter half of the 1980s, virtually every broadcaster in the country was sold and resold; this involved refinancing, the acquisition of new debts and obligations as well as new owners. During this period, profits and losses oscillated violently, levels of debt rose, and decision-making became increasingly *ad hoc*. Competition between the various outlets within the same medium was already intense but this was exacerbated by the development of fierce competition for advertising *between* media. Where once radio was largely interested in local, rather than national, advertising, the implementation of the National Radio Plan and the aggregation of regional television markets meant that, by the end of the 1980s, everyone was competing for the same sources of national advertising revenue. This aggravated the trend towards maximising ratings in order to build up advertising revenue. Such shifts in the operation of the industry have made the work of the "smiling professions" an ever more tightly articulated part of the work of journalists, of program producers, of network managements. The

exploitation of celebrity has now become a staple activity at all levels and in all sectors of the media.

To return to the issues raised at the end of the previous lecture, how does all this affect the representation of Australian writers? Some time ago I conducted research into Peter Carey's treatment in the media. The initial stimulus for the research was a shift I had perceived in Carey's cultural placement: where Carey began his career as an international writer whose work displayed the influences of North and South American fiction, the late 1980s version was very much the national figure, offering his thoughts on the state of the nation, the republic, and so on. The research threw up some interesting information about how this reputation was formed.[4] For instance, when Carey was promoting the publication of *Oscar and Lucinda* there was more written about the book and its author in *Elle* than in, for instance, the *Australian Book Review.* What was more interesting was the kind of treatment received. An examination of the burst of promotional activity around the publication of *Oscar and Lucinda* and its success in the Booker Prize in 1988 was revealing:

> Over this period, Carey was treated conventionally enough in numerous book reviews, profiles and magazine features in the quality and weekend press. We can detect the specificity of his definition as a literary and cultural figure, however, by noticing that he was also the subject of an editorial in *The Sydney Morning Herald* claiming him as an Australian success story (29 October 1988); a lifestyle piece on his relationship ("Then we just fell in love, starting that night") with his wife, Alison Summers in the same paper's *Good Weekend* (27 August 1988); three-page features with pictures in *Elle* (April 1988) and Australian *Time* (22 February 1988); a feature on "the making of *Oscar and Lucinda*" in *The Bulletin* (23 February 1988); and finally a "diary" piece by Alison Summers detailing "a week in the life of her husband" around the time of the announcement of the Booker (*The Bulletin,* 15 November 1988). All of these

> move easily (in some cases "definitively") between Carey's work and his private life—representing the latter in the mode of any celebrity interview, be it with Alan Border or Madonna.[5]

Oscar and Lucinda came out in the Bicentennial year, and Carey's tour of the media outlets assumed some of the proportions of a Bicentennial event. At every opportunity he talked about the central image in the book—"the glass church floating down the river." He explained that symbol to viewers of the *Today* show, to readers of *The Bulletin, Australian Book Review, Vogue, Elle* and all the major daily newspapers. Media coverage of his book was highly personalised, with the accent upon his personal style, his marriage, and most substantially, his pronouncements on Australian society and identity, and on the future. The book promotion became utterly bound up with the marketing of Carey, the national celebrity. Whether fact or mythology, whether deliberately fed to the media or relentlessly dredged up by bored researchers, the various media constructions of Carey's personal history at this time contributed to the author's "media-ted" identity as well as to the critical and mythic frame within which each successive work of fiction would have to find its place:

> The extraordinary fact one *can* verify with a little research is that while Peter Carey is now well established within Australia's literary canon, there has been much more written about Carey's life and opinions in the Australian popular and daily press than there have been analyses of his fiction within scholarly journals or the small literary/cultural magazines.[6]

The conclusions I went on to draw from this case study are of direct relevance to the argument here, and therefore may be usefully quoted at some length:

> We are accustomed to TV personalities, sports stars, even some politicians, being "nationalised"—incorporated through media

> representations into the service of a narrow range of definitions of the Australian national character. We are less used to seeing this happen to literary figures. Rather, we have tended to see the writer as a scourge of such processes, indeed of all media-constructed identities (Patrick White, for instance, performed this role perfectly when he attacked the Bicentenary as a complete waste of time—and he did so, of course, with the complete cooperation of the media...). Hence, when we talk about extra-literary influences upon Australian literary studies and specifically upon the processes of canon-formation, we tend to cast our net rather close to the shore. We think of the institutions most directly involved in these processes—the publishing industry, the education system, funding bodies for the arts—and see the politics of production and reception which most determine our literary field as largely contained within these domains.
>
> Our sense of the narrowness and relative autonomy of these domains has possibly been sharpened over the last few years as our media industries have become ever more focussed on the mass, to the expense of the minority, markets. However, Carey's celebrity suggests that this concentration of the media, the increasing difficulty experienced by small presses, small magazines, and small constituencies of all kinds in maintaining their own media presence, may actually increase the influence the mass media exerts on Australian literary studies, on popular conceptions of the writer, and thus on the formation and interrogation of the canon.[7]

This was written in 1993, well before the controversies over *The First Stone* and *The Hand That Signed the Paper* gave the suggestions a sharper point. It would be hard to find a more signal example than these books provide of the influence the media exert on Australian literary studies, how they help form popular conceptions of Australian writers, how they frame and reframe the context of reading and reception, and how they participate in the construction of literary reputations and the canon.

