



Life as a Content Provider

Ms Maxine McKew

Journalist, *The Bulletin* and ABC Television

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Arthur Norman Smith died in 1935 - not one of the great years, it would have to be said, for employment opportunities for journalists - or for anyone else.

They were dark days in Australia - as the writer Shirley Hazzard has put it -when she was growing up "this young country seemed old."

My grandparents, like a lot of Australians, lost a great deal in the Depression of the 1930's. Thirty years later I grew up listening to their vivid recollections of what was obviously a very pinched existence for them -a life lived on a small stage because of too few opportunities and a country turned in on itself.

But with characteristics that I think are very Australian, they survived adversity because they had a bit of 'get and up go', big hearts, a lot of spirit and a sense of fun that never left them. Above all they never lost their curiosity and interest in a world beyond their own.

Their stories opened my mind to a world beyond the confines of Moorooka and Scarborough in Queensland.... and helped stimulate me to wonder, to question and enquire - I must have driven them mad sometimes with my whys and hows but they always responded.

If we fast-forward to today, to what should be the beginning of a glittering century for this lucky land, we see immense prosperity and dynamism. NSW Premier, Bob Carr, no doubt intoxicated by the success of the Olympic Games said recently - "we're living through the best time in our history."

For those of you tempted to mock this, I invite you to consider the perspective of those who live in very troubled societies. A couple of recent conversations say it all. One with the new Israeli Consul General who's been in Sydney for about six months or so - the other, with our Ambassador to Indonesia, John McCarthy, who was back here recently for consultations.

Both are engaged in constant discourse about the explosive life and death forces that are wreaking havoc in Israel and Indonesia - so its not surprising that they take one look at public debate in Australia and say "you spend weeks agonizing about phone-card fraud!!!"

Well yes we do, and that's the first obvious point to keep in mind. That we have the unique luxury of being able to dissect that, which is NOT life threatening. And it's in that spirit that I invite you to consider some of my more caustic comments this evening.

We journos are not a particularly happy bunch at the moment, but most, I trust, have a sense of perspective about our grumps. We investigate, we interrogate, we insinuate - a lot of the time we're just plain rude and offensive - but we do so comfortable in the knowledge that we won't be thrown in jail, or stalked or intimidated. I'm excluding of

course the verbal intimidation of some members of the NSW Labor right - but that's another story!

Why then, aren't we celebrating? Certainly, we've never been better paid. And journalism is now considered so prestigious that you practically need to be Einstein to make it into a university communication courses. Of course, I do wonder, from time to time, what's going on at these places.

I won't name the establishment, (but it is one of the Sandstone 7) but the top student in one of these courses recently told the head of the school that, when she graduated, she wasn't focused on being the Norman Smith or the Laurie Oakes or the Jana Wendt of her generation. No, when she graduates, she wants to be DR. HARRY.

You know who Dr. Harry is? The TV vet.... my 8 year old niece Alex never misses him... but I'm hoping she'll grow out of it.

Of course our young undergraduate is not silly. She's in touch with the zeitgeist. She knows that if you make it to a certain rank in what is now clearly the cross-over world of information/entertainment, then you will be a "celebrity."

If you further manage to grow up and acquire an ability to read an auto-cue without falling off the studio chair, then good fortune and social cachet will surely follow. You may well end up, as many a TV starlet has, wearing a funny hat and being photographed on Derby Day.

The best take on the age of the celebrity journalist has been written by Matthew Parris in The Spectator. As he's said, with mock horror - "the velocity with which media people have been shooting up the social scale in modern Britain is extraordinary and almost certainly injurious to the common good.

The latest terrifying example is the betrothal of the mother of an hereditary peer to our own editor. Where will it end? It is not boastful to say there are now few dining tables in England at which a reasonably successful professional man or woman engaged in writing for journals...or broadcasting almost anything short of porn... is thought an unacceptable guest.

One is automatically thought terribly interesting. It's hip, crucial, wicked to be in the media; well regarded, well rewarded and socially smart."

