



# THE MEDIA: REPORTER OR REFORMER?

In March, the Press Council co-sponsored a forum in Sydney at which media professionals from here and abroad discussed the media's ethical responsibility.

**C**an the media help reduce conflict? Or should it just report? Indeed, should the media try to change society for the better? These were some of the issues discussed at an International Media Forum in Sydney on the weekend of 15 and 16 March. Forty-two journalists, publishers, editors and commentators from Australia and overseas met at the roundtable forum convened by the Australian Press Council and the International Communications Forum.

While the theme was the seemingly bland, *The Role and Responsibility of the Media*, the subject matter was full of undercurrents such as "What is truth anyway?" as the participants got down to questions like how to report clashes of race and culture, let alone war; how to tell whether reporting is balanced; and what are the aims and aspirations of publishers?

The forum was opened by the Chairs of the two convening bodies.

**Professor David Flint**, Chairman of the Press Council, noted that, world-wide, perceptions of the media were not flattering:

"I don't pay much attention to the media because I don't believe any of them," said one critic in Paris. Or from Rome: "When I buy a newspaper I am perfectly aware the information I get is biased."

Today there were fewer newspapers and more highly educated journalists, said Prof Flint, and this might contribute to such mistrust. He emphasised that state intervention, often proposed, would not be a remedy but would only make things far worse.

ICF Chair **William Porter**, introducing his organisation, spoke of its establishment and aims. After his retirement as a publisher in 1990, he convened the ICF as a way for media people to thrash out questions of ethical responsibility among themselves.

**Richard Walsh**, Chairman of Australian Consolidated Press International, commenting on the general themes, was unworried by public criticism.

"The press should be an irritant: It will always have its critics," he said, disagreeing with the view "that there's a thing called truth and you go out with a camera, photograph it and reproduce it in whatever medium you belong to. I respect that philosophical belief. But some of us believe there's a battleground of disputing opinions and you can't photograph it. It's a very slippery thing, a chimera ..."

He instanced the horrors of paedophilia, and drew attention to one "extraordinarily interesting ethical question": the fact that some teachers, suspected "on the say-so of children but not actually found guilty, can no longer get employment". He thought the media contributed by stirring the mud on issues and "maybe find great difficulty in coming to grips with its rights and wrongs. The truth is we don't stir as much as we want to "because of the fear that "in exploring some issues we will arouse prejudice and paint a picture of ourselves which we don't like".

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## REPORTING RACE AND CULTURE CONFLICTS

Ross Tzannes, Deputy Commissioner of the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission, chaired the first session which discussed how the media should approach the reporting of clashes which involve different cultures. The media, he said, must act as the community's conscience, as the shaper of its self-perception. Concepts of cultural diversity are so fragile, he added, and the power of the media so potent.

The discussion was led by two men with wide international knowledge of this scene: Rajmohan Gandhi, and Dr Zaki Badawi.

Rajmohan Gandhi, an Indian journalist and academic, gave two examples of where the Indian media had helped defuse potential violence and one where it had increased such dangers. When Indira Gandhi was assassinated by Sikh members of her bodyguard, there was tremendous public hostility towards the minority Sikh community, and some 5000 Sikhs were killed in reprisal. Indian newspapers played a part in restoring some confidence between the Sikh community and the Indian nation.

In 1992 when a Hindu mob demolished a mosque at Ahyodya, journalists were attacked and their equipment damaged. Indian newspapers took the clear line that extremist Hindu opinion could not be tolerated and helped defuse the situation.

By contrast, one of India's great newspapers, *The Times of India*, printed in its Bombay edition in January 1997 a large supplement eulogising a populist politician whose extreme sectarian attitudes had inflamed the bloody Hindu-Muslim riots in the city during 1993. The publishers were paid 8 million rupees and undermined the reputation of the newspaper.

It must be difficult in Australia, Mr Gandhi added, to visualise the pressures of a climate of frenzy and hatred under which many journalists operate. But "as a responsible writer I have a duty not only to present what is being said fairly but also to do something to reduce the hatred and possibilities of violence; at least to promote dialogue."

Dr Zaki Badawi, Chairman of the Imams and Mosques Council of the UK, began with a defence of journalists: "Journalists ... serve what the public want. People buy a newspaper because it satisfies their prejudices. If you want to reform the press, start not with the symptom, the newspaper men, but with the disease. Prejudices are fed to the very young ..."