I should make it clear at this point that I am not asking for special privileges for writers, or suggesting that they be excused from participating in this process. What I am saying is that we need to acknowledge that they *do* participate in it, that writers have become cultural commodities in the same way as the stars of *Baywatch*. If this is the case, then we need to be aware of how that might affect the formation of literary reputations.

Given that point, it is probably fair to say that there is nothing exceptional about the Darville case—other than its scale. Indeed, what helped to make the controversy possible, apparently, was the author's sense of the usefulness, of the centrality, of the media to the construction of her reputation and thus of her readership. What she overlooked was the fact that the media always serve their own interests; providing them with a story which serves one's own interests may seem a smart way to intervene in and control the process, but there is no guarantee the media will treat it in the way intended. Unfortunately for her, Helen Darville underestimated the level of interest celebrity excites in the media, and thus the level of scrutiny to which the media would subject her claims if she continued to make them.

Furthermore, and still in terms of generalities, the affair does suggest that certain kinds of literary controversy are more likely to be followed up than others. We can see that certain values were vigorously defended by the media covering Helen Darville's career. Any attempt to blur the distinction between fiction and fact or to problematise the idea of authorship was stoutly resisted. The media reports defended what they clearly regarded as commonsense (a straightforward notion of authorship, fiction and originality). The debacle over the Miles Franklin Award was used to interrogate the dubious subjectivity of literary judgement—again a potential offence against common sense and egalitarianism. The figure of the professional

critic was caught in the spotlight; it froze, unable convincingly to defend itself. Finally, the "politically correct" ethic of multiculturalism—figured forth in the Ukrainian costume, the folk dancing lessons and Darville's habit of explaining the most trivial of gestures as ethnic in origin—was strenuously attacked because it, supposedly, privileged certain kinds of ethnicity as more authentic than others—than white Anglo-Australian, for one.

Within this "media-ted" narrative, the trendy privileging of difference ran up against good old commonsense with a most cataclysmic smash. Caught were the ambivalences discussed in the first lecture: the suspicion that the professional critic had seized control of Australian writing and turned it into something that no longer had anything to do with its readers and everything to do with the careers of those employed within the academy. The fact that grants and prizes were involved was further grist to the mill, increasing the intensity of existing suspicions that privilege was being justified by dubious theorising.

Some of this had little to do with the author herself; her manipulation of the media merely triggered the expression of attitudes and doubts that were already firmly established. Much of it, however, was specific. As I have said earlier, Darville was not somebody who wore her celebrity reluctantly, only for as long as she was forced to. The nerve required to challenge Gerard Henderson's right to speak on behalf of Australian Jews on national television, while at the same time appropriating a bogus ethnic identity in order to speak herself, is not insignificant. Indeed, it is the eagerness to speak—as much as the appropriation of speaking positions—that seems to have been a significant factor. Many of the problems Helen Darville encountered were the product of her willingness to talk to the press and offer further elaborations of the fiction she had woven around her life. Indeed, it was the persistence of some of these performances which brought her undone: the public

reiteration of fictions about her school days, for instance, finally wore down her high school principal to the point where he decided he should circulate his own version.

As has been pointed out, the choice of publicity material and the way in which Helen Darville dealt with the press when she won the Australian/Vogel National Literary Award helped lay the foundation for later problems. The combination of the glamorous photograph and the deliberate foregrounding of what we now know was a false ethnicity certainly helped create a personality of interest to the media. Publicity around the Vogel Award, however, was minor compared to the storm which broke around the awarding of the Miles Franklin to Darville.

The fact that the decision met with widespread criticism was neither new nor unexpected. The Miles Franklin Award has been dogged by controversy for some years—particularly around the issue of the "Australianness" of its winning book. Australian authors whose books have not been set in Australia have in the past been deemed ineligible: Christina Stead suffered this fate, as did Tim Winton in the year Darville was successful. The choice of Darville's book was widely regarded as an attempt to reposition the Award, and indeed to redefine what constitutes "Australian" life. While there was much support for this attempt, there was also a great deal of criticism—both for the principle it enacted and for the book chosen to carry it forward.

Despite the accusations of anti-semitism levelled at the author and of political correctness levelled at the judges, Darville seemed to be surviving the controversy well enough for some time after the 1 June 1995 decision. Articles such as that in *Who* magazine ("A Winner Scorned: Helen Demidenko's award winning novel opens old wounds," 17 July 1995) recounted the complaints and accusations but allowed her to emerge brave, battered but not beaten:

> She's been spat on in the street, mailed faeces and endured a barrage of obscenely worded telephone death threats that drove her flatmate to move out, but Brisbane writer Helen Demidenko, 24, still manages a smile as she agrees: "It's been an interesting month." (37)

Pictured with "real" writers Rodney Hall and Marion Halligan at the Adelaide Writers' Festival, Demidenko was merely controversial and challenging in this kind of representation.