But Parris warns: "I sense this joyously buoyant upward trend in our own self-regard is cruising toward some sharp future CORRECTION. We are puffed up beyond our deserving by fashion. Intrinsically, we are not as interesting, useful, or clever as we are thought to be."

Of course, many fear that the 'correction' is already upon us. It's not hard to see evidence of the McKinsey ethic of maximum focus on the 'bottom-line.'

We are now content providers, mastheads are advertising platforms and employees are expected to have evolving skill-sets. News and current affairs, in the ABC context, has become known as short-form/long form.

So we're being asked to reinvent ourselves. Well, so what, you might say. Welcome to the club. And of course there's nothing revolutionary about the idea that publications and media outlets have to worry about circulation and competition to stay in business.

But of course many of my colleagues are now asking, whether journalism can survive constant cost-cutting and a mind-set that appears to be put too little value on experience and depth, as opposed to volume.

Delivering the annual Andrew Olle lecture only a few weeks ago Eric Beecher, a former Fairfax editor and now CEO of Text Media said that "commercialism, not idealism, now dominates the media landscape so that these are uncomfortable, unpleasant days for the profession.

Good journalism, he said, is not a commodity. It's something more than that. In one way or another, journalism has to have passion, and if it does it works commercially as well." But the pressures to take a more commercial approach are everywhere, not just from the media managers who, these days, look more and more like accountants, and have MBAs and marketing degrees.

For public broadcasting in particular there's pressure from right across the political class.

I will take a little of your time to talk about and defend a journalist who has borne the brunt of political attacks from all sides and yet still manages to maintain a passion for his craft and for the role of the ABC in Australia's media.

The marginal Liberal member for the federal seat of Moreton, Gary Hardgrave, recently revealed an unexpected level of pettiness by saying "if you got rid of Kerry O'Brien you could replace him with ten journalists". Hardgrave in a previous incarnation had the limited experience as a journalist of working for the ABC on the *7.30 Report* - in Brisbane.

Well Gary - no, you couldn't - even if they were ten journalists much like yourself - and I'll tell you why.

Kerry O'Brien is worth every cent the ABC pays him because he has spent thirty years perfecting his craft. He is the interviewer he is today because he has served a substantial apprenticeship over many years - on local national and international affairs. He's constantly tested and challenged himself - and has never settled into a journalistic comfort zone.

Or perhaps Gary - you had in mind that O'Brien could be replaced by ten young researchers... a bit like the one who said to me recently "Ramallah...that's a suburb of Jerusalem isn't it?"

Kerry O'Brien has been both a friend and mentor to me over the years, and I can tell you that he has that increasingly rare quality - an ability to attract and nurture and invest in the talents of others. Robert Manne has said of O'Brien, that he's now the Robin Day of Australian journalism. To which I would say - Robin Day, without the pompous airs.

Above all, he is committed to a profession that is layered, that has a depth of experience and understanding. Journalism as a craft, not, what some see today as the 'information commodities' racket.

So in the battle between journalism and a healthy-looking balance sheet, how are we doing?

There is room for criticism of the performance and coverage of all forms of our media. They all have their place and different approaches to their role - thus any particular criticism I make tonight, or example given, is not to be taken as an undue focus on any one organisation but rather as convenient examples of a broader set of problems within the media.

Recently the sword has fallen on Paul McGeough, editor until recently of the Fairfax broadsheet The Sydney Morning Herald. He managed two years in the job until Greg Hywood, publisher and editor-in-chief, gave him the flick with this generous statement:

"Under Paul, the paper has broken many stories, added new sections, undergone a sweeping and successful redesign and delivered an outstanding Olympics coverage that left the Opposition floundering."

Which just might leave the likes of you and me to wonder out loud why Mr. McGeough is still not sitting in the chair. I'm afraid I can't enlighten you.

Writing in The Australian a few weeks back, journalist Mark Day theorized that McGeough lost his job because he "resisted what he saw as the redeployment of resources from the core newspaper business into the Fairfax electronic arm, f2."

