



# CU Book Reviews

## Henry

Rodney Tiffen ed., Mayer on the Media: Issues and Arguments, AFTRS and Allen and Unwin September 1994, 201pp, \$22.95

### 'I remember once Henry said ...'

It is a mark of the central role he played in Australian media studies for so many years that it is, nearly four years after his death, Henry's first name which is sufficient for recognition by anyone in the field that the person spoken of is Henry Mayer.

Rod Tiffen, a longtime colleague of Henry's at Sydney University, has compiled this collection of his writings, royalties from which will go to the Henry Mayer Trust. Tiffen has also written an admirable introduction, sketching in Henry's background and gathering from his writings a set of maxims which 'seek to encapsulate his essential outlook' - a herculean task given Henry's prodigious output.

Each of the maxims has the authentic ring of Henry's voice - invariably startling, provocative, daring the listener to disagree. In commenting on them, Tiffen provides valuable (and affectionate) insights on Henry's unique contribution to Australian intellectual life over a period of forty years.

In Henry's view orthodoxies (and most forms of tribal loyalties) tend to maintain themselves more by creating blinkers and by appeals to partisanship than by intellect. They encourage intellectual mediocrity and lack of questioning. They allow people to mistake the contingent for the necessary, to bury problematic assumptions as if they were facts. The most problematic parts of a political ideology or academic argument are often those to which least attention has been paid.

Anyone who ever had anything to do with Henry and had occasion to be baffled by what sometimes seemed wildly diverging positions, will find Tiffen's analysis and piecing together

of Henry's intellectual position enlightening. As Tiffen says, Henry thrived on conflict and revelled in schisms, especially over arcane issues among groups sharing an ideology. His staggering range of reading reflected his thirst for novelty and variety and a commitment to pluralism and diversity. In his view, differences in the power or social interest of ideas were no guide to their validity. 'Even if Hitler said it, it might be true, even if everyone in society believed it, it might be false'.

The selection of writing covers a period from 1975 to 1990, and is a well balanced choice representing the breadth of Henry's interests: topics include media diversity (always a favourite theme), right of reply, censorship, political advertising, images of politics in the press, and the 'information revolution'.

The reader is struck by Henry's prescience on matters like cable television, and by how pertinent to current concerns much of the material in this selection remains. This is a tribute to Rod Tiffen's careful selection, but much credit must go to the writer himself, whose great gift was to be able to cut through the crap and get to the heart of any matter, seeing far beyond the myopic blathering which passes for analysis of public policy in the majority of the Australian media.

This book is a worthy tribute to a seminal Australian intellectual. Every media and communications library - indeed every library - should have it. □

## Getting The Full Picture

Australian Film Commission *Get The Picture*, AFC, Sydney 1994, 240pp, \$25.00

The AFC has done it again, with the third edition of their invaluable compendium of data on Australian film, television and video, *Get the Picture*.

As AFC Chair Sue Milliken remarked at the launch, *Get the Picture* (GTP) now has an international reputation as a model for documenting a national production industry. The 1994 format is similar to that used in the second (1992) edition, with comment and analysis on key aspects of the industry - production, distribution and marketing, critical/audience, information - accompanied by recent and comprehensive statistical data.

At 240pp (20pp longer than its predecessor), this edition contains much useful, interesting and often diverting material. As might be expected in the more buoyant atmosphere prevailing in late 1994, the tone of GTP is generally upbeat, noting the resurgence in commercial TV profitability as a crucial factor given that commercial TV is the single largest market, and welcoming the significant impact of Australian - mainly low budget 'arthouse' - films in local and international markets. One encouraging statistic is that seven per cent of the total Australian box office (\$26m out of \$370m) was paid to see Australian films. GTP also notes such developments as the ascendancy of the 13-part miniseries over the more traditional four or six hours, and the advent of telefilm packages.

The attention GTP gives to video is a sign of the growing importance of this market segment, with corporate video production worth an estimated \$170m in 1991/92, making it comparable in value with the older - established areas of advertising and TV drama.

As before, the contributions begin with an overview of the year by former AFC policy adviser Jock Given, with data on Federal Government assistance to film through all agencies since 1972 and statistics on industry employment 1981-1991, showing - not unexpectedly - a marked drop in total industry employment during the grim days of the recession - from 20,594 in 1986 to 18,940 in 1991.