The storm broke, however, when her claim to Ukrainian ancestry was revealed to be false: that is, it was not the book but her own identity and her manipulation of that identity through the media that precipitated the media frenzy that ran throughout August and September. From this point, Demidenko, or Darville as she then became, was news; "Author Mystery Deepens," "Dad a Cairns Cabbie: Claim Denied," ran the headlines while Darville remained "defiant in face of furore." As the whole story unravelled, the media treatments became increasingly personal, speculating on her mental health, the reasons for her behaviour, and calling her a liar and cheat. Her attempts to reposition herself as, despite everything, an author ("My work must stand as a novel") were treated as entirely spurious and evidence of failure to understand just what she had done and what she had become. Once she appeared on the front page of *The Australian* fleeing from reporters, issuing a series of explanations and apologies to buy them off, her transition from successful author to notorious public figure/bogus celebrity was complete.

One can of course sympathise with Darville's attempt to refocus attention on her book. So far in this discussion *The Hand that Signed the Paper* has rarely rated a mention. The furore around the author, her personality, her attempt to manipulate the media, have dominated what I have been saying as well as what the media said throughout 1995.

Inasmuch as the book is an issue, and I recognise that to some its representation of European history remains the *crucial* issue, the cultural placement of the author has changed the meaning of the book. Once made public, the deception about her ethnicity repositioned the authority of her point of view on the events described, forcing the book to depend entirely on its power as fiction—no longer able to draw on its apparent facticity for whatever emotional power it might generate.

For present purposes two issues need to be highlighted. One was raised earlier: that this affair is a categoric demonstration of the domain into which literature and literary debate have now been drawn—that of mass-mediated popular culture. The second issue leads on a little further: that the way in which the media treat their celebrities seems to be out of control. It is not principled, it is not judicious, it is not responsible. Whatever one may think of what this particular author has done to gain publicity for her work, the level of harassment and distress to which her family, friends and associates have been exposed seems utterly disproportionate. Once her story moved from the inside page to the front page and became news, reporters besieged her house, climbed on her roof, lay in wait for fellow students after class and for the secretaries of the university department in which she studies, and believed the most ridiculous rumours (a journalist rang to ask if it was true that someone in the Department of English was reading all of Gerard Henderson's work to check it for plagiarism). David Bentley's receipt of the Gold Walkley for his part in this feeding frenzy indicates that few journalists would regard this interest as excessive. In my view it is; and while I have no brief for its object, I do have sympathy for anyone caught in a media spotlight of this intensity because of the lasting distress it is bound to cause. By the end of the year, it was seriously being suggested that there was no possibility of this author ever being published again.

The Demidenko case is not unique, of course. There are many examples of excessive media interest producing inordinate levels of distress for their objects. The treatment of James Scott, the so-called "Iceman" who sold his story to *Sixty Minutes* and regretted it, is one such example. As part of its critique of media practices, the ABC TV satire, *Frontline,* provides thinly fictionalised instances in almost every episode. In such cases, it is the media's singleminded pursuit of their own interests in the capture and deployment of this particular commodity—the star, the celebrity, the newsworthy individual—which seems impossible to resist. There is very little the victims of media interest can do to protect themselves. However, and as if this wasn't enough, the media's interests can work in the opposite direction, too. When it suits them, the media can deliberately protect the image of individual celebrities from being scrutinised or tarnished. In some cases, once a person has been installed as a national figure, dear to the nation's heart (as with Paul Hogan or John Farnham), there are occasions when the media will go out of their way to maintain that image and to resist publishing anything which might destroy it. From both perspectives, the media treat their celebrities as marketable commodities in the battle for audiences; they privilege their commercial objectives over any acknowledgement of the obligation to inform.

My 1994 study, *Making it National,* discusses the identification between a particular brand of business hero in the 1980s and discourses of national celebrity. At a time when, we know now, business least respected and observed its social and legal obligations, it was offered to us as the model for social organisation: the economy became a model of society where everything was achieved through the operation of market forces. One of the ways in which the identification between the interests of business and those of the nation was maintained was through the media's relentless boosting of particular representatives of business

as national heroes. At the time, any criticism of Alan Bond, for one, was seen to be a little un-Australian. But one only has to notice what has happened to the image of Alan Bond since the late 1980s "to see how bogus all of this was":

> Far from being a paragon of Australian virtues, Bond is now routinely disowned; his "meanings" are now articulated by way of an explicit disarticulation between what he is and what Australians are.... From being merely a "tottering tycoon" or "the wheeler and dealer who could not stop" [news headlines at the time of his abandoning the chair of Bond Corp], he came to be seen as a threat to the freedom of the press, an unfit person to hold a media licence and finally someone whose withdrawal from public and corporate life was applauded by key writers within the financial press.[8]

The story is similar for other corporate heroes of the time; indeed, it is notable how many of the mass media's heroes of the 1980s have found themselves in the law courts during the 1990s.

