



The ABA has released *Sources of News and Current Affairs*, conducted for the ABA by Bond University.

The ABA has released *Sources of News and Current Affairs*, the report of a research project conducted for the ABA by Bond University.

In releasing the report, the ABA Chairman, Professor David Flint offered some personal observations on the news cycle, on journalists, on distinguishing fact from comment and on the conclusions that could be drawn from the report. His paper is available on the ABA web site, www.aba.gov.au/about/public_relations/speeches/index/htm.

The ABA commissioned Bond University's Centre for New Media Research and Education to conduct the project. The research was carried out in two stages. Stage 1 involved a telephone survey of 100 news producers (television, pay TV, radio, newspapers and the Internet) plus a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 key news producers and experts. Some of these are identified in the report while others preferred to remain confidential.

The second stage involved six focus groups and a national telephone survey of 1620 adults.

The genesis of the project is in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* which proclaims that the intention of Parliament is: the more influential media the greater the regulation.

The Broadcasting Services Act says at section 4(1):

The Parliament intends that different levels of regulatory control be applied across the range of broadcasting services according to the degree of influence that different types of broadcasting services are able to exert in shaping community views in Australia.

Sources of news and current affairs

Key findings:

Stage 1 in-depth interviews and survey of practitioners

A. Definitions

1. There is a range of definitions for news and current affairs, with a variety of meanings emerging from regulations and industry experts. In industry experts distinguished news from current affairs in terms of: the length of an item, whether it interprets and comments upon the news, depth of coverage, and 'that which is not news'. Thus, the variety of definitions gives rise to inconsistency in the regulation of news and comment across different media industries.

2. Current affairs is generally regarded as a television phenomenon, strongly associated in radio as talkback, and seen as 'features' and 'analysis' in the print media. Many practitioners considered the mixing of news and comment to be acceptable, as with FM-format news on radio, interviews with expert reporters such as political correspondents, and when covering emotionally-charged situations.

3. Many practitioners consid-

ered interpretation and analysis to be a central function of modern media as audiences demand more than just straight factual information. They considered mechanisms used by their media to distinguish fact from comment were effective and understood by their audiences. The mechanisms include the use of a 'piece-to-camera' to interview a television reporter on their area of expertise, the labelling of a newspaper item as comment or analysis, and the labelling of a wire story as a feature or focus piece.

B. Influences on practitioners

4. Many of the practitioners saw several factors influencing them in their work beyond the basic 'newsworthiness' of an item. These factors include the pressure of audiences, ratings and circulation; commercial interests such as advertising; owners; public relations operatives; politicians and government; and other journalists and media.

5. The pressure of ratings and circulation reflected the commercial imperative of modern news production, to the extent that the eagerness of news producers in giving audiences what market research told them was wanted was criticised by some practitioners as having an impact on journalism quality.

Ownership

6. Most practitioners reported no experience of ownership pressure, confident that integrity in leadership and a hands-off ownership policy could deliver quality products, which rated or circulated well. However, some practitioners described ownership interference as a subconscious pressure, which led to self-censorship. The concentrated media in Australia was seen as presenting fewer career opportunities for practitioners who fell out with the major employers.

7. Many practitioners were keen to quarantine the influence of their employer's com-



mercial interests on the items they would run with. They considered this would not compromise their independent judgment on the newsworthiness of other items, leaving it to other media to cover fairly those items concerning the corporate interests of the practitioner's employer.

8. Many practitioners expressed concern about the 'cosy' relationship between media owners and politicians.

Peer pressure

9. News producers agreed that there was a herd, pack or club mentality among practitioners. This mentality seemed to result from journalists mixing with each other in social networks and through caucusing with each other while covering news events where they might other-

wise be perceived to be in competition.

Relative influence of different media on practitioners

10. Many practitioners considered newspapers, news wires and public radio to be significantly more influential on the news products of other media. Free-to-air television was next, with commercial radio, magazines, the Internet and pay TV falling into the third group.

11. Newspapers were perceived by many of the practitioners as the dominant agenda-setters in the daily news cycle, along with the 'AM' program on ABC radio.

12. Commercial radio sat within the bottom category of influence, and also ranked last in the question about credibility of news and current affairs in different media. However,

talkback radio programs were considered by many practitioners as having more influence now than they did previously.

