



In Defence of Talkback

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Thank you for coming to listen to me here this evening. And thank you to the University for the invitation. I remember a recent fierce cross-examination of the Vice Chancellor about some hot topic or other – and thought – oh dear – there goes all the polite conversation at the A N Smith lecture.

This evening I want to defend talkback radio -defend it from its reputation as a refuge for the reactionary, a sanctuary for the superficial and a bolthole for the bloody-minded. Instead, I want to sing its praises -as offering the potential for a democratic market for what I call the contest of ideas.

I am puzzled why it would be that people who get to listen to me for three and a half hours a day already... would want to hear even more of my voice. And what's more, my opinions. I go to great lengths not to expose my ignorance during the daily show, so it is going to be even more stressful to get through this occasion without revealing the habitual shallowness and intellectual laziness of the radio announcer. It is the perfect job for unattractive people with short attention spans, thirsty egos, and lousy fashion sense.

I want to cover a lot of ground while I have this opportunity. You may be surprised but it is a novelty to have the chance to get a few things off my chest. I am tonight free of the usual constraints of producers telling me to shut up, no-one is expecting a time call or the current temperature in Melbourne, and the Newsroom is not going to come crashing in so inconveniently every half hour or so. I hope I am not giving away too many trade secrets when I tell you that there is intense rivalry at the ABC Southbank Centre between local radio programmes and the Newsroom, indeed I have heard it said that they think of us as 'the stuff that fills in the time between News bulletins'..... and we think they are the people who mop up after our show has broken all the big stories. But it is a friendly competition and one that has remarkable synergy and mutual benefits.

I also want to tell you about -radio as the flavour of the month – the currently 'hot' medium compared to other electronic and print formats, -the fascination that political minders have with talk radio in particular, -the ethical crisis that has recently been visited upon people who do what I do, -the daily battle we embark upon with spin doctors to control what is called 'news' -the unease with which I grapple with the so-called power presented to us 'on air' types -and of course a few words about the ABC.

It is a little daunting to follow in the steps of media moguls, editors of prestigious broadsheets and nationally published columnists. I suspect I am the lowest level of the media food chain to have delivered this speech, and it is the only thing that Rupert and I will have in common. Not often has a working hack been given this chance. Not so Mary Delahunty who when delivering the A N Smith lecture ten years ago said "I trust my association with the A N Smith Memorial lecture will be a springboard to bigger and better things". I leave it to each of you to decide if her wish has been fulfilled or derailed.

What do I do? and is it journalism? At its simplest, I get up before everybody else, read everything before you all do, then regurgitate it, suitably filtered, on the wireless. Is it

journalism? Yes, in the sense that as well as filtering everything already published in print or electronically, I also research fresh stories, break 'news' and analyse the world around us. I also get to talk to many of the newsmakers and ask them anything I like. That is journalism.

Or I could invoke the John Laws defence, used so shamelessly in the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal inquiry into 'cash for comment', where Laws tried to pirouette out of trouble over conflicts of interest by saying that what he does is just 'entertainment'. This of course is facile nonsense, and as Mr Laws celebrates fifty years behind a microphone with a national roadshow, he surely must wish that he had pulled the plug at 45 years and left with his reputation – and ratings – intact.

I do however admit to a small problem with describing myself as a journalist, even though what I do is plainly journalism. I have never trained as a journalist, never been a cadet or been graded. I have never worked in a newsroom, either electronic or print. My apprenticeship was served as indentured labour of a different kind, as an articled clerk in the law. I entered into the media from the side, not the bottom. I do not pretend to have the training and the instincts that others have absorbed from the years of slog, battling through the hierarchy of the different rounds and the thrill of the chase being on the road running after a big yarn. I have never been a foreign correspondent, never been part of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. Maybe it is the ingrained respect for rank and title that comes from years in the law that leaves me wary of adopting the 'journalist' tag without any formal credentials – it seems wrong. But one day someone will decide that in order to practice journalism you need to be a formally accredited journalist, and then the issue that will need to be resolved is how you provide occupational licensing and regulation to an astonishingly fragmented and haphazard industry. No one can call himself or herself a plumber and set up fixing taps without proper training anymore, nor can anyone teach in a school or care for your children or drive a bus or do any number of jobs without proper qualifications. Oddly, the industry that loves making everybody else accountable has not yet addressed this issue of its own.