It was very different then. Skase, Elliott, Bond, Connell, were all at one time or other held up as figures to emulate, exponents of a new form of Australian entrepreneurialism —what I have called elsewhere "larrikin capitalism."[9] While it must have been clear that the process of asset-stripping and paper revaluation that marked the 1980s entrepreneurs' mode of creating wealth had its drawbacks, very few in the media were interested. Indeed, the very unscrupulousness and riskiness of their financial tactics were seen as precisely the kind of imaginative, unconventional thinking that was required for Australians to make a mark on the world. The failure of financial journalists to write accurately about what they saw was of particular assistance to Alan Bond's corporate career. Once his boat won the America's Cup, Bond—the personality, the celebrity, the Aussie hero, and also the businessman—was unassailable. For the next four

years, as far as the business and mainstream media was concerned, he could do no wrong. Even those who could imagine doubts about his suitability as the role model for Australian business, dismissed them. This is from the *Age* editorial of 28 September 1983 applauding *Australia II*'s winning of the America's Cup:

> It may be argued that Mr Bond is the embodiment of a narrow range of virtues. That an Australia populated by Alan Bonds would be an unhappily competitive place. That the aggressive brand of capitalism he represents is not an unequivocal good. But if in this remarkable victory, the culmination of the sustained and courageous campaign over many years, we have seen not the whole truth, we have still seen a truth. It is that teams led by vigorous entrepreneurs can achieve much.

The alliance between nationalist heroes and business seems to have been sealed at this moment; the interests of Bond, the media, and the nation were universally taken to be all but identical. Through his consequent status as a national treasure, Bond—the business man—and his commercial practices were protected from the scrutiny that should have revealed that his activities were of dubious legality and at times in direct opposition to the national interest. At various moments during this period of media adulation, Bond's companies were responsible for 10 per cent of the nation's foreign borrowings, paid negligible tax and actually participated in the destruction, not the creation, of jobs.

The story of how this alliance was maintained, and indeed how it was reversed once Bond's celebrity could no longer sustain him against media scrutiny, is not my concern here. My point in bringing it up is simply to demonstrate how the media's dependence upon celebrities, and the manner of their treatment of them as commodities in transactions with their audiences, serve the nation very

poorly indeed. Bond's celebrity status protected him from the scrutiny he should have received; consequently, Bond's shareholders and Australian taxpayers were denied their only protection—accurate and independent information. On the other hand, in the case of Helen Darville, one could argue that the media scrutiny was excessive. Certainly the hounding of the author and her associates after the truth about her ethnicity was revealed was grossly out of proportion to the importance of what she had done, or its implications. In all the dealings the writer has had with journalists over this affair, and there have been many, the constant refrain has been—"this really has gone too far, but we have to follow it up." Of course, the gambit was calculated to encourage my assistance. But it also indicated unease amongst the journalists themselves about the values implicit in the way the story had dominated so much of the media for so many days between July and September 1995.

Coming to this position concludes my interest in the specific literary context within which the discussion began. To think about the special place of the writer within media practice and current media representations is after all to look at a particular instance of something much more comprehensive. The worries about the enclosure of Australian writing within the media's commerce in celebrities reflect much broader concerns about the way the media currently operate. We need to reconsider, in my view, the principles which underlie the operation of the media in a democratic state and test current media practice against these principles. How well do our media discharge their obligations of providing us with information, of exercising social obligations, of protecting democratic freedoms, and of attempting to find accurate accounts for their stories? There have been significant shifts not only in the structural and commercial organisation of the media in Australia over the last decade, but also in media practice—issues of

programming, formats, and what passes for ethical performance. These shifts do, it seems to me, threaten the media's fulfilment of their social obligations; indeed, they may actually help obscure the fact that such obligations exist at all. It is with these concerns in mind that I shall go on to examine the ethics of contemporary media practice, particularly in news and current affairs journalism.

1. Graeme Turner, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture,* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994).
2. John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures,* (London: Routledge, 1993).
3. See, for example, Philip Bell, Kathe Boehringer, and Stephen Crofts, *Programmed Politics* (Sydney: Currency, 1982).
4. Graeme Turner, "Nationalising the Author: The Celebrity of Peter Carey," *Australian Literary Studies,* 16: 2: 131–39. The part of this lecture dealing with Carey draws on this article for its main arguments.
4. *ibid:* 132–33.
5. *ibid*: 133.
6. *ibid*: 137.
7. Turner, *Making it National:* 34.
8. For a full length account of this see Turner, *Making it National.*

Chapter 3

POWER WITHOUT RESPONSIBILITY: JOURNALISM, ETHICS AND THE MEDIA

This lecture is solely concerned with the media, although it develops out of the arguments already made in the preceding two lectures. Its objective is an explicitly polemical one: it is my view that the operation of the news media in Australia should be a matter of greater public concern and independent regulatory control. Over the last decade, there have been a number of changes in the way the industries which run the news media are structured, and in the way the media routinely perform their tasks, which have exacerbated problems already present by encouraging the neglect, and even dismissal, of fundamental public responsibilities. I will be focussing primarily on television news and current affairs programs but what I have to say is applicable, to a greater or lesser extent, to the media in general.