13. Wire services, particularly the Australian Associated Press (AAP), along with the Internet and pay TV, were seen by many practitioners as playing an important role.

14. Practitioners did not consider high rating television news and current affairs programs, which command top advertising rates, to be particularly significant agenda-setters with the media. These include the evening news and current affairs programs and '60 Minutes'.

C. Gatekeeping

15. Many of the news producers did not seem to have thought deeply or routinely about the kinds of factors or media, which

might influence them most in their work.

16. Time is relevant to gatekeeping—shorter deadlines allow for less interference with the raw news or current affairs product, but also allow for the publication of biased or questionably motivated items without the benefit of extensive review.

17. News producers' influence on their products seemed to vary according to the staffing levels in their particular media outlets.

D. Agenda setting

18. Butler's (1998) finding of a prime time East Coast news agenda can be extended to apply across media, given the influence of Sydney-based newspapers and talkback programs.

19. Morning talkback radio is now seen as an agenda setter, news breaker and a yardstick of community opinion.

20. The Sunday morning television programs often set the news agenda for the coming week.

E. Syndication

21. The structure of the Australian news media industry and the nature of the markets lend themselves to syndication of news and current affairs, and this is readily apparent across all major media. Syndication can bring to listeners, viewers and readers stories that an individual outlet might not have been able to cover otherwise.

22. The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games prompted a formalisation of resource sharing between newspaper groups, with Fairfax, Rural Press and Australian Provincial Newspapers





all providing resources to an Olympics conglomeration known as the f2 Group to compete with the pooled resources of News Corporation.

23. Syndication also occurs at the level of individual journalists, with some setting up syndicated operations trading on their own names, thus clouding the perception of their roles as independent journalists.

24. Numerous informal links also exist between news organisations and individual journalists, ranging from helping out with recording and notes clarification, through to the sharing of news crews, helicopter rides, news story leads and archive materials.

F. Localism

25. Syndication of radio services has resulted in reductions to journalist staffing, a decline in the provision of local news and a reduction in the number of news 'voices' available to listeners. While syndication of programming has budgetary advantages, it needs to be weighed against negatives such as irrelevance to markets and concentration of opinions.

26. Syndication might result in

more senior journalists being employed to work in centralised newsrooms than would have been employed in regional centres. However, the provision of local and regional news appeared to be affected by newsroom budgets and attempts by larger media groups to effect economies of scale.

27. Radio syndication is problematic even in Sydney, where several stations across at least two ownership groups rely on the same reporting resource.

28. Newspapers and public radio were considered to be better at covering local and regional issues than other media, with free-to-air commercial television and commercial radio considered covering local and regional issues 'somewhat adequately'.

G. International news

29. Pay TV has increased Australians' access to international news and current affairs, but there was criticism that such news flowed from major international providers, leaving many voices unheard.

30. Public radio, public television and the Internet were considered to cover international



Telling the news: Professor Mark Pearson, Bond University, flanked by Professor Jeff Brand, Bond University and Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman, answers question at the launch of the report, *Sources of News and Current Affairs*, at the ABA conference, Radio, Television and the New Media in Canberra, 3 May. Photo: Andrew Campbell

issues better than other media does, with pay TV and newspapers covering international issues better than 'somewhat adequately'. Both free-to-air commercial television and commercial radio fell between 'not very adequately' and 'somewhat adequately' in their coverage of international issues.

H. Credibility

31. Key ingredients of credibility identified by practitioners were: consistency, honesty, accuracy, balance, reliability, trust, lack of bias, experience, truth, not sensationalising and objectivity.

32. News and current affairs on public radio, public television and in newspapers were perceived to be more credible than news and current affairs in other media.

33. News and current affairs on commercial radio was perceived as being less credible than news

and current affairs in other media.

34. Sensationalism was perceived as occurring more frequently in news and current affairs than bias, intrusion and inaccuracy. Some practitioners admitted that sensationalism occurs routinely, and this was of concern to them.

35. Transparency also appeared to be an issue of concern to practitioners, particularly in the wake of the ABA's commercial radio inquiry. Different media outlets have varying approaches to dealing with transparency of practitioners' interests.

36. Practitioners revealed that intrusion into privacy was practised, although some journalists were more sensitive than previously, especially as audiences were less tolerant of unethical practices.

37. Practitioners saw accuracy as a fundamental value to journalism. They agreed that mistakes were inevitable, but they should be corrected.