Talkback radio seems to attract thugs and loudmouths, smartarses and bullies. That's the presenters – I will describe the callers in a moment.

But more seriously, currently presenting talk shows just in this city you have several very experienced print journalists, an ageing rock and roller turned failed quiz show host, a nightclub crooner who earned his stripes as a TV variety host, a couple of comedians, two more refugees from the practice of law and a few career broadcasters. If we look around the nation, across the ABC and commercial talk radio, the most likely entry point for radio host is still to have worked as a print journalist. In Sydney, most of the talk show hosts have come from a print background, except for the odd rugby coach. And I use 'odd' deliberately.

When people think of journalism, they seem to have some default setting that goes straight to print ... and if their thoughts of journalism embrace the electronic media at all they seem to snuggle up to TV News and Current Affairs personalities. With a couple of honorable exceptions, commercial TV current affairs is mind numbing crap, thinly disguised advertorial and targeting a lowest common denominator that shames the playschool demographic. It is suffering a crisis in credibility that is richly deserved and self-inflicted. The commercial networks that keep professing a commitment to current affairs have for years subverted the format and so diluted the brandname it may be suffering terminal decline. The TV satire '*Frontline*' was a documentary. Certainly it is pointless to continue to try to tell the viewing public that Ray or Naomi –or whoever it is in your city – will anticipate and analyse your every worry and concern about the world – and then night after night let the audience down. People are NOT stupid. The network executives just might be.

Yet look at what talk radio hosts do in even a quiet week. With the invaluable and expert work of the programme producers – those often unthanked and unrecognized creative thinkers- we find anything between six and ten stories a day, interview anything between ten and thirty people each day, five days a week, all year. I calculate we cover about 2 000 stories a year. To those interviews you have to add about thirty talkback callers a day. I estimate as many as ten thousand talkback calls a year get to air, just on my show alone. Two thousand guests, ten thousand callers. On one shift. Just at one radio station. In one city. Each year.

And of course every one of them is a gem.

If the internet wants to boast about being interactive, it has a long way to go before it gets within cooee of the interactivity of talkback.

The ABC alone has more than fifty local radio stations, from the big ones like Sydney and Melbourne through to tiny outfits in outback towns like Kununurra. Talkback has even penetrated the hallowed halls of Radio National, the ABC's up-market talk network, with Sandy McCutcheon moderating a nightly session that ponders the issues of the day. And creates a virtual community through the airwaves.

Talkback is big. According to the latest ratings figures, more than a third of the Melbourne listening audience choose talk radio of one kind or another. At times of crisis, war, elections and disasters, listening patterns show substantial swings towards talk radio, and away from music, light entertainment and comedy. It is not just the audience either that turns to talk radio when they need to tap into what is happening. Laurie Oakes, speaking last month at the Melbourne Press Club awards, pointed out that the Prime Minster "virtually lives in radio studios" when he is out selling a message to the Australian people [as he was recently when committing Australian troops to the 'coalition of the willing']. The various state premiers, apart from sharing a party affiliation, also boast another shared value – they all love talk radio. One of the principal weapons needed in a successful politicians personal armory is the ability to conquer radio, to sound personable but authoritative, to do battle with the host and to create a relationship with the listeners. It is often the only way people get to flesh out an idea of what sort of person their Premier or Prime Minister is, as it is often the only place where an extended interview will take place.

When was the last time anyone saw a Victorian local political story covered in any detail on TV? *Stateline* on ABC TV wages a lonely battle. As TV current affairs – on commercial and ABC TV –becomes Sydney centric to a ridiculous degree, the opportunity for radio to plug the gap, and provide proper coverage to local stories is obvious.

