



Inside the Hour

Inside Sixty Minutes: The story behind the stories

by John Little

Allen and Unwin \$19.95

Sixty Minutes first went to air on 11 February 1979.

Ray Martin did a piece on a new form of pay TV in America, Ian Leslie did one on cigarette smuggling across Australian state borders and George Negus had a story on Primal Therapy.

John Little claims Kerry Packer rang executive producer Gerald Stone to say 'You've blown it son'.

Nearly sixteen years later, the Nine network's current affairs flagship draws an average audience of around 3.5 million Australians each Sunday night. A 30-second national advertising spot costs \$30,000 and Little estimates the program annually earns \$25 million (and costs \$12 million). 'If you can stand the pace,' says Little, '[it's] still the best gig in town'.

Perhaps more than any other program, it signals the turnaround at the Nine network, from its doldrums in the mid-1970s to the top in the 1980s. The program had a significant effect on television in Australia, changing not only current affairs TV but laying some of the basis for the 'infotainment' programs which have become such important prime time fare.

John Little worked as a producer on *Sixty Minutes* for nine years. He says the program was, 'like most ideas in Australian television...an American invention'. Don Hewitt at CBS had conceived of 'a television version of *Life Magazine*, with a hard, newsy story, a colourful feature or two, perhaps a personality profile and a 'back of the book' section that would cater for the arts'.

Elsewhere, Hewitt has said he had seen documentaries scoring 15-20 shares on ABC, CBS and NBC. He thought 'I'll bet if we made it multi-subject and we made it personal journalism - instead of dealing with issues we told stories; if we packaged reality as well as Hollywood packages fiction. I'll bet we could double the rating'.¹

Central to the program's approach was the idea of the reporter as star. 'If you don't give a shit about Afghanistan you might care what George [Negus] is doing in Afghanistan,' as Gerald Stone put it.

The first three reporters - Negus, Ray Martin and Ian Leslie - went into a public stratosphere unknown in Australian current affairs television. Of course, they had to deliver each Sunday night. The program broke stories, like the on-camera arrest of Miranda Down's killer, Ernie Knibb (Ian Leslie). 'The Chelmsford Scream' (Ray Martin) won the program a Logie. Negus's Margaret Trudeau interview sold around the world ('I was unfaithful and therefore our marriage was over. A one night stand. Seems a shame doesn't it?' she said. The crew allegedly supplied vodka and dope to her while the film magazines were changed). His 'just plain pig-headed' question in an interview with Margaret Thatcher brought him celebrity status.

Little writes about the ways the attention affected all the reporters who have worked on the program. Jennifer Byrne was uncomfortable from the time she recorded the first 'mantra' 'I'm Jennifer Byrne' and Mike Munro is supposed to have missed his family so much on overseas trips that he would ring airlines 'to find out if there was a tailwind...in the hope that he might arrive a few minutes early'.

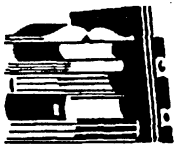
This kind of personal detail is central to the book's 'inside story' pretensions, but it's often just soap opera - wacky practical jokes from Ray Martin ordering multiple breakfasts to be sent to Jana Wendt's room, and the truth behind Mike Munro's various nicknames 'The Blue Heeler', 'Munzie' and 'Psycho Boy'. The story board setting out proposed stories for budding reporter Bob Hawke (Keating, Pilots, Child Poverty 1991, Defamation and the Print Media, Sobriety and Fidelity) makes up for some of it.

Little spells out the *Sixty Minutes* gospel, absorbed, he says, from Don Hewitt's style. 'Always concentrate on the person not the event' (Noah, not the flood). 'Go where the research takes you' (If you want to find out what the American President is thinking, go to America and ask him).

Then there are Stone's own obsessions. Remember that the viewer has to take your work into their living room. Get rid of excess facts. Re-introduce people who were last seen in the story more than a few minutes ago ('Remember so-and-so?'). Tease early in the story ('More of that later'). 'Get the filming done and save the nasty stuff for last. That way, if you get thrown out, or the victim walks out, you still have a story', explains Little. Find 'the *Sixty Minutes* moment' (Vincent Lingiari removing the bandages after a cataract operation by Fred Hollows, to find his sight has returned).

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There is some discussion of the *Sixty Minutes* audience. The figures say that in late 1993, it included more than 43% of the women over eighteen and more than 46% of the men over eighteen who are watching TV at the time ('share') - 'an advertiser's dream'.