Let me begin by fleshing out the kind of shifts I am talking about. They are varied in their origins and their effects but, cumulatively, amount to a significant modification in the function and meaning of the media in Australia. Some of the shifts I refer to are simply localised changes in programming strategies, but others constitute substantial realignments of "the news" or "current affairs" to bring them into much closer synchrony with marketing strategies. While individually the effect of each of these alignments may not seem significant, incrementally they

constitute a trend which has the capacity to change radically how the media define what they do.

To give some sense of the kind of redefinition I have in mind, I shall refer to the way the British media have changed through the cultural/political positioning of tabloid news over the last decade. Where once "the tabloid" was simply the crass, more sensationalist end of the newspaper industry, the success of *Sunday Sport* and the Murdoch *Sun* and *News of the World* (all of which have been able to make the sensational their beat and largely forget about the alibi of "news") has enabled the genre to carve out a populist cultural/political role as "the voice of the people." The downmarket approach has thus come to signify a grassroots ventriloquism on behalf of "the people." This has occurred in conjunction with the newspapers' redefinition of what they do as "giving the public what it wants" (entertainment) rather than telling it what it needs to know (information). As the level of information has declined, paradoxically the popular influence of the tabloid newspapers seems to have grown. In the UK today we have a textual form which still markets itself as "newspaper" (although *Sunday Sport* defines itself as a "news entertainment") but which really requires a new noun to distinguish it from what is most often considered to be a newspaper outside the UK. As a result of the tabloids' cutting away at the centrality of the notion of truth, the use of acknowledged sources, and the basic assumption that the stories which appear in newspapers have been verified, there are now at least two active and contradictory definitions of what a newspaper is in the UK. One of them acknowledges some sense of public responsibility, the other does not; one of them accepts the responsibility of providing accurate information, the other sees itself as a genre of representation. I think we are looking at a similar process here in Australia in the broadcasting media's redefinition of news and current affairs.

In order to develop this critique of the Australian media, I shall first examine the gradually increasing centralisation of the ratings system in television and radio. While ratings have always been important, the last decade has seen this importance grow dramatically. There are a number of obvious commercial reasons for this: when both radio and television were so radically affected by the changes in ownership and in the regulatory regimes during the 1980s, it was inevitable that this would be reflected in increased competition for advertising revenue. Although the pool of advertisers did not increase, the pool of those attempting to attract their business did—particularly as a result of the aggregation of regional television markets. Nor was this solely a commercial phenomenon. Both the ABC and SBS have allowed ratings performance to influence their activities over the last decade as never before. Viewers of the ABC complain that there is little difference between much of its programming and that of commercial television, while the advertising on SBS is increasingly similar in content and frequency to that found on the commercial channels.

Of course, ratings are a commercial necessity for the operation of the media even though everyone who uses them admits their inadequacy as measurement techniques. However, their relative importance has climbed as profit levels have oscillated, as competition has become more intense, and as the television audience in total has declined. The early 1980s trend had been towards more specialised identities within the broadcast and print markets—if not towards niche-marketing then certainly towards a defined demographic. Now, in television only Channel Ten looks to a specific demographic and everybody else pitches for the whole of Australia. There is a subtle but significant consequence of this; broadcasting now supplies a commodity rather than performs a service. Once broadcasting is generally regarded as something which sells its products to an audience rather than serves a constituency, then we have

redefined the media's function as solely commercial and transactional. Audiences are, of course, the last group to accept such a definition but I think Australian audiences are approaching such an acceptance now.

The second shift, which has a relation to the first, concerns specific understandings of news and current affairs programming. Over the last five years, we have witnessed an incremental distortion of the relation between the news media and the events upon which they report. No longer content to cover the news, today's news media like to participate in creating the news or, in some extreme cases, actively intervening to change the course of the news. The siege at Hanging Rock, in which *A Current Affair*'s Mike Willessee conducted a phone interview with the two children being held hostage, and where the same program's Mike Munro landed a helicopter between police lines and the farmhouse in which the hostages were held, is probably the most worrying example of the media attempting to manipulate an event so as to secure exclusive coverage for their own viewers. Here, the media seemed to see themselves as caped crusaders able and entitled to act on behalf of the public—but with almost no regard for the likely consequences beyond their own ratings and personal profiles. This, again, strikes me as a sign of a fundamental shift in the way in which the media think of themselves and thus in the way they operate.

The third shift is perhaps a familiar one, but it has been particularly marked lately: that is, the progressive blurring of the distinction between information and entertainment. This, too, is related to the competition for ratings and especially the insertion of public broadcasters (ABC, SBS) into this competition: once this insertion occurred, there was no other discourse available from which to mount a comparison or critique. Where once the blurring of the line between information and entertainment was routinely talked about as one of the "problems of television," we have

now arrived at a situation where this is simply not perceived as a problem any longer. Not because it no longer happens, but because it happens so routinely. From what one can see, it is actually much harder now, in practice, for people in the media to justify their attempts to maintain a balance between information and entertainment. Within the news media today there is not much of a supporting ideology for journalists who attempt to preserve their old-fashioned standards.