There is, in fact, no other way for a politician or opinion setter – take Professor Alan Fels or Dr Kerry Phelp as examples – to get to speak to so many people at once as talk radio. If a public figure agrees to a print interview, someone will decide which bits of the interview are used and which bits hit the editor's floor. A photo of someone else's choice will go onto the page, with a headline placing emphasis on some aspect or other of the issue with the politician having no say over how any of that is done. No role in where it goes on what page with whom knows which distracting ad adjoining.

TV will work with ten or fifteen-second grabs for the nightly news, again with the pollie having no say on which grab gets a run. On radio, though, by agreeing to a live to air interview, the Premier or the Prime Minister or any other public figure gets to talk directly to the citizens. If they can get to be good at it, it is very persuasive medium indeed. If they fluff it, on the other hand, they wear the consequences. Two personal experiences of mine illustrate the point.

When Jeff Kennett was Premier, he held a weekly exclusive interview with Neil Mitchell. The rest of the media was suitably put out, and was required each week to wait for the Premier to make whatever announcements were to be made through the unofficial organ of a commercial station radio show. Contrary to popular myth, he did also - regularly but not weekly - appear on the ABC. One day, well before the 1999 election in which he lost power - indeed just after the ALP had dumped John Brumby as leader of the opposition to install the unknown Steve Bracks - the Premier came in for one of our regular chats. He was never early for these appointments - indeed he sometimes used to sit in the car outside and wait until it was 8:29 before coming up the stairs. On other occasions he would relax in the sumptuous surrounds of our cafeteria with the customary hot water with a slice of lemon in it. But on this occasion, as I recall, in mid 1999, he arrived early. Our state manager, Murray Green, welcomed him to the premises as is our practice and he was escorted to the studio. Word was sent around to my desk 'he's here, you better get around' even though it was only 8:20. I went to the studio and Mr Kennett greeted me, exchanged the usual pleasantries and then surprised me by asking me a question: "How many listeners have you got? Overall?" he said. I replied that he knew the ratings as well as I did, to which he replied "Yes, but you have so many listeners outside the city... not counted in the ratings, so how many listen overall? Do you have any figures?" I assured him that we do not really know, as no one has ever managed to precisely measure our audience, stretching as it does from Mt Gambier across the South Australian border, to Mallacoota, from Wonthaggi to Wagga Wagga to say nothing of the persistent calls into talkback from Northern Tasmanian listeners.

"Well" said our then fearless leader "you know I could do you each week the way I do the other fella... would you like that" he selflessly offered. I was somewhat taken aback by this unprecedented gesture of reconciliation from Mr Kennett, with whom I did not enjoy a close relationship. "Well, I guess that would mean I have to do a weekly spot with the new leader of the opposition too, this is the ABC, we have to be balanced" I replied. He rolled his eyes. "Oh I wouldn't like that" he said reflectively, then finished the conversation by saying "I'll get back to you, think about it".

Of course we did not make any deals with the Premier or anyone else, and the election came and the less I say about that tonight the better.

Immediately after the ALP were declared to have the support of the three independents in late 1999 - after the delayed supplementary election in Frankston, that held things up as you recall - Steve Bracks came in on his first day as Premier. He arrived early - someone went and did the meet and greet - and I was summoned to the studio at about 8:20. I congratulated Mr Bracks on his victory, expressed my commiseration that he had had to cancel his Queensland holiday that had been booked in the expectation of a somewhat different election outcome, and then he asked me a question. "Would you agree if I came I for a weekly spot?" he said, "I'd like to do that, because your show reaches right across the state".

"Well" I responded, "that would mean I would have to do whoever is going to lead the opposition each week as well. This is the ABC, we have to be balanced". "Oh, no, I wouldn't like that" said Mr Bracks, echoing word for word the attitude of his immediate predecessor.

The story shows that our political leaders - regardless of which side of politics they come from - know exactly the nature of the transaction and the leverage they can extract from the power of incumbency. They also go out of their way to set aside time in a hectic schedule to use one medium out of all those available, to reach the community. I have had members of parliament contact me with a question for the Prime minister, asking me to ask it on air because I have more time with and access to the PM in our occasional chats than they do.

