



1993 FULBRIGHT SYMPOSIUM SYDNEY 27-28 OCTOBER

Day Two: The Power of the Media

The central issues which emerged under the theme *The Power of the Media* were the potential both for concentration of media power through satellites, global services, and the mergers of powerful players; and for diversification of power as a result of proliferating services and multiple owners.

The keynote speaker was Peter Vesey, Vice President of CNN International, the Atlanta-based news service which has revolutionised the delivery and coverage of news stories around the world since it was established in 1980.

Vesey is responsible for CNN's editorial content, programming and development. Like Henry Muller of Time Inc on the previous day, he was at pains to tout the high credibility of his service, sounding at times like an extension of the slick video promotion for CNN which opened his presentation.

'The most influential people use CNN as a primary source of information', he said. It plays a role in global diplomacy where a phenomenon known as 'the CNN curve' plots the interval between a story appearing on CNN and the response by governments. In Somalia, it is being broadcast continuously on the only available channel. In Eastern Europe it has been described as 'the most powerful intelligence agency in the world'.

If this sounds as though CNN wields inordinate power, we can all take comfort from Vesey's claim that 'our global impact has heightened our awareness of journalistic responsibility', and that accuracy, immediacy and impartiality are the objectives. While speed and accuracy are not always compatible goals, CNN has to get it right and present a balance of views, he said.

Gulf War 'Not Well Reported'

Vesey rejected any suggestion of government-applied constraints, though he conceded that during the Gulf War 'a lot was wrong' with CNN's coverage because of censorship and a limited ability to confirm what was happening. It was not their idea of a good story well reported, he said. He also conceded that CNN occasionally resorted to the use of clichés like 'hardliners' and 'warlord' and while this was regrettable, it was a fault shared with much other journalism.

Questioned about accusations of superficiality levelled at CNN the previous day, Vesey said that people's expectations to television determined whether they think CNN does a useful job. It was not trying to write history, and for most viewers it was one source of news, but not the only

one. He disagreed with a statement that live coverage did not work and was often inaccurate, saying that the service would not work without credibility, nor would it survive in an environment of increasing competition from services like the BBC and Sky News.

Asked how they can verify stories 24 hours a day, Vesey said that they used wire services and extensive phone contacts, and that 'most news stories happen during daylight hours'.

He said that the most important 'backstop' to accuracy was that reporting of any event is usually seen by the people involved (though as one questioner asked, who in Pakistan is going to call Atlanta to complain?). CNN has not undertaken any studies of its cultural impact on the countries it reaches, and relies on feedback from its correspondents.

Asked why CNN barely recognises the existence of Australia, Vesey said that there would be a bureau here one day but that high cost was a factor against this currently.

Some at the symposium felt that Vesey's answers were often disingenuous, and there was an uncomfortable feeling that CNN does not acknowledge the extent of its power to set the world's news agenda.

Dr Liz Jacka (Macquarie Uni), whose paper was based on research carried out by herself and Dr Stuart Cunningham, commenting on the global impact of CNN's Gulf War coverage, said that when a single message was coming from a single source, you had to ask what is the nature of the message. What is being included and what is being left out? In whose interest is it being transmitted? Research shows that even the most apparently monovalent message can be decoded locally in a surprising variety of ways. (NOTE: CU will report this important paper further in its next issue).

Local Views

Gerald Stone, executive producer of Seven's *Real Life*, said that until the 1950s correspondents had an obsessive loyalty to their governments, and no-one questioned government policy. All this had changed with events like Watergate, Panama, El Salvador. CNN's Peter Arnett was typical of the new correspondent with no accepted orthodoxy.

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Journalism has been 'de-territorialised' and there is constant interchange between countries. Stone believes that the media will become more sensitive and aware of cultural differences as it becomes more globally intrusive. By the same token, there will be a great deal of self-censorship when, for example, a comment on human rights violations could see a journalist expelled.

Carmel Travers, recently appointed head of news and current affairs at Ten, said she thought that 'hard core news' would survive in a multichannel environment, as the success of CNN had shown. But viewer expectations have been raised so high that news services have to deliver world events virtually as they happen, and the best an Australian news director can hope for is to subscribe to someone else's reporting so that the same footage and images open each news every night.

Travers said that there is a finite number of satellites in geostationary orbit and the battle is on to control them. When technology opens new doors, it closes others, and in news reporting, the result may be a return to 'the straight and narrow'. With digital compression, the exclusive club of information warlords will be overtaken by mass literacy and the airwaves will revert to common ownership. Ultimately the message will prevail over the medium, and nothing will ever replace the immediacy and impact of a reporter on the spot reacting to a story, Travers said.

The Role of Technology

Dr Peter White of La Trobe University tackled technology-related issues, and said that software would be the new media gateway. The two-way nature of the system would reduce the power of media owners and increase the power of advertisers. And just as Apple and Microsoft dominate the computer software market, someone will dominate cable software.

There will need to be a re-think of the political role of the media when users' views are no longer formed by relatively few sources. News menu-ing systems will supplant the old roles of editors. Information will be transaction-generated. Advertising could be placed with individual items, and profiles of viewers matched with advertising slots. The current shared public world could diminish and be replaced by multiple private worlds.