Dr Badawi went on to describe the difficulties of living in the West as a Muslim, and therefore "targeted by the media in particular in a kind of 'Islamophobia'.... The world press has come to associate Islam with violence, Muslims with terrorism, provoking an irrational hatred for 'the Muslim world'". Would anyone regard 'the Christian world' as a unit? But "you can pass judgment on 'the Muslim world' by the action of one state, one group or even one individual.

At the height of the crisis arising from the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, a young television journalist asked Dr Badawi who among the Muslim community would comment. Dr Badawi gave him the name of a professor. After contacting the professor, the reporter complained:

"No, no. We don't want somebody sensible; we want somebody mad".

Australia, noted Ross Tzannes, has the most culturally diverse population in the world. Both main political parties have made a genuine multicultural society a major aim for over 20 years.

One European commentator complained that the scale of the SBS service and Australia's multicultural intent is little known. Before travelling south he had been told much about spectacular scenery but nothing about the 'very significant social experiment' of Australia's attempt to make a home for the world.

Mr Tzannes pointed out that this experiment was still "in the balance" and "exceptionally delicate. It could go either way. We have as a country an extraordinary amount invested in a successful outcome", and the composition of the population means "there's no turning back".

The discussion turned to the subject of Pauline Hanson and the "race debate" she had inspired. Mr Tzannes argued that Ms Hanson was a "media creation. ... This most articulate woman was given the image of an inarticulate battler". The media had publicised her views on race and immigration, he said, because they promised to lead to a vigorous debate, but soft-pedalled her other views, for instance that Australia should withdraw from the UN and prepare for invasion from Asia.

One Australian journalist pointed out that much of the controversy over Ms Hanson's prejudiced views was encouraged by "red neck elements" over talk-back radio. Biased presentation and manipulated telephone polls had inflamed the situation. "The mainstream media covered the debate in very strict ethical and sensible terms," said Charlton.

Ian Hicks told how *The Sydney Morning Herald*, of which he is



Dr Zaki Badawi, Ross Tzannes, Rajmohan Gandhi

assistant editor, published a rare front-page editorial confronting the distortions of her claims on the extent of immigration and special privileges for Aborigines. "The antiseptic of disclosure was applied to the venomous and noxious nostrums she provoked," he said.

It was a debate the country had to have, suggested **Warren Beeby**, editorial manager of News Limited.

Mr Beeby said that many of the issues she raised continued to be crucial and "at the end of it that debate will leave the country a better place".

"But does the disproportionate power of the media distort the picture?" asked Tzannes. "Does being an irritant unleash undesirable powers?"

**Sir Zelman Cowen**, former Governor-General and one-time Chairman of the British Press Council said that the media's power "gives you the opportunity - and the obligation - to consider the mischief that may be done. The only thing I fear is the laying down of prescriptions and rules. That is antithetical to everything in our values." Sir Zelman argued that "judgment" was needed by the media in determining what to print.

## AIMS AND ASPIRATIONS OF PUBLISHERS

Rumours of major changes to media ownership regulations in Australia have been causing controversy, particularly suggestions that rules enforcing diversity would be weakened to allow companies to own a newspaper and television station in the same area. So the forum session on *The Aims and Aspirations of Publishers* was timely. The discussion was led by John B Fairfax, a descendant of Australia's great newspaper publishing dynasty, and Paul Chadwick, Melbourne co-



John B Fairfax and Paul Chadwick

ordinator of the Communications Law Centre, a media think-tank.

**John B Fairfax** has the controlling interest in Rural Press, Australia's largest publisher of non-metropolitan periodicals. He argued that the principles of publishing newspapers would continue to apply in the electronic age. He thought that the size and lack of intimacy of, and unreliability of sources on, the Internet would keep it from having the credibility of newspapers as a source of news.

He related how the Board of John Fairfax Ltd had once asked his father to resign as a director because he had accepted a bank directorship, and they felt that readers would perceive his bank interest as influencing editorials. "In those days the Fairfax family took an active, daily interest in their newspapers to the virtual exclusion of everything else. The same can be said of the Packer family. Those were the days when publishers were publishers."

Mr Fairfax asserted that proprietors should be divorced of other commercial interests because Australia is so small that its media is capable of getting into the hands of very few.

"There is no part of the media other than newspapers capable of acting as the Fourth Estate. They must keep governments focussed and politicians honest. So it was vital for media not to be politically compromised by non-media interests involving government licences. ...

"Only through diligence, independence and integrity can the credibility of newspapers be maintained and perhaps regained. The freely printed word should be the one thing that preserves our democratic society. And that can only be achieved by people dedicated to the higher principles of journalism and without the contamination of certain outside commercial interests."