The other anecdote also concerns the Prime Minister. At the height of the 'cash for comment' scandal, after the Broadcasting Tribunal had delivered its findings about the ethical void that Messrs Jones and Laws occupied, the PM was a studio guest on my show. Amongst other questions put to him, was this one: "Given that the Broadcasting Tribunal has found that Alan Jones and John Laws are unethical in their behaviour, why do you continue to give them credibility by appearing on their programmes?"

Mr Howard responded with a gleam in his eye – and he does not always have a gleam in his eye – with the perfect answer. "Jon" he said and I hope I have it word perfect "I am sure you think that when I come in here I am coming in to talk to you – but I am really coming in to talk to your audience and while they have an audience I will continue to appear on their programmes too".

Thank you Mr Howard for the perfect analysis of the interdependence of radio programmes and politicians.

But at least when dealing with the political minders you know what they are offering and what they want in exchange. It is an equal transaction. Not so with corporate Australia. Every day, my producers sift through reams of press releases and PR Company guff in order to distinguish spin from substance. This has been a problem for a long time, but now has reached epidemic proportions. So many journalists have gone from gamekeeper to poacher, using their experience and contacts to foist their clients onto unsuspecting programme makers. We have so-called ground breaking new research into every imaginable disease and medical condition that turns out to be nothing but soft sell for some new – or even not new - pharmaceuticals. We have the lifestyle research promoting new technology, and financial service companies offering psychologists with tips on coping with retirement just to flog superannuation. Fast food companies find tame dietitians to try to tell us that junk food is actually good for you, and the dairy or livestock corporation find another one to tell you to avoid junk food at all costs. Of course pet food companies are the worst – or is it the best? They astonishingly have found that dogs and cats live longer – and are happier, yes happier – if they eat out of a tin. Just as nature intended.

Is it any different to the common corporate sponsorship of events and venues which is designed to get repeat mentions of their brandnames into the public psyche? We have the Westpac Consumer confidence index, the ANZ employment figures, the Telstra Dome, the Pura Cup in cricket or the Wizard pre-season football competition. Where to draw the line? Personally I would like to see the Alan Fels Corporate Bullshit Index or the Rodney Adler Accountability Survey.

I have no doubt that I could carve out three and a half-hours a day of passable radio by just taking the drip feed from the publicists. Indeed as I make the daily drive home and channel surf I regularly hear stories we dismissed out of hand as advertorial being given a run on other stations.

Does it matter? Surely the public know by now that this is part of life. They know when to suspend belief and when to pile on the grains of salt. That of the thirty different types of shampoo on the supermarket shelf – all of which are just different scented variations of the same detergent - the only distinguishing feature to separate one from the other is their image. The public surely know not to take any notice of the pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo from an actor wearing a white coat talking about enzymes and scientifically calculated additives. Or do they? If the marketing department have done their focus groups properly, it still works.

And what an advantage if you can find an overworked and stressed – or lazy - radio producer looking for a spoon-fed interview that puts your ad to air masquerading as research or news?

Of course there is the widespread and more insidious practice of presenting gifts to programmes – sometimes quite generous – to use payola to muscle onto someone's programme. There are parcels of beer, foodstuffs of every kind, endless t-shirts, caps, 'samples' and so on arriving at the studio with our names on them. And this at the ABC!!! There is an expectation that the follow up courtesy call "Did the hamper arrive" will be met with the quid pro quo of a spot on the show to flog whatever is being flogged. Last week a new brand of disposable shaver was launched onto the market. Some PR bod had clearly failed in their basic research when I was sent a sample pack with a covering letter encouraging me to personally put their new razor to the test and let them know what I thought!!

We show great restraint in resisting temptation, and indeed the ABC has strict guidelines about what can and can not be accepted in the normal course of work, and how it is disclosed if it is accepted. But it is widely known in the industry that commercial radio has no such rules and it is free for all. Payola is not covered by the 'cash for comment' guidelines – they relate to ongoing commercial tie-ins. In other words: big bribes, not little ones.