White said that Reuters had restored its finances by selling financial information direct, ie retail, rather than wholesaling through intermediaries. With new services advertisers would discover the benefits of direct contact with customers.

At the same time, significant privacy issues would arise; for example, who would own the personal data generated as a result of these transactions?

Media commentator Liz Fell took issue with some of White's thesis. She uses a prospect of *increased* power and

commercial possibilities for media proprietors. In her view the battle is for control of the global market and information systems.

She agrees that targeted marketing will be important but suggested that those whose tastes and interests do not accord with those of the marketers would probably not be served, and we would need the ABC more than ever.

Fell said that the idea that the camera does not lie is a thing of the past. IBM is applying computer based techniques to film and television images, and it is no longer necessary to use a camera to generate pictures. Already, television uses tricks to give the impression that a reporter is on the scene. Australian reporters routinely re-voice international footage.

The implications are 'scary' Fell said, and editors and journalists need to be thinking about the ethical questions raised.

Achieving 'Quality'

A final panel session considered the question of how (not whether!) quality in the news media can be assured.

Julianne Schultz, formerly of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism and now at ANU, said there were four major factors affecting quality:

- The relative roles, rights, responsibilities and duties of media owners, managers and journalists. The desire of media owners to influence the way the news is reported cannot be overlooked. Journalists have divided responsibilities, to serve both their editors and the public.
- The definition of the product. The blurring of the line between entertainment and news is potentially dangerous for the role of the media in public life.
- Interaction between commercial and corporate aims, and provision of a service to the public (the church/state division described by Henry Muller).
- The relationship with the audience. Schultz said that the role of the journalist needs re-evaluation in this environment. The media needs to be willing to admit mistakes and to make a new contract with the audience combining corporate aims and the public interest.

Andrew Clark, editor of the *Sun Herald* (Sydney) warned the Australian media of the perception of an 'enveloping consensuality' in the United States mainstream news reporting. He noted that the language of 'political correctness' tends to produce niche arguments and a puritanical and censorious tone. He felt that while current domestic and international events provided a great opportunity for newspapers to contribute to open debate, this opportunity was being lost because of too much speculative reporting and reliance on single-source material.

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Canberra Times editor Michelle Grattan said quality is a critical issue facing the media at the moment because it relates directly to its credibility. The media's image in the community is extremely low; people do not believe or trust it. While the public are not always right in their judgement of the media, the media cannot ignore public perceptions. There are significant pressures on the ability of the media to provide quality, including:

- speed of production;
- the temptation or need to produce news that sells;
- commercial pressures, resulting in a focus on presentation and selling rather than conveying information;
- the general ethos and organisation of new offices, with not enough attention to accuracy.

Grattan saw a need for changes in the newspaper office. The current system did not allow enough emphasis on accuracy and more background research was needed, with support from specialist researchers. She said the culture needed to change so that the brightest journalists were not automatically siphoned off into executive positions. Senior writers should be valued and put on a par with managers. She also wondered if journalism was attracting the best talent. She deplored the fact that journalism has become over-bureaucratized, and that there is no longer a place for 'mavericks'.

These thoughts were echoed by Sam Lipski (*Australian Jewish News*) who said the minimum requirements to improve standards are that journalists should be better educated, and more motivated to stay journalists for the rest of their lives. His recommended intellectual diet for journalists was based on the staples of history, language, ethics and law rather than subjects like media studies, journalism, sociology, English literature.

He noted that the pressures of the daily deadline could easily leave journalists exhausted, dispirited and socially isolated. They need to be given the opportunity to refresh their careers midway, take time out, to travel or work in another area altogether for a while, Lipski said. He concluded by stressing that back in the news room, the primacy of the writing reporter must be acknowledged, and journalists must be given time if they are to achieve real job satisfaction. □



Not the Full Guide

CU recently received a copy of the 1994 edition of a publication entitled *The Guide to Australian Lawyers*.

This 222-page directory is intended to provide guidance for people seeking lawyers with particular expertise, and also for journalists looking for comments from lawyers who are willing to speak to the media on their subject area.

Admirable aims. But on leafing through, *CU* was struck by some prominent omissions from this publication in this magazine's areas of interest - areas which have seen a positive explosion in legal specialisation in the last decade or so. For example, although *Encore* magazine in a special supplement last year listed over 30 firms specialising in film and television related law, only nine firms are listed here under the general heading 'Entertainment' and they do not include such well known film lawyers as Michael Frankel or Martin Cooper.

Under Media, a mere six firms are listed; under Telecommunications, four firms. And while these include some of the major specialist firms, some other large and/or highly competent firms (we won't give them a free plug by naming them) are not listed.

It should be noted that the Communications Law Centre is not listed either!

The explanation is not hard to find. Lawyers have to pay to be listed in this directory, and apparently a substantial number of lawyers did not judge it to be worth their while.

If you are still interested, *The Guide to Australian Lawyers*, second edition 1994, edited by Christine Tilbury and published by PB Marketing and Media Pty Ltd, is available at \$35.00 from Butterworths. □