The Australian Financial Review reported recently that f2 lost \$40 million last year on revenues of \$115 million. The division employs about 700 people, most of them in sales. The AFR explained the losses this way - each time someone reads a Fairfax newspaper, the company makes 87c profit...but each time someone reads an f2 website Fairfax loses 60cents. Little wonder then, at the growing concern of Fairfax journalists that internet losses are funded in part by reduced spending on the core business of news-making.

I can only add to that by saying, that having sat on panels with Greg Hywood in the past, he has articulated the challenges posed by the digital age this way: As he puts it: "to what extent do we have to cannibalize our core product to create something new?"

Which of course reminds me of that appalling rationale used by the American military during the Vietnam war - "we had to destroy the village in order to save it." Well I'll just give you one example of how the newspaper village is in danger of being torched.

Fairfax editors now have their remuneration tied to performance pay. I'm talking about the editors of the various sections of the paper...business, metro, national...up to 20% of their pay is in the form of a bonus and is paid if those editors keep costs down.

Needless to say this sets up an immense conflict. No more separation of church and state.

If say, an editor loses an experienced well paid journalist, then it's in the financial interest of the editor to replace that individual with someone less experienced and therefore someone who comes cheap.

Fairfax is currently being McKinseyed by its CEO, Fred Hilmer. - performance bonuses, efficiency gains, down sizing, - the whole gamut. Yet he says without any apparent irony "to me bad policy is policy that devalues resources and limits opportunities". Touche!! A comment made recently by Mr. Hilmer when he was attacking the short sightedness of the government's approach to broadband television spectrum. But a comment that could equally be applied to his own organisation. But then we are accustomed to many a politician and CEO tailoring their speech to the audience only to have their contradictions caught out.

Again to quote Eric Beecher, cost cutting in the news business means that "money, budgets and profits are now the biggest issues for senior editors." So the worry about 'dumbing-down' is very real.

I've talked about the Fairfax organization because it's one of the most important news-gathering institutions in the country with a fine tradition and a deep history.

I care about it because I start every day with a Fairfax publication or two, as I also start every day by listening to the ABC. So let me talk a little now about the national broadcaster in the age of content provision.

First of all.....I CARE ABOUT THE ABC.

I care about what it says, about the breadth of what it does and about the audience to whom it speaks. The ABC occupies a unique place in our culture...an institution that, through an immensely diverse range of programs offers us argument, thoughtfulness and imagination. At its best, it shows us who we are and encourages us to do better.

If we at the ABC have the grumps at the moment it's because, amidst all the words about 'the digital future' and the 'on-line this and that', no-one at the top... not one individual... has talked about the value, the range, the possibilities of the ABC.

Not one of the new bosses, or the old ones for that matter, has given us a sense of what the organization could be in the twenty-first century or why and how it needs to change. No one has given us a dream to dream, a vision to fight for. To simply say, as the new Managing Director Jonathan Shier has... I'VE GOT THE GIG... doesn't quite do it for us, I'm afraid.

The ABC is one of the great cultural and intellectual assets of the country, and from time to time, its appropriate that those who seek to lead the organization restate, with clarity and conviction, what its values and goals should be.

But I would be remiss if I didn't at the same time COMMEND Jonathan Shier for his refusal to accept the parsimony of the government, and his stated determination to get more revenue out of Canberra.

That brings us to the truly shocking hypocrisy of a government that continues to tell the ABC that it has to learn how to live within a set budget and cut its cloth accordingly. This, from the same lot who tolerate a Finance Department that can't even manage to get on top of a ministerial phone bill that blows out, (you knew I'd get back to that)... and of course the same Finance Department that has recently managed to spend \$25.7 million to a bunch of advisors about the outsourcing Government IT.

And wasn't this money well spent!! The Auditor General recently reported that the program's implementation costs had blown out three-fold and that the Government's claim of a billion dollars in savings was grossly overstated. But of course it's much easier to lambast the ABC for all that profligacy on cab docket!!

Oh, and how did we find out about that finance department cock-up? It wasn't a content provider or open government which let on - it was through hard assiduous work by a journalist - Laura Tingle - a Fairfax employee who worked on that story for months.