**Paul Chadwick** quoted the American press critic A J Leibling as saying, "Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one". Nowadays, with the convergence of print, broadcasting, film, telecommunications and computing, press freedom "belongs to those to whom the power of property is delegated". So "the core of the issue" for today's owners is by what processes and for what purposes the power is delegated, to whom the delegates are accountable and "how can accountability be extracted, without threatening liberty through government intervention?"

He saw the basic issue as legitimacy. The large proprietors say only that they do not use their power. "But those who work for them, who gather the news and select and edit it, know that the power is there, setting the parameters of policy. That knowledge shapes the cynicism of the press. ...

"Of all the possible aspirations of publishers, to restore and maintain that sense or legitimacy is surely the finest."

Asked about the value of charters of editorial independence, John Fairfax responded, "If you own a newspaper, you ought to be able to do what you like with it." In Rural Press, however, a lot of autonomy is given to the editor.

**Richard Walsh** said that newspapers had become "less important in the political process ... To talk about a proprietor exercising the sort of power

a Beaverbrook or Frank Packer did is just ridiculous. There are so many other ways of getting information and entertainment. The real straightjacket that keeps publishers and journalists on track is that if they do not produce a newspaper that makes decent money, they get hurled out. It's a very complex business, but it's a business, a discipline under which we all publish."

Sir Zelman Cowen countered that it was a very special sort of discipline because of the "sort of things that are canvassed and argued in a newspaper. Issues of a very wide range: moral questions, political questions."

Rajmohan Gandhi added: "Newspapers have to survive and be profitable. But I can't for the life of me accept that making money is the sole aim of a newspaper just as I cannot accept that making money is the sole aim of a physician or a lawyer or an architect."

Paul Chadwick asked Richard Walsh why his employer, Kerry Packer, who owned the country's largest chain of magazines and its best rating television network, wanted to acquire the second largest chain of metropolitan newspapers as well.

Mr Walsh replied: "The [Packer] public company, PBL, says that in so far as it's interested in acquiring shares in Fairfax, it wants them for economic reasons. It claims that it can run the business better and achieve synergies which in fact will enrich its equity holders. It is not saying that it's attempting to do that in order to exert greater power than it needs to."

Mr Fairfax summed up, "We can never forget as publishers, journalists or whatever, whether you're making money or not, you still have a social responsibility."

## BALANCED REPORTING

The session which gave rise to the most interesting debate was one on balanced reporting, chaired by

William Porter and Richard Walsh. Porter began by introducing a videotaped speech by **Martyn Lewis**, a prominent BBC news presenter, who was taking every opportunity to call for "a shift in the news agenda so that explaining and analysing mankind's achievements becomes just as important as investigating its failures. Alongside the reporting of problems should come - on a much more regular basis - the airing of possible solutions."

Richard Walsh took up Mr Lewis' complaint that good ratings were treated as more important than good journalism. "But if it's good ratings, that's what people want. Lewis is actually not complaining about the media, but about the society in which he lives. He wants society to have a different kind of agenda."

But the forum, he said, was basically focussed on the print media, so he turned to the "legitimate need of print readers to be informed and entertained. ... Print is a great medium for analysis and argument. Each of us wants to read that argument at our own pace. Broadcast is a tyrant - there is only one pace." So a newspaper should "be full of argument. The only time we should cavil is when it is not transparent whether it is giving fact or opinion. We shouldn't be surprised that print no longer wants to run round taking polaroid photographs of the Truth."

A portrait in oils, said Mr Walsh, referring to the Archibald Prize, can represent a deeper kind of truth. "By arguing about it, by seeing Truth not as one fixed thing but as an ever-evolutionary process out of argument, we can see that print is particularly good at being the compere for argument, and the pain we get from the problems Martyn Lewis has talked about isn't quite so acute."

William Porter said that BBC News had in fact begun to put more emphasis on constructive solutions to the problems in the news. And that anyway "Lewis was not talking about a good news only

policy... but a balanced news policy".

Sir Zelman Cowen spoke about "a real difficulty" he saw, of saying confidently about something, "that's Truth". The perception of something by a variety of people - even something that looks objective - is "not like that".

Mr Walsh said he shared that view. "I don't see how moral ideas can be true ... We should cultivate the cult of scepticism about our own ideas most of all. Only a society that is prepared to keep allowing the challenge of its most entrenched shibboleths will progress."

Bernard Margueritte noted that he had "been waiting for Richard to use



William Porter and Richard Walsh

his admirable talent to give the opposite view." Noting that Walsh had characterised Lewis' argument as wanting to change the world, he asked, "What is wrong with that? Many of us are hoping to change society. Why should we keep this materialistic, hedonistic, consumerist and violent society and not try to move to a society where moral and spiritual values are at the centre? That's a legitimate thing to attempt, and the media should play a role."

