

# "Church and state" together in new Age

*Trusting to the future of one of its stable leaders, Fairfax has relaunched Melbourne newspaper The Age with a new design, much touted fresh editorial approach and an advertising slogan commanding it to "Seize the day"*

In September 1854, a Melbourne general merchant and stock holder, Francis Cook & Co, issued a prospectus for a new newspaper which it was backing. It would be "a journal of politics, commerce and philanthropy," the prospectus said, "the record of great movements, the advocacy of free institutions, the diffusion of truth, and the advancement of man". The paper would advocate "the removal of all restrictions upon freedom of commerce, freedom of religion and - to the utmost extent that is compatible with public morality - upon freedom of personal action".

With this piece of puffery, *The Age* was launched, its first issue coming out on October 17, 1854. After a troubled birth, the paper grew, eventually becoming unchallenged as Melbourne's quality broadsheet, and a Victorian institution. It even lived up to the Cook brothers' prospectus, often acting as a liberal influence on society and politics in the state.



But the past decade has not been kind to *The Age*. Since Warwick Fairfax's disastrous takeover bid in 1987, the paper has suffered from continuing uncertainty about ownership and a revolving door into the editor's office.

Enter Steve Harris, who late last year was appointed publisher and editor-in-chief of *The Age* after five years as editor-in-chief across the Yarra at Herald and Weekly Times. He started there in the wake of a turbulent merger between the *Herald* and the *Sun*, which had led to mass redundancies and bitter industrial confrontation. Harris received some criticism for being too close to the state government, particularly after the *Herald Sun* distributed (at sweetheart rates) a government survey of "community attitudes" to criminal sentences. But any fair-minded observer would agree that the paper improved greatly during Harris' time there.

On getting the *Age* gig, Harris left no doubt that he would be a new broom. His first public address after taking over the reins showed real insight into the problems facing Australian journalism, and a refreshing frankness. "Within our newsrooms we have too many pockets of negativism, arrogance, sneering cynicism and confrontationalism," he said. "Newspapers have not been sufficiently astute to the changing needs of the community and . . . their own culpability in adding to community frustration."

*The Age*, he said, had grown lazy and arrogant, resting on the laurels of its glory years under Graham Perkin. Journalists had to be less precious and more dynamic. In particular, they had to recognise that good journalism was only possible on a profitable newspaper: one which sold lots of copies and carried lots of advertising.

"Church and State can work together," Harris said on another occasion, an interview with industry magazine *AdNews*. "It's important for all employees to take a helicopter view."

There are some interesting parallels between events at *The Age* and a recent shake up at the *Los Angeles Times*. There Mark Willes, a former executive with breakfast cereal manufacturer General Mills, has radically restructured and reshaped a paper which, like *The Age*, is a heavyweight but is seen to have stagnated. Like Harris, Willes has broken down the "Church and State" division between editorial and advertising and upset a large number of journalists (who call him "the cereal killer"). Like Harris, Willes says his critics are arrogant and sanctimonious, and says that he is committed to quality journalism because it is the key to financial success.

"Anytime we do anything to damage that relationship [of trust and credibility] with the reader, we basically damage our own franchise," Willes told *American Journalism Review* recently.

"Strictly from a business point of view, it is imperative that we do not ever, ever, lose sight of what journalists hold near and dear."

But with the *Los Angeles Times*, as with *The Age*, the jury is still out on how well the new approach will work.

As part of its efforts to revitalise the paper, *The Age* launched a new look in early March, accompanied by considerable fanfare. The paper of Saturday March 5 had two wrap-around pages. The first was a huge picture of a new-born baby, the second an equally huge picture of a sumo wrestler. Mixed in with this was a short promotional spiel from the editor, Michael Gawenda, and the somewhat cryptic slogan "Seize the day".

The following Monday, the public had its first look at what the fuss was about. The new-look *Age* is given to enormous mast-heads. The banner takes up one-sixth of the front page, the section headings are not much smaller, and even the tags flagging "News", "Opinion" and so on, are larger than many headlines.

Most stories longer than 10 or 12 paragraphs have a summary at the top in sans-serif type, something longer than a sub-head and shorter than an intro. There is a lot of white space, generally well-used, and a lot of keyline boxes around stories, which are perhaps a little busy. There is an emphasis on columns of paragraphs, whether summaries or news briefs, which would make J.F. Archibald smile.

The old *Metro lifestyle* supplement is gone, replaced by something called *Living*, which is a house of many rooms and lacks focus. The sports section has been expanded and given more resources: it is one area in which the new paper is a clear improvement. The business pages, too, have been given a lift.

That's the good news.

Unfortunately, the new *Age* is suffering from the defining publishing problem of our times: nice wrapping, shame about the present.

When the new look was launched to the paper's staff, in a presentation in *The Age* building's basement, several of the slides showing the new layout contained spelling mistakes.

And the literals have crept through into the real thing. On the front page of the first issue, the caption to a photograph illustrating a story about class sizes got the number of children in the picture wrong. On another occasion a court story was subbed so that a quote from the prosecuting counsel appeared to be the words of the judge. More recently, another front page photo caption caused a storm. It showed John Howard looking joyful in Parliament. The headline said: "Why is this man smiling? His numbers have just come up." Below was written: "Happy days are here again: Mr Howard can't resist a good laugh . . . after being handed an envelope containing the High Court's 5-1 ruling [in the Hindmarsh bridge case]."

The clear implication of the wording was that Mr Howard was reacting to news of the decision, which he had received a few minutes earlier - but he wasn't.

This sort of thing is what Mark Willes would call franchise-damaging. It is also harmful to the morale of staff.

It is difficult to report on the inner workings of news organisations. People who work within them are obliged to remain anonymous, while people who have left can easily be dismissed as

prejudiced. What is more, the old accusation that journalists are a pack of whingers has much truth.

Even so, having spoken to more than a dozen *Age* staff - sub-editors and advertising people as well as journalists - there is no doubt that morale there is extremely poor. Old hands not prone to exaggeration say they cannot recall such a poisonous atmosphere.

Erratic management and poor planning are part of the problem. Chaos caused by closing the Melbourne pay office and shifting its functions to Sydney nearly led to industrial action recently. A new supplement was developed, right up to the point of having freelancers commissioned to write copy, only to be completely scrapped at the last minute.

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Some staff are also uncomfortable with the "Seize the day" slogan. No one is sure what it has to do with newspapers. Most of us are familiar with the expression from Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society*. But the expression comes from the Roman poet Horace, who wrote: "While we're talking, envious time is fleeing: seize the day, put no trust in the future."

Hopefully, all the pain will be worthwhile and *The Age* will emerge from the crucible a dynamic and viable institution. But just at the moment, there is any number of journalists at the *Age* who put no trust in the future whatever.

**Richard Evans**