And Peter Reith's telephonic escapades? That was unearthed by a young journalist at the *Canberra Times*. She got the story by hard work and I assume a drive to be as good at her craft as she could be. and that's as fine an ambition as there is - to be as good as your capacity allows.

But of course in an age of excessive news management by government, good journalism, instead of being seen as the healthy irritant that keeps everyone on their toes in a democracy, is increasingly seen as something akin to subversion.

How easy it is to accuse the ABC and its pesky interviewers or other publications of conspiring against the government, when often, all that is sought, is that rare thing... a straight answer.

There will always be tension, as there should be, between the fourth estate and the governing class, but public debate would be better served if politicians could suspend their hostility for a minute, and tried, just occasionally to explain and persuade. A bit of straight-talk, instead of the dodging and weaving that now passes for political discourse, and who knows? The electorate might just respond by being that much less sullen and feral!!

Certainly worth a try!!

When my rage dies down about the double standards of Canberra - I then look for a bit of amusement at what some of our other critics say. And there's the crowd who insist that we who work for the ABC are members of a "workers collective." This is usually accompanied by a demand that management somehow 'crack' the collective and take back ownership of the ABC from the staff. Now this IS very funny, and just a little outdated.

What seems to be ignored is that some of our most enlightened companies are now spending millions (again with advisers and consultants) to try and work out how to give their employees a sense of 'ownership' about what they do.

The feeling that one is part of a fine and worthwhile enterprise, and not just a disengaged cog, is now regarded as a valuable business asset, and a key driver of productivity.

One such consultant, Alistair Mant, recently made this point at a seminar at Sydney University. He found it ironic and a touch disturbing, that just at the time when smart multi-nationals were beginning to wake up to the value of collegiality, that public institutions such as universities and broadcasters such as the ABC were being exhorted to go in the opposite direction.

The collective sense of ownership, the passion, the pride, the belief that ABC staffers have in the work they do, is one of the organizations great strengths. It's the reason the ABC can still attract exceptional people, who are prepared, in some under-funded units, to work on pretty crummy salaries.

THE ABC IS ITS PEOPLE. Smart organizations know this. It's even taught in business schools!

Now I would have to say that when you have an organization of 6000 people, all of whom think they could run the joint better than the bloke who's attempting to do so, then you can have a pretty anarchic organization.

One where change is exceptionally difficult to broker, where modern work practises are often resisted, where morale is hardly ever more than 4 out of 10, and one where some people prefer blind ideology over the facts.

All this is true of the ABC. But I would say this from the perspective of someone who first joined the national broadcaster in 1975 as a trainee on the original This Day Tonight program. Without a doubt the ABC today is a much more vibrant relevant and exacting organization than the sleepy self-satisfied one I joined a quarter a century ago.

To those tempted to feel nostalgic about some supposed 'golden era' I say, you're fooling yourself.

I'll give just one example.

Newsgathering and especially news analysis in the pre-satellite era was a very primitive arrangement. If you were working on daily current affairs, and had to cover an international flare-up in country x, you only had two options. First of all, you'd head down to the 'film' library to see Deirdre and drag out whatever dated footage of country x you could find, and then attempt to re-work it some way.

So much for the visuals.

You then had the fun job of doing a ring-around of the universities. If you actually found a public intellectual sufficiently informed about country x... that is someone who didn't think their colossal learning would be debased by actually appearing on the media, then you were in business.

Said intellectual of course may not have been near country x in quite a while... but heh, neither had anyone else... SO YOU WERE COOKIN' WITH GAS!!

I like to remind people of these scenarios whenever I hear the line that technology is to blame for all our problems.

Satellite television, perhaps as much as anything, forced the country to focus on life beyond our quiet borders. In a very real way, it made possible, a program that I was privileged to work on, *Lateline*.

You could fill a who's who with the names of international leaders who appeared on *Lateline* over the years - just in my time, I'd list Shimon Peres, Tony Blair, Aung Sung Su Shi, Sir Julius Chan, Fidel Ramos, Madelyn Albright and William Cohen.