Let me follow through some effects of these broad shifts—the symptoms, if you like, of a change in the function of the media. To begin with, consider how the news media create their own stories. Concern about this goes back a long way. Some will remember the eyebrows raised a decade ago when the *Australian* began commissioning its Newspoll surveys and then publishing its interpretations of the results as front page stories. As many pointed out at the time this was creating news, not reporting it. A newspaper could not be independent if the events it was describing were the product of decisions made by its own editor. This was especially the case during elections when the polls themselves became the primary news events, when they provoked representatives of other news organisations to ask candidates for their responses to the polls and their interpretations, and when the relative standings in the polls reported by the paper had the capacity to influence voter behaviour. Despite vigorous criticisms of this practice, it has continued and now seems firmly established as one of the conventional tactics available to a newspaper reporting on elections and other issues.

Of course, the publication of poll results is a neat technique for proliferating stories where none exists. The poll is an event that, in a sense, has not happened: the interpretation tells you what this poll suggests might happen. As a solution for a news desk wanting to produce stories that do not simply recycle what the candidates say, it

is elegant and effective. It is now part of the political process, it would seem, so that the parties deal with the polls and their supposed effects as a routine part of their planning and strategic process.

To continue the theme of the media creating its own stories, the hidden camera belongs in this context. *Hinch* and *A Current Affair* have been the key exponents of this tactic and made it part of the current affairs repertoire. This is the tactic where you put a hidden camera in a car, send it off to be repaired and then check the videotape to see if the repairers did what they said they did. Or, you abandon a car by the side of a highway and hide a camera in a tree; eventually, someone comes along, strips the car, and you have a TV program. Easy to promote through "shock, horror" teasers, visually dramatic with the frisson of voyeurism provoked by the underlit, grainy pictures, this gimmick should really be thought of as a replacement for current affairs, not one of its constitutive strategies. But, unfortunately, it isn't seen that way at all.

More serious is the kind of intervention mentioned earlier, where the media's participation in pursuit of exclusive footage puts citizens at risk. *A Current Affair*'s intervention in the Hanging Rock seige is the most vivid example. Here, the telephone call to the children—which told them the danger they were in, when their earlier answers had indicated they were relatively secure because this was precisely what they did not fully understand—interrupted police access and delayed the liberation of the hostages. The ABC, significantly, were also involved in this; their radio crews also obstructed police communications with the kidnappers as they attempted to get "live" interviews. In this case, there is no doubt that the interests of the children and of those attempting to free them were subordinated to the media organisations' interest in a hot story. Something of a public outcry ensued, but some sections of the media appeared to have learnt very little. A

month or so later, there was another siege—of a legal office in Eagle Street, Brisbane, where hostages were being held—and this time the kidnappers themselves contacted the media. This had the attraction, presumably, of allowing them to conduct their negotiations, indeed commit their crimes, live on television. For the media to cooperate in this, as they did, was to further emphasise how poorly they understood their own responsibilities and those of the police.

When complaints are made about this kind of behaviour, the media tend to defend themselves by invoking their responsibility to the viewers. "Giving them what they want" is accorded a higher status than the observance of some rarified standard of journalistic ethics or responsibility to the community. This, both for commercial reasons and as an exercise in applied democracy. It is true that balancing such competing pressures is part of the journalist's job, and is occasionally very difficult to do. However, increasingly we find that the defence of the public's democratic right to know—a reasonable enough ethical position—is becoming an alibi not for brave, challenging and investigative journalism but for crass and irresponsible journalism. The fact that a lot of people might want to know is offered as an excuse for telling them things that are distorted, untrue, unsubstantiated, or misleading; in many instances, the kind of information disseminated under this rubric is extremely damaging, its effect irreversible, and there is little likelihood that such damage has ever been an editorial consideration. (I am thinking of one recent case where an ex-convict, having served his time and recommenced his life, had his new whereabouts, even his children's school, publicised in a national current affairs program.

One of the difficulties, for the critic, for the public and for the individual journalist is that journalism speaks through strongly established discourses of authority. The language of journalism is designed to authorise what it does, and in a

sense we grant journalists a licence to act on our behalf in some territories. Because they have access to information we don't have, journalists are expected to use that information in our interests and so perform a central role in democracies like ours. However, these same discourses of authority can be manipulated to serve less disinterested ends which have nothing to do with democracy. The achievement of authority identified with the editorial writer, for instance, is not necessarily the product of knowledge, probity or sound judgement; it may be simply the operation of a rhetorical strategy. The editorial writer learns how to deliver opinions with a degree of apparent evenhandedness that impresses as fair and reasonable. The trouble is, so many of these opinions prove to be unfounded or wrong: in the case of the reputation of Alan Bond, referred to earlier, the editorial writers actively participated in protecting the fiction of Alan Bond, role model for Australian business, and thus collaborated in deceiving Australian taxpayers and shareholders. As the Bond example demonstrates, the level of evidence required for the authoritative editorial is derisory, when one considers how much credence an editorial can carry.

