



Tombstones of diversity

The first duty of a newspaper is to stay alive. And the most important single fact about any newspaper is that it differs from the next newspaper and is owned by a different man, or group of men. This fact, the fact of difference, transcends a newspaper's greatness, a newspaper's honesty, a newspaper's liveliness, or any other quality. The health of the country deteriorates every time a newspaper dies of strangulation or is wiped out in a mercy killing.

E.B. White, 'Death of the Sun', in **Second Tree from the Corner**, collected writings, 1954

The toll of dead Australian newspapers and magazines would have made the gentle Elwyn weep.

Recorded here for the first time, the 14 metropolitan papers and eight magazines represent the worst casualty list since at least the Depression.

Of the papers, eight were dailies and six Sundays. Nine were traditional tabloids. They included every afternoon daily Australia had when 1987 began with the frenetic takeover activity that saw Rupert Murdoch's News Limited acquire the Herald and Weekly Times and every TV network change hands.

By year's end, young Warwick Fairfax had made his ultimately unsuccessful grab for his inheritance. Nine years later the Fairfax papers have still not regained their stability.

One of the justifications offered for the increased concentration of ownership was that the large groups would be able to cross-subsidise weaker titles and so foster diversity. The tables give the lie to this, as the largest publishers mostly abandoned the cross-subsidies which used to characterise Australian publishing. Remember Old Fairfax's awkwardness with its loss-making *National*

Times, or Murdoch and his brave *Australian* in 1964 and for some years afterwards?

The magazines which have disappeared include a disproportionate number of independent titles which were forums for disclosures and debates among Australian voices about local issues. They were contributors to our 'civic conversation', as the philosopher Max Charlesworth recently called it.

Certainly there have been new ventures by the largest publishers, but these have tended to add to already crowded categories of the entertainment market, for example *Who Weekly*, *New Woman*, *marie claire*, *She* and *Sports Illustrated*.

Let us hope the Federal Government's proposed media inquiry - and the concurrent study of the ABC by Bob Mansfield - produce a meaningful analysis of the meaning of the term 'diversity' and practical measures to improve it. The closures of the past nine years are part of any such analysis.

Several newspapers disappeared in circumstances that need to be remembered now, as Fairfax is stalked and the prospect of greater concen-

tration of ownership grows.

After News Limited acquired HWT in 1987 it found itself with all of the papers in Brisbane, dominance which even the then Trade Practices Commission could not accept.

So News sold the mastheads of its *Daily Sun* and *Sunday Sun* to Northern Star, which later sold them to a management buy-out team headed by a former News executive. The afternoon *Telegraph* was closed on 5 February 1988 and on 15 February the *Daily Sun*, which had been competing with the Murdoch *Courier-Mail* in the mornings, switched to become an evening paper, a decision which defied the worldwide trend of dying afternoon papers. By 1991 it was dead.

Similar circumstances in Adelaide saw the afternoon *News* put down within a week of the tabling of the Lee Inquiry report into print media ownership in March 1992.

The Perth afternoon *Daily News* was a different case. It too may hold lessons for the future if, say, Murdoch acquired the Fairfax papers and his *Daily Telegraph* and *Herald-Sun* were sold to management buy-out teams. Already some are arguing that Melbourne and Sydney will in a few



METROPOLITAN NEWSPAPER CLOSURES SINCE 1887

Dailies

Business Daily

6 July 1987 - 18 August 1987

Telegraph, Brisbane

1 October 1872 - 5 February 1988

Sun, Sydney

1 July 1910 - 14 March 1988

Daily Mirror, Sydney

12 May 1941 - 5 October 1990

Daily News, Perth

26 July 1882 - 11 September 1990

Herald, Melbourne

3 January 1840 - 5 October 1990

Daily Sun, Brisbane

2 August 1982 - 10 December 1991

News, Adelaide

24 July 1923 - 27 March 1992

Weeklies

Western Mail, Perth

8 November 1980 - 31 December

1987

Times on Sunday

(formerly *National Times*)

7 February 1971 - 13 March 1988

Sunday Observer, Melbourne

1969 - 11 June 1989

Sunday Press, Melbourne

9 September 1973 - 13 August 1989

Sunday Herald, Melbourne

20 August 1989 - 31 March 1991

Sunday Sun, Brisbane

(*Truth* until 5 September 1971)

9 September 1900 - 12 April 1992

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SELECTED MAGAZINE CLOSURES

Age Monthly Review

May 1981 - June 1990

Eye

July 1987 - June 1991

Modern Times

(formerly *Australian Society*)

October 1982 - September 1992

Matilda

March 1985 - June 1986

Ita

March 1989 - August 1994

Australian Left Review

June 1966 - October 1992

Editions

August 1989 - March 1995

Independent Monthly

July 1989 - July 1996

years support only one daily each.

In 1990, Alan Bond's Bell Group controlled the sole morning daily, the *West Australian*, and also held 49.9 per cent of the *Daily News*, which was ailing. The TPC refused an application by West Australian Newspapers for authorisation to acquire full control of the paper. WAN argued that although it would have a Perth monopoly, it would rejuvenate the *Daily News*, persist for at least two years and provide public benefits of continued employment and a second source of news, opinion and advertising space. No alternative bidder emerged.

Refusing authorisation, the TPC argued that a WAN monopoly in Perth's small market 'would constitute substantial deterrents to any new entrant.' *The Daily News* was closed soon after.

The late Henry Mayer's finale to a 1981 survey of media ownership and diversity issues comes to mind: 'This paper is very depressing. Our only plea is that it was even more depressing to think through and to write than it will be to read' (*Mayer on the Media*, Allen and Unwin, 1994, p 61).

Never a wallflower, Mayer devised some 'crucial questions' which remain relevant to the forthcoming inquiry:

1. What are the co-operative practices at work within the groups of commonly owned media outlets and how far do they undermine or qualify independence and create interdependence?
2. What practices cause conflicts which interfere with smooth interaction within groups?
3. What kind of markets are the groups in, and how far, and in what

sense, is there 'diversity' in them?

4. If there is diversity, who can alter and introduce greater or lesser degrees of it?

5. What happens if we temporarily shift the focus from owners to journalists, editors and middle managers and look at: source-reporter relations; resources which make the achievement of diversity more or less likely; and the effects on journalists of their own beliefs about owners and editors and story usage?

Henry still teaches. Do we learn? □

Sources: Author's records and checks; Barker, What Happened When (Allen & Unwin, 1996). Assistance by Liz Burke, librarian, city campus, Victoria University of Technology, gratefully acknowledged.

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