

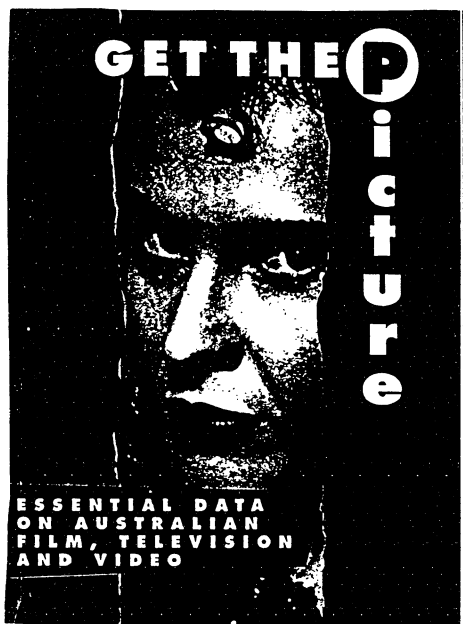


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Other contributors are Jeremy Bean and David Court on production, including data on production numbers and value, 10BA and 1991/2 - 1992/3 feature and TV drama production; Mary Anne Reid on distribution, with full data on each main type of production; 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 'N'eer Shall a Conflict of Interest Abide'. □

Paul Chadwick