The "belief-creating" style of the editorial can be carried over into other media, for instance, into the representation of the TV presenter—Ray Martin, Jana Wendt. They too occupy a position of authority, act as proxies for their audience, and mediate in debates in "the public interest." One only has to watch *Frontline* to see how easy it is to unpack that construction of authority. The moment when Mike Moore goes on camera, assumes the pose and expression and turns to the camera to say, "I'm Mike Moore," is the moment when we appreciate the television presenter's "authority" as the product of deliberate strategies of representation. What *Frontline* allows us to see is that this persona is a fabrication we have agreed to accept. However, *Frontline* also suggests that, if the fabricated

persona doesn't do the things we want it to do on our behalf, the agreement needs to be revoked and disowned.

Frontline has been very useful because it operates in such a close relation to the media: its stories are usually recognisable, drawing on real or rumoured events that have become part of the history of the news and current affairs sectors of the media over the last decade. It is interesting for present purposes, because the target of its satire is precisely the highly competitive, high profile journalism under discussion. What *Frontline* documents is the culture within which these programs are produced: a culture that is arrogantly unresponsive to social democratic formulations of the ethics governing journalism, but violently responsive to ratings figures and subtle shifts in personal profiles and career trajectories. The picture that emerges is of a very destructive culture which reduces everything it touches, from the presenters to their victims.

An episode of *Frontline* dealing with the seige discussed earlier will illustrate this critique. In the fictionalised version, Mike Moore's phone calls threaten the whole operation, causing exactly the public outcry experienced by Willesee. The Police Commissioner visits the *Frontline* office to express his fury, but this occurs concurrently with Brooke Vandenburg returning from an exclusive interview with one of the kidnappers, delighted with the great footage she's got, so viewers are never invited to consider that the Commissioner's complaints will have any effect. Sure enough, two weeks later there is another seige. Just as with the real Eagle Street seige, the kidnappers ask for Mike who agrees to conduct a live phone interview with them. Asking them what they want, in his best smug "I'm a famous media interviewer" manner, Mike Moore's face falls almost comically, as the kidnapper answers, "I want you to hear this!" and starts shooting his hostages. The screen goes black on Mike's sudden appreciation of the egoism implicit in his assumption of power and the fragility of the

agreement between society and the media upon which his precious celebrity depends. For the viewer, a more fundamental problem is exposed—that of the operation of power without responsibility.

The episode takes the media's assumption of power without responsibility to its logical conclusion. It was screened at a time when there was some concern about the perceived arrogance of the media so it had immediate impact. Further, its characters drew on precisely the same kind of defence, using almost exactly the same form of words, that had been produced in a *Sixty Minutes* special the previous year, "Has the Media Gone Too Far?" In this special, hosted by Jana Wendt, it was clear that there was conflict within the group of journalists about what constituted ethical behaviour (George Negus, for instance, took the more democratic line while Richard Carleton and Jeff McMullen subjected James Scott's sister to a particularly ugly attack over "the iceman's" failure to deliver sufficient material to justify the fee he was paid). A key moment, however, occurred, when one of the hostages from the Eagle Street seige confronted Mike Munro, the interviewer in question, and asked what credentials he possessed that entitled him to think he could negotiate successfully and safely with psychopaths. Like Mike Moore, Munro seemed to have no doubt about his ability or his motives: "I've talked to everyone from the Pope to Neddy Smith," he said, as evidence of his high level of people skills. The fact that someone might have died as the result of his meddling seemed, even at that late stage, never to have crossed his mind. *Frontline* reproduced this irresponsible insouciance perfectly.

What *Frontline* diagnoses is the effect of a particular genre of current affairs or news program being developed into a specialised entertainment category. It targets the emphasis on celebrity that has been central to the discussion so far; it targets the preference for the exposé rather than analysis; it

targets the privileging of entertainment value, ratings, over social importance. And it reveals the increasing irrelevance of most current affairs on television to understanding politics or to grappling with the larger, long term social debates.

The worrying thing is that the level of responsibility in media practice appears to have dramatically declined. Indeed, the decline in responsibility has actually enabled the kinds of redefinition discussed above. As a result, it is becoming harder to be well informed about issues that might matter. Paul Keating has complained recently because, while the economy is going well, nobody knows about it. In lighter territory, the fact that the dispute between Super League and the Australian Rugby League involves the two major media proprietors makes it impossible in some cities to find an independent point of view. At the same time, we are occasionally given an amount of information that could be quite dangerous: in the Ivan Milat trial, the media's deployment of information has exceeded the normal limits for those yet to be tried and may well be the occasion for a successful motion for a mistrial.

At this point, it is appropriate to start thinking about whose fault these worrying tendencies might be. In my view it is not the fault of the individual journalist (with a few possible exceptions). Even *Frontline* indicates that Mike Moore could operate just as comfortably within a different ethical framework. While some journalists may have taken to this recent climate with more ease than others, it is also true that it is very difficult for single journalists to exercise much influence over the culture within which they work. There are limitations to the changes that can be produced from within.