M. Margueritte gave examples of newspapers and television stations who decided to portray "family values" and ratings and sales went up.

He went on: "The mission of journalists is to serve the people. How can democracy function if we don't have well-informed citizens? I would agree with Lewis that there is a great

deal of laziness. It is much easier to write about bad things, about conflict, than about - well, not only positive events, but what is happening in society: the environment, the cities ... We have to do that in an interesting way and show our readers why it is relevant to them. I don't share your view that by accepting things as they are we are serving democracy."

Mr Walsh replied, "We have to distinguish between ourselves as citizens and as participants in the media. Yes: as an individual I'm unhappy with society. I want change. I've spent most of my adult life trying to precipitate change. But I don't transpose my desire for change into a critique of the media. Because I believe it is right and proper to reflect the society they operate in."

**Dr Janner Sinaga**, an Indonesian publisher, noted that, in the final analysis, whatever is reported depends on the quality of the person who does it and "his views of the world ... and his norms of what truth is."

**Margaret Jones**, former Foreign Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, said that she was "uneasy with the policy of balanced news, because this can in adverse circumstances lead to managed news. Any journalist who has worked in a country where the media is controlled by the government has seen very gross examples of this". For example, when she asked the editor of the *People's Daily* why no natural disasters were reported, he had looked her straight in the eye and said, "Events of that sort do not happen in China". She saw dangers in managing news and not letting it flow as it comes.

**Pamela Bone** of *The Age* pointed out that the media does self-censor to protect the public from some of the worst horrors that actually happen - for instance things she saw in Rwanda in 1996 which she "wouldn't write about and the photographer wouldn't photograph because it was just too horrible to present."

**John Farquharson**, one-time deputy editor of *The Canberra Times* and editor of the *South Pacific Post* in Port Moresby, recalled Sir Zelman's point about the need for judgment. "I don't think we in the media are always given credit for what we do do, the self-discipline that goes on all the time in every newspaper." Again, Sir Zelman summed up: "I think there are things wrong with Martyn Lewis' statement, but there is in it a core of truth."

Which left unanswered the question raised by the desire for reporting which balances the news: who decides what balance is required and what stories to be told? Everyone assumes that their "balance" is the correct one. Would you want news that has been balanced by a religious fundamentalist; a soviet commissar; or an historical revisionist?

#### OTHER SESSIONS

The forum also discussed questions of balance in war reporting and of changes in eastern Europe and south Asia in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, and engaged in a case studies seminar. Polish journalist and author **Jan Pieklo** who has written extensively about the tragedies in the former Yugoslavia introduced the discussion of war reporting. He looked in particular at the media of the former Yugoslavia and how they now serve nationalist propaganda.

"So long as the media continues to play the role of agitator, no-one will be able to find a peaceful solution to the Balkan conflict."

The international media, Mr Pieklo said, had also contributed greatly "to the Balkan mess" in seven ways: sensationalism, simplification, focussing on politicians, ignorance, fragmentation, Sarajevo-centredness and political correctness.

The discussion looked at the reporting of other conflicts as well, particularly the poor reporting in Australia of the Bougainville war.

**Bernard Margueritte** reports from Warsaw for French radio, television and print media, and also appears regularly on Polish television. He observed that a rapid improvement in the media would be strange as the journalists had too long worked as propagandists and lacked training in journalistic methods. Instead the eastern media were stressing the sensational.

**Dr Jara David-Moserova**, a Vice-President of the Czech Senate and a former Ambassador to Australia, spoke of the Czech situation. The sudden freedom of 1989 brought a totally free press from which "a number of excellent journalists have emerged. But still the public finds it difficult to cope with this reporting" because in the Western tradition, it concentrates on what is going wrong.

**Dr Janner Sinaga** surveyed for the forum the role of the press in Indonesia's history. The official doctrine for publications, he said, is freedom and responsibility. "From time to time there is a warning from the government if the press exerts too much freedom but the corridor has been wider and wider."

In the forum's final session, the delegates used case studies based on Australian Press Council complaints to simulate the adjudication process, as a way of looking more closely at particular questions of press ethics and responsibility.

The forum dinner was addressed by **Sen. Chris Schacht**, who deals with Communications matters for the Labor opposition in Canberra. His speech stressed important questions of human rights in Australia's international dealings.

**JACK R HERMAN**  
(based on a report for the ICF by  
**JOHN WILLIAMS**)

[A further report on the forum is printed on page 10 of this issue.]