



Journalists' Code Scrutinised

(There is a) growing ethical gap between the view many journalists have about what they do and that held by sections of the public who value a free press, but question some practices of journalism.

Sam Lipski, *The Australian*, 5 October 1993

Opinion surveys of occupational popularity consistently rank journalists at or near the bottom. Such poor perceptions of their craft have usually been ignored by journalists. That was always a strategic mistake.

The Weekend Australian, 9-10 October 1993

The journalists' code of ethics is to be fully reviewed by a committee of lawyers and journalists for the first time since it was adopted by the (then) Australian Journalists Association in 1944 (it was revised once, in 1984).

Announcing the move, joint federal secretary of MEAA, Chris Warren, said the Alliance acknowledged that journalists exercised power and this brought with it responsibility. He said that 'journalists' self-regulation must be, and must be seen to be, effective and fair'.

Recent events like the jailing or fining of journalists for refusing to reveal sources, controversial defamation actions involving journalists and criticism of intrusiveness and harassment, particularly by television current affairs programs, have no doubt contributed to a perception that journalists may need a more contemporary and relevant code to work with.

Self-regulation by the print media, through the Press Council and the journalists union Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), has increasingly come under scrutiny. Even the wishy-washy Print Media Inquiry (which reported in early 1992) expressed criticism of the Press Council (whose oversight is anyway limited to the print media) and recommended changes. Clearly the union, at least, felt that the time was ripe for some soul-searching.

It is fortuitous that this review is happening at the same time as the Senate Inquiry into the rights and obligations of the media (the Cooney inquiry), as there may be some useful cross-fertilisation.

High Powered Committee

The committee which will conduct the review is a high-powered one which includes former ABT chair now AAT president Deirdre O'Connor; writer and occasional journalist Frank Moorhouse; Mary Delahunty of the ABC's *7.30 Report* (Melbourne); and Professor of Philosophy, Tony Coady of Melbourne University (who is currently at Princeton and will participate by phone). The chair is Jesuit priest and lawyer Frank Brennan, a worker for Aboriginal rights who has been prominent during the recent Mabo debate, and secretary is Paul Chadwick, CLC



Melbourne Co-ordinator and prominent media commentator.

The most potentially controversial appointment is that of Fairfax's Deborah Cornwall, recently convicted of contempt for failing to reveal her sources to NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption.

The Committee will produce an issues paper within the next couple of months, and will call for comment by the end of January 1994. It aims to report to the Alliance Federal Council next April.

Submissions to: Ethics Review Committee, c/- Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 245 Chalmers St, Redfern 2016.

Terms of Reference

1. Review the code of ethics and advise on any appropriate changes.
2. Review the procedures for dealing with complaints including:
 - (i) the composition of judiciary and appeal committees, including the desirability of having non-journalists as members;
 - (ii) the procedures for investigating and adjudicating complaints, including how to ensure natural justice and consistency;
 - (iii) the desirability of holding open hearings and publishing decisions.
3. Examine the relationship between the proper operation of the code and the law, in particular, defamation and contempt. □