For more information

The full text of Professor Flint's speech can be viewed at www.aba.gov.au/about/public_relations/speeches/index.htm

The *Sources of News and Current Affairs* report is available from the ABA, price \$55 (including GST) by calling (02) 9334 7700.





Key findings

Stage 2 audience survey and focus groups

A. Uses and sources of news and current affairs

1. Half of Australian adults spend at least one hour a day watching, listening to or reading news and current affairs.
2. Ten per cent watch pay TV while 11 percent use the Internet for news and current affairs.

B. Preferences for sources for sources of news and current affairs

3. Free-to-air television remains the most used source for news and current affairs, with nearly 88 per cent of Australians using it, followed by 76 per cent listening to the radio and 76 per cent reading newspapers. 'National Nine News' is the leader among free-to-air viewers, 'ABC Radio News' in its various forms is the most attended by radio listeners, while newspapers are predictably popular within their own city, State or Territory.
4. Australians use their preferred source of news and current affairs because of the quality of coverage it provides, although many admit that timing of the availability of content and convenience are the main reasons why they read, listen or watch.
5. Pay TV news and current affairs preferences were dominated by the only Australian product available to subscribers: Sky News Australia. CNN International and BBC World ranked as second and third choices.
6. The top three Internet sites used by Australians for news and current affairs were domestic news products:

NineMSN, ABC Online and f2. Overseas sources rounded out the top five: Yahoo and CNN Interactive.

C. Preferences for journalists

7. Over a quarter of survey respondents reported that their reason for choosing a preferred journalist, reporter, presenter or columnist was attitude, manner or character, while about 16 per cent provided accuracy, trust or reliability as their reason.
8. The data suggest that although journalistic ability and integrity do have some impact on preferred journalist, personal attributes play a larger role. In this way, it appears that many journalists, reporters, presenters or columnists are considered more like media 'personalities' than as objective sources of news and current affairs, particularly when one notes that nine of the top ten journalists, presenters, reporters or columnists mentioned were television presenters.

D. Credibility of news and current affairs

9. Most Australians believe that news and current affairs media are credible, although they are not as credible as they should be. The most credible sources are the public broadcasters, while the least credible are the commercial broadcasters, with other media sandwiched between them.
10. The top five reasons why a program, column or Internet site was considered most credible were based on the quality

of the information presented in the content. The most frequently cited reason for why a particular program, column or Internet site was deemed to be less credible than others was sensationalism and tabloidism.

11. Of most concern to Australians is sensationalised reporting in news and current affairs. Intrusive reporting ranked as the second highest concern, followed by biased content and then inaccurate reporting. Nevertheless, sensationalised reporting is recognised as an effective tool to draw audience attention to particular services.
12. The survey responses suggest that half of Australians believe that as much as 40 per cent of news and current affairs is dominated by opinion. About 41 per cent of respondents indicated that it was 'not very easy' and 21 per cent indicated that it was 'not at all easy' to tell the difference between facts and opinions in news and current affairs.

E. Influences on, and of news

13. Australian audiences believe that the business interests of media organisations are the greatest source of influence on what they read, hear or see in news and current affairs.
14. Nearly all Australians (86 per cent) believe that their preferred source of news and current affairs has at least some influence on public opinion, with about half (47 per cent) attributing their preferred source with a moderate to high level of influence.

F. Local/regional coverage

15. Newspapers are considered best at covering local and regional news and current affairs.
16. Three-quarters of Australians believe the media cover local news and current affairs less adequately than they could and attribute inadequate coverage of local events and issues to a general lack of community and media interest in local matters.
17. Given that 77 per cent of Australians believe the media cover local news and current affairs between 'not at all' adequately and 'somewhat' adequately, they clearly have local issues they would like to see covered more in their news and current affairs. At the top of the long list is crime and drug use, receiving 14 per cent of the mentions by survey respondents, followed by local politics, receiving 11 per cent of the mentions.

G. Demographics

18. Those Australians who reported preferring and mainly watching free-to-air commercial television for their news and current affairs have more conservative social and political attitudes than those that prefer and most often use free-to-air public television. The most conservative attitudes are found among those who watch 'A Current Affair' and '60 Minutes', whereas the least conservative are found among those who watch SBS 'World News'. Economic attitudes do not differ in relation to the sources of news and current affairs used by Australians.