The word was out pretty quickly about *Lateline* - that if you had something important to say, something that required a bit of reflection and a bit of context, or if you wanted to influence the decision-making class, then an appearance on the program was an obvious choice. It gave the ABC enormous prestige and was, or so we thought, an essential part of the news and current affairs schedule.

Well, as we all know the original discussion format has been changed radically, which is not to say that the present format doesn't have merit, and that the people working on it aren't doing a fine job.

But cost pressures can in part be blamed for gutting what was always a key feature of LATELINE - international comment, often from key players, not marginal ones, and via lengthy satellite bookings.

It was hardly the most expensive show in the line-up, but it wasn't cheap either. There is now no substitute forum on ABC television for what *Lateline* once did and we are, I think, the poorer for it.

Now, there are even greater cost pressures in what I see as a core area of ABC activity - that of news and current affairs. We're being told, once again, to do more with less.

Eight million dollars less as it turns out. That still leaves news and current affairs with around a \$112 million budget, about a fifth of the total ABC budget, the reason that some non-News and Current Affairs staffers at the ABC, get a little tired of our complaints about budget cuts.

Many program-makers have been hit much more savagely over the past ten years than we journalists.

And I agree absolutely with former head of drama Sue Masters (and how anyone could let her walk out the door remains one of life's mysteries?) - I agree with her when she says there are many ways in which to tell our stories.

Seachange tells us as much about our aspirations and our reappraisal of work and family issues as does a news story about changing demographics and the population movement of baby boomers from cities to coastal towns.

Equally no-one has yet done any serious work on the threat posed to traditional news shows by comedy. Whether it's *Backbencher*, *The Panel* or *The Games*, we're seeing a whole area of programming that is appropriating the format and techniques of current affairs.

Are they subverting the news or giving it to us straight? I made the point in *The Bulletin* not so long ago that when it came to a series such *The Games*, John Clarke and friends were asking questions that weren't being asked elsewhere. Basic things that we journalists tend to ignore - like "WHAT DOES THE IOC ACTUALLY DO?" That's a really terrific question!!

All these things have to be considered. The last thing we content providers should do is to erect the resistance barriers and refuse to consider different approaches.

But understandably my colleagues get very edgy indeed when they hear that familiar cry - "reallocation of resources." Let's just consider some recent history.

In his book *Death Struggle* Quentin Dempster has documented what is nothing less than a national and regional disgrace - the systematic destruction of Radio Australia.

The last time we had a massive restructure, called ONE ABC (remember that?) by the Brian Johns management team, Radio Australia lost its status as a separate division and with it much of its bargaining power.

Then, we all heard about the need for a more "flexible attitude" to RA.

Of course we also had Bob Mansfield's report which recommended closing down the service so that the ABC could better concentrate on domestic reporting. RA, after all, was old technology, short wave radio. Shutting it down would save \$13.5 million and plenty wanted to get their hands on that little pot.

As Quentin documents, despite a spirited fight by RA's chief Derek White and a supportive public campaign, the argument was lost. Australia's cheapest and most effective form of public diplomacy was lost to more than half of Asia when the transmission station at Cox peninsula near Darwin was closed down.

At the very time that we needed a counter voice to Hansonism - throughout the Asian financial meltdown - a time when Indonesia was experiencing its greatest upheaval in forty years and during the crisis in East Timor, Radio Australia's voice was reduced to a whisper.

To read Quentin's account, is to read one of the sorriest chapters in recent ABC decision-making. What was done to Radio Australia was nothing short of vandalism. A decision taken by a bunch of people with too little appreciation of what is truly valuable. An independent newsgathering voice to the Asia Pacific region.

In belated recognition of the damage caused, the Howard government in August of this year took the decision to inject an extra \$9 million over three years into RA.

So with this recent example of what happens when we seek to reallocate resources, let's be very careful about which limb we think about chopping off next!!