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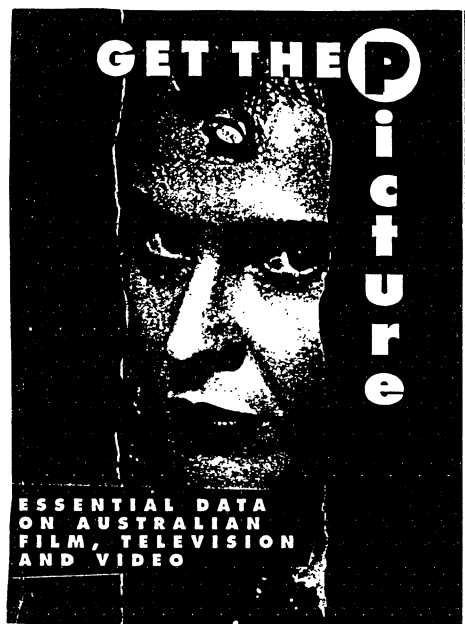


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Other contributors are Jeremy Bean and David Court on production, including data on production numbers and value, 10BA and 1991/2 - 1992/3 feature and TV drama production; Mary Anne Reid on distribution, with full data on each main type of production; and Blake Murdoch analysing critical and audience reaction, drawing on box office and ratings figures and video rentals as well as reviews and awards.

The section on information (Peter Langmead) comprises a guide to industry information resources around Australia - what is available and where (which is in effect also a guide to the existence and activities of key agencies - funding, regulatory, legal, statistical, educational and industrial, as well as industry associations for distributors, exhibitors, producers etc). This is accompanied by a bibliography of publications in 1992 and 1993 on all aspects of film, video and television. For the purposes of students, researchers, investors, producers and others needing access to information about resources on Australian production, *Get the Picture* would be worth the \$25.00 for this section alone.

GTP shows a very high standard of production; its excellent layout and design are extremely reader-friendly. □



## Even Murdoch queries cover price hikes....but not Australian ones

**On 19 October, Rupert Murdoch was quoted in his *Australian* (cover price 80 cents) saying that News Corporation's 'price cutting in Britain, criticised as undermining the viability of quality competitors, had been justified because "the whole industry had been greedy and tried to put up the cover price well ahead of inflation".'**

How is Australia different, we wondered, as we read the latest letters from the Assistant Treasurer, George Gear, and Prices Surveillance Authority chairman, David Cousins, explaining why Gear will not exercise his powers to order the PSA to inquire into newspaper prices.

In April, *Communications Update* published fresh data showing that while the Consumer Price Index had increased 67 percent between 1984-94, newspaper prices had gone up an average of 132 percent on weekdays and 188 percent on Saturdays - well ahead of inflation, as Rupert might have said. Since that time, the prices of several papers have increased.

Several consumer organisations, the ACTU, and the Democrats joined the Communications Law Centre's call for an inquiry. The PSA told Gear that, although the major publishers had a prima facie defence, there was enough evidence to justify a public inquiry. But Gear refuses. He wants the PSA to concentrate on its review of companies, already declared under the Prices Surveillance Act. As Ben Potter (*Age*, 21 September) put it: 'If your business is not already under PSA control, now is the time to put up your prices. And if you are not too blatant about it, you won't have much trouble from the authority. It has not opened any new industry inquiries this year and is unlikely to do so next year.'

But, be warned, George Gear says he is watching those publishers and if they get too far out of line he'll, he'll...

Evidence of the extent to which Rupert Murdoch feels chastened is reported above.

In the August *CU* we sketched the cover prices issue in Britain, where Murdoch is putting extreme pressure on Conrad Black's *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraphs* as well as the financially weaker broadsheets. That market is characterised by competition.

In the US, where one-newspaper cities are the norm as in Australia, price patterns are similar to Australia. According to newspaper analyst, John Morton, (*American Journalism Review*, July-August 1994, p 52): When the advertising recession hit newspapers in 1990, many publishers started raising circulation prices to make up for the advertising shortfall. This aggressive pricing policy remained in place throughout the recession, and it is no wonder that total national weekday circulation has sagged ever since [about seven percent in 1988-93] while Sunday circulation has barely increased.

Australian cover prices are so blatantly an issue that even the Pacific Area Newspaper Publishers' Association Bulletin, to its credit, has reported the CLC data and Gear's inertia (September 1994, p 14). But most major media outlets have ignored the story.

When the Senate inquiry into the rights and obligations of the media resumes its hearings in December, we should all recall this cover prices saga when a choir of pious newspaper executives rise before the senators to sing the traditional hymns 'Safe Shall the Public Interest Be With Us, O Lord' and 'Nearer Shall a Conflict of Interest Abide'. □

Paul Chadwick