The problems are primarily cultural or industrial in origin. The pressure so vividly caught in *Frontline,* the pressure to produce decisions based on dealing with competition, has created a slightly panic-stricken mode of

production. This within a profession that is extremely exclusive, closed, and defensive. Journalists are not used to criticism from outside the profession; they don't like it when they get it, and often display a great lack of respect for their own audience or readers. However, these issues do not emerge from the culture of journalism alone, nor even from the climate of competitiveness that seems to have developed in such an excessive way over the last decade. It seems to me that the key change over the last thirty years or so is the way in which the media have become enclosed within business.

This is receding into memory now, but there was a time when the notion of a free press included the idea that media operations should be entirely separate from other kinds of business. A newspaper company was *only* that and was discouraged from diversifying into other areas of commercial activity. The assumption was, and it still seems a sensible one, that only by maintaining their independence from commerce could the press comment authoritatively upon commercial activity. Today we have a highly concentrated media industry in terms of the spread of ownership but all the major media organisations are highly diversified companies with interests in manufacturing, mineral exploration, communications technologies and so on. For many of the parent companies, the media interests are not the primary business. This was the case when Alan Bond bought Channel 9 as a cash flow business which could help solve the liquidity problems of a Bond Corp built almost entirely on revaluation and speculation. As media outlets merged with each other, and as the numbers of proprietors shrank to the point where the whole of the Australian media came to be run by three or four large conglomerates, it was not surprising that the ideologies of management practice shifted gradually into line with those of most other commercial enterprises: that is, the fundamental purpose of making a profit overrode any of the competing objectives conventionally associated with media

practice. Indeed, as Frank Lowy said when he bought Channel Ten, television is "just another business."

As Lowy found out, rather quickly, the media are not "just another business." Unlike most other businesses, they have social and ethical responsibilities which affect not only the financial probity of their operations but also the social, cultural and political aspects of what they broadcast and print. These responsibilities are, in a sense, the trade-off for what amounts to a highly protected climate for media operations. Television and radio operate under government licences that have similar effects to the granting of a monopoly; there can be no further competition as there is limited and regulated access to the airwaves. Those who are licensed to use this limited resource have a privilege not available to the rest of the nation and so assume certain obligations and responsibilities on behalf of the nation—and these are aside from and additional to issues of access and equity, for instance. In this specific sense, then, there is no comparison between the broadcasting business and selling shoes. It is precisely this difference and these obligations that have disappeared as the media industries have restructured and realigned, and as their programming tactics have adjusted to the new ideologies.

The media now seem to have developed their relations with business and government to the point where government is powerless to exercise influence over the way the media serve the community. The possibility of "new players" entering the game through the opportunities provided by pay TV has categorically vanished. The chance of a new press proprietor competing with Murdoch or Packer in the foreseeable future is nil; control of the supply of newsprint alone enables Murdoch to throttle any likely competitor. The likelihood of the concentration of media ownership being unravelled to any significant degree in the near future would also appear to be nil.

So what can be done? Structurally very little, I suspect; but some suggestions might help make an impact on the depressing media cultures I have been discussing. We could do with a new form of regulation for the media industries that was genuinely independent, community based, and with the power to impose penalties. Calling a halt to self-regulation would be the most promising start one could make to improving the media. A further suggestion is the establishment of a source of redress for victims of the media: say, those who have been misrepresented but who customarily receive a tiny little paragraph at the back of the paper making amends. It would be interesting to see the media required to provide equivalent prominence for the retraction as for the original accusation: a front page story for a front page story, for instance. The procedure for making a complaint against television reports is currently designed to deter most complainants. The aggrieved party has thirty days to register a complaint in writing, and a series of subsequent processes slows down the hearing of the complaint, the adjudication, and the result. Any determination emerging from this series of processes will occur so long after the original story that its power to redress the injustice will be minimal. Further, the responsibility for investigating the complaint lies with the source of the item which caused the complaint. Again, viewers' and readers' criticisms should be made accessible by all media forms as part of their licence obligations, so that consumers can assess the level of satisfaction an outlet enjoys. There are many examples of review programs on television in other countries, some in prime time, and the example of *Media Watch* is encouraging. Finally, media criticism is almost invisible in the media, and this seems a deliberate and self-serving tactic aimed at maintaining the illusion that people are "getting what they want."

The government does have to accept some responsibility and attempt to intervene so as to weaken the conflict

between the commercial pressures on the media and the media's community and social responsibilities. That can be achieved through a regulatory agency such as the Australian Broadcasting Authority, but not through its current remit. From government, a better understanding of the structural problems that expose the media to commercial pressures would be helpful; as would a clearer recognition from media proprietors that the media are not "just another business."

My final point is that while I have been very critical of journalists and journalism in these lectures, no kind of improvement in our media services will come if it is left to individual journalists or even to journalists as a profession. That is asking more of them than they can deliver. Improvements, a redirection of the current depressing trends, must come as the consequence of deliberate and applied media and cultural policy from both state and federal governments. Only by setting up explicit statutory performance guidelines, regulated and overseen by an independent community review committee, can we change the climate within which the media operate, recover the centrality of ethics to that operation, and ensure that the media exercise their power with greater responsibility.

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