Current executive producer, John Westacott thinks there's a core audience which brings in ratings in the low 20s. This is not sufficient to justify the program's costs. The rest has to be lured week by week. Even the core audience has to be nurtured if they are to remain loyal. Hence the hard fight to secure the prestigious first interview with Paul Keating after the 1993 election, despite its predictably low rating from audiences tired of politics.

Packer's direct interest and involvement in the program is referred to several times. The book begins with Little recounting an exchange between Packer and Stone during which Packer said he'd cancel the program before it even went to air, furious that Stone was not doing a story about the British elections. Little also claims Packer demanded to see Jeff McMullen's story on John Hewson's children and first wife before it went to air to satisfy himself that the children had not been manipulated. He also asks whether Packer, who had sold the network to Bond, would have continued with the program through its bad ratings stretch from the beginning of 1987, when first *Alf*, then *The Comedy Company* beat it in its timeslot.

And Little recites Packer's response to the new megastar Negus, when, over lunch, Negus told Packer he understood he talked often to Stone about the program 'but it was nice that he wasn't interfering with them' - 'When I become fucking interested in one of your fucking stories sonny, you'll be the first to fucking know'. □

¹ Quoted in Richard Campbell 'Securing the Middle Ground: Reporter Formulas in *60 Minutes*' in Horace Newcomb (1994), *Television - The Critical View* (5th Edn) Oxford University Press, New York.

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A Text Book Case

The implicit message to students is that you should stop reading when you get to 10% of any book. Move on to the next source. Change the channel. Or better still, the teacher will do it for you.

Educational publisher Eleanor Curtain also stresses the consequences of photocopying for reading practices. 'Publishers spend a lot of time on layout and design, turning a manuscript into something that readers will want to read. Teachers and lecturers go and photocopy double pages onto A4 or do reduction copies and then complain that the students don't want to read. It is actually much easier, and better, for students to use books.'

There is a further question of the integrity of the work. A statutory licence means an author has no right to object to excerpts being taken from their work, and reproduced as self-contained works in different contexts, although authors have never been able to control the way an individual reader may choose to 'excerpt' their work in actually reading it.

Iremonger suggests that many of the 'book blocks' do not actually do what the academics claim. 'They're often just chapters of secondary sources, rather than original or hard-to-find sources, and they're often quite old material. They're not textbooks, they're showbags,' he says. 'The key to a textbook is structure - providing the discipline necessary to approach a subject.'

What to do

A decision in the CAL/VUT case is expected by the end of October.

Michael Fraser says that if the Federal Court finds against CAL, 'We will definitely have to look at a more commercial kind of arrangement with the educational institutions. Some publishers may wish to lobby for changes to the legislation'.

The ABPA is conducting a survey to get a clearer picture of the problem.

Janet McCalman, a research fellow at Melbourne University and author of last year's *Age Non-Fiction Book of the Year Journeynings*, has organised a

petition to the Australian Academies of the Humanities and Social Sciences asking that teachers set four or five paperbacks to be studied in each subject in depth. 'We've got to get students to value books again and to get used to reading something from beginning to end,' she says.

She also believes the fee payable by educational institutions to CAL needs to be increased and ways found to ensure all authors photocopied for inclusion in anthologies actually receive remuneration. (Because use is measured across a sample of institutions, some authors receive no payments from CAL despite the fact that their work is known to have been copied in an institution not included in that particular sample.) Thirdly, she argues that the cost of photocopying by students in campus libraries should be increased, and the funds raised spent on university publishing. (Under the 'fair dealing' provisions of the Copyright Act, no payment needs to be made to the copyright holder for students' own copying.)

**"They're not textbooks,
 they're showbags"**

John Iremonger

John Iremonger says one of the ways to combat the problem is 'to produce better versions of the book blocks'. He mentions Henry Mayer's classic Australian politics reader, which was once used extensively in politics courses. 'It included quotes from political speeches, newspaper articles, everything. It had structure. One of the problems was it became too unwieldy, and competition grew up around it.'

Such a product might be well-suited to CD-ROM, updated from time to time, particularly if text can be supplemented by audio and video. Further, rather than fighting against the popularity of personalised teaching resources, we may see educational publishers developing electronic products and services which facilitate their production on properly commercial terms. These might include databases of material designed for downloading and reproduction under licence from the publisher. □