Which brings me to what we might call "the idea de jour" - the present ambitions to redirect funding into ABC on-line activities. The plan apparently, is that we can generate a few quid by doing what YOU'RE all attempting to do - to try to develop a facility as a virtual teacher or a virtual university, by repackaging the vast information we gather. Perhaps, along the way, to encourage the state premiers to kick in money from their education budgets.

I asked Premier Steve Bracks about this a few weeks back and he said simply - "the ABC is a federally funded organization."

Now the horror scenario would have to be that the ABC ends up pouring a lot of development money into an on-line operation and ends up with very little in the way of a return. Remember those figures about f2.

At this stage no on-line information or news outlet anywhere in the world today is profitable, and it is possible, that, in the form that we currently know, they never will be.

What we do know is that the media is facing great change and it is logical that media organisations invest in new forms and hope to hell that they get it right.

And we know from past radical shifts in communications use, that at some point, the industry will stabilise into a relatively predictable shape as it did with the invention of the printing press, Morse code, crystal sets, shortwave radio, AM radio, television and FM radio.

Not all survived or lasted long as a principal means of communications and not all of the new experimental forms that media organisations are now having to evaluate, invest in and second guess will survive either.

What our Fairfaxes and Newses and Packers' and Stokes' and ABCs have to do while they continue their quests for the new media is to make sure that they don't destroy or neglect the principles that shaped the core business and the intellectual property that's been developed..

Yes, advertising on the web is growing, but most of it goes to consumer and financial sites. Does this mean that ABC on-line news would be used as a portal to, perhaps, real estate services or financial or travel services. The consultants have been busy on that one already. And I relish the debate that will no doubt ensue if this one has legs!!

So here I am, a confused content provider, unable to give much of a clear picture about the future, but someone who's concerned enough to say..hey, let's talk about this!

But being the optimist I am, I will end on an up-beat note.

I don't buy for a minute the notion that we're witnessing the beginning of the end of quality journalism. I love the robust raw edgy way in which the media game is played out in this country. You don't have to look far for evidence of investigative zeal and its consequences.

Whether it's the dramatic volte face of an Immigration Minister presented with such obvious evidence of shocking maladministration at the Woomera Detention Centre, that he is forced to call an inquiry - you can say thank-you to vigorous journalism. In this case the efforts of *The Australian*.

Or perhaps it's an image that says it all. Who'll forget opening their papers only a few months ago to see a front page pic of Paul Reith, all dandied up as a city toff with his latest squeeze in a London cab. Just imagine the reaction in Peter Costello's kitchen that morning!!

And of course I remain forever grateful to the proprietors of The Bulletin magazine that they employ me to do something outrageously old-fashioned -and that is to interview people over lunch. Fortunately my editors ignored the advice that this is a way to ruin both activities, and every week I just sit down, put my tape recorder where the bread and butter plate normally goes, and just sit back and listen.

And of course it's amazing what some people tell you. In between the entree and the main, John Della Bosca actually told the truth about the inconsistencies of the ALP's tax policy. And for Kim Beazley, this was thoroughly indigestible!!

Television? Just one example will suffice. The recent embarrassment of the American networks and their reliance on exit polling to report the Presidential election, is a timely reminder that between the ABC and Channel 9, Australian voters, receive, by and large, early and accurate election-night results.

And nearly always presented with zip and good humour and without the unnecessary gravitas of some American and British anchors.

So let's keep a sense of perspective in the era of click and drag and realize that good people are still attracted to journalism for all the right reasons - because they have a real taste for it. I met a young woman recently who, Monday to Friday, is lawyer who works for Clayton Utz. She's highly prized by the firm as a German speaker who services all the firm's German-based telco clients. She's on track to made partner.

But the best part of her week comes every Saturday morning when she turns up at the 2BL studios in Ultimo as a volunteer radio producer and runs around the city doing interviews. She can't wait for the day when she gets offered what will no doubt be a short-term contract on a marginal salary so that she can say goodbye to the law and embrace radio journalism full-time.

When she makes it, as she no doubt she will, she'll probably call herself a content-provider - but the spirit she embraces goes all the way back to Arthur Norman Smith.

On that note, I'll end. Thank you for your attention.