Of course some others in the industry have not resisted temptation, and their disgraceful conduct was fully explored and exposed in the cash for comment inquiry. I find it amazing that a couple of years down the track, Alan Jones and John Laws are still on air, Jones in particular with apparently undiminished influence, if anything more power, despite the exposure of his lack of ethics. What does it say about the industry and regulation of it when it has so clearly failed in trying to rein in the excess of some of its stars?

What has amazed me most of all as a distant observer of the Sydney talk scene is how so much power is cultivated and brazenly exploited by people who talk on the radio. Surely you only have the power to influence the appointment of a police commissioner, for instance, just to choose a random example, if that power is given to you. It is when politicians, in a self serving survival instinct, cosy up to someone and do deals that offer mutual advancement, that you have the problem. If the shock-jock is not given the influence, if he is kept at arms length by government and business, and not indulged, then the equation is not subverted. The fault lies with the giver as well as the taker of such liberties with the communities trust.

The concept of conflict of interest seems to be re-negotiated as you cross the Murray River and head north, and it is to the credit of the community ethic of Melbourne as a city that it has not flirted with the worst that talk radio has to offer. We refused to embrace the rude rabble rousing ratbaggery typified by the now departed Stan Zemanek. Indeed, last year saw a clear Melbourne market rejection of an attempt by that radio station to pollute the local waters, a test run which has cost that companies share holders dearly. It was obvious from the start that Stan was the wrong shape for the spot, and there was general hilarity within media circles that a business that prides itself on smart management had made such an obvious and basic error. And then could not see the mistake for what it was and would not cut its losses after just a few months when the writing was on the wall. And even after being sacked, Stan was still trying to describe his disastrous Melbourne adventure as a success.

I am often asked what it is like to have 'so much power'. I blanch at the question. I am, obviously, aware that there is the potential for power to be exercised in the role I play, but it is not automatic that the muscle is flexed. It may be a measure of how naïve and irrelevant I am, or how limited my influence will be, but I do not think it is right for anyone, let alone a radio presenter, a broadcaster, especially one on the public payroll, to salivate over that role. I do not want to talk down the potential nor talk up the temptation. It is a credit to those individuals in particular on Melbourne commercial talk radio, that they have decided – and I suspect consciously – to turn their back on the

Sydney way, which I mention in passing has been mimicked in Adelaide and Perth as well.

Do we need safeguards against abuse of power in the media? We have them already. They need to be better enforced, and need to be seen to be better enforced -as with all law enforcement - so as to have the proper deterrent effect. But we are so accountable already I would dread another layer of bureaucracy.

The ultimate sanction, when it is all boiled down, is that we are, by virtue of the job we do, minor public figures and thus we jealously guard our reputations – or ought to. If we are careless with that, and prepared for reasons of greed or power to risk that one precious and indeed irreplaceable asset, then no other potential sanction will work. You only get one reputation, and once besmirched, it is next to impossible to rehabilitate. No amount of coverage on '*Australian Story*' nor an exclusive with the Weekend newspaper magazines will repair the damage you can do to yourself by abusing the public's trust.

Before I lose you all to the temptations of Lygon street, I want to say a few words about my employer. I started with the ABC in January 1989. I had been a solicitor in private practice and with Fitzroy Legal Service after that for seven years. I abandoned that career for a job with Radio National as presenter and producer of the *Law Report*. A few months after I started, there was a staff seminar, promoted as a glimpse of the future and an essential tool to cope with the new horizons of broadcasting. Some guru or other was flown into Melbourne to tell us about the new digital technology that was approaching, and how this would mean the imminent arrival of new platforms and delivery methods for radio and TV. We would see narrowcasting – as opposed to broadcasting – and there would be massive fragmentation of the industry. We were warned to prepare for change or risk losing our jobs. Cripes, I thought – I wonder if I can get out of this before it is too late.

Of course the reverse has happened. With the new technology, people feel more distant from their surrounds and the radio – local radio – offers them a link. As people are busier and busier, they have less time to concentrate on other media-to read papers and so on – and instead they are relying on radio as a method of staying informed whilst doing other things. You can work and listen – you can cook and listen, you can drive and listen. You can fight a bushfire and listen. In fact, if you are fighting a bushfire you are certain to keep listening.

This has made the ABC the most important media organisation in the nation. The ABC is the only way the nation can have a conversation with itself. No one else has the potential to reach just about every Australian household. Through more than fifty local radio stations, Radio National, JJJ, Classic FM, Radio Australia and the Parliamentary and News network, the nation is covered. ABC On line has one of the most used websites in the country. ABC TV is delivering more local programme to more viewers than ever before. ABC Radio is enjoying larger audiences than ever in its history. Excuse me if I point out that 774 ABC Melbourne – the station affectionately known as 3LO for so long – has more people listening across the week than ever before. The ABC combined radio audience in Melbourne is more than 22% of the total audience, and in the critical 55+ demographic more than one third of all radio listeners were using the ABC. This is an astonishing success, yet it is a story that has never been reported.

Yet when the organisation was in turmoil eighteen months or so ago, we were scrutinised like never before. An ABC in trouble is a front page yarn. An ABC kicking goals is a threat and not to be mentioned. I do not like to talk about ratings – they are a two edged sword and I am laughed at each time I repeat the ratings are but one measure of what we do. But as long as they are kept in perspective, they are one of many useful tools to read what the market is doing.

In that marketplace, our competitors are our loudest critics. Do I need to point out that they have a vested interest in bagging us? They stand to carve up our audiences – TV and radio – between them if they can weaken Aunty and reduce our output. Of course I do point out that we achieve our listening figures without massive cash giveaways, free trips overseas or endless sponsors prizes, with minimal marketing and little or no branding of major events. Any growth achieved in our audience almost has to have been achieved because people want to listen to our content, not because they think they will win some swank prize or tickets to the Grand Prix. And this has been achieved within a climate of shrinking budgets and fewer staff. Longer shifts, fewer people. More with less.

As the Senate considers media deregulation, the ABC needs to be able to stand and deliver, and if the new media environment is going to be subject to looser ownership rules – whatever they turn out to be – the position of the ABC in the market ought not be at the discretion of the Packers, Murdochs or Fairfax. Over and over the commercial barons have conceded that the ABC is a vital ingredient in a healthy media mix – now the government has to put its hand in its pocket and ensure our future is financially secure and healthy. If it is forced to do so by the Independents in the Senate, rather than because they recognise that it is a good thing to do in its own right, then so be it. As long as it happens somehow.

Clouding that prospect though is the perceptions of bias that linger against the ABC. We are accused of being biased by every government, Liberal or ALP, federal or state. They all make the same complaint. In the last state election, I was accused of being biased against the Greens... whilst the station overall was accused of going soft on the Greens. I am told that because I asked the Greens spokesperson some tough questions and applied the same rigour to them as is regularly applied to other aspiring political leaders, I was biased. Meanwhile the logging industry say they do not get a fair go either. And so on.

On the Iraq war effort, I have been an apologist for Mr Howard and transparent in my dislike for him, according to the feedback. I have been sucking up to the Prime Minister but I am a puppet of Simon Crean at the same time. Interestingly, the abusive correspondence is in the minority – most are people commenting about some aspect of what they heard, thanking us for it and suggesting where they would like it to be taken next. I ought to publish a collection of the torrent of letters and emails that descend upon the show.

What does all that diverse and sometimes passionate reaction mean? People hear what they want to. Their preconceptions are reinforced when they listen. It has taken years, but at last people listening [at least to mornings on 774 ABC Melbourne] realise that the way I see my job, I ask whoever is on the show the toughest questions I can think of. My job is to test their position as best I can. From one minute to the next I will argue the opposite point of view. My own beliefs are suspended. They do not matter. For the purpose of testing what a guest has to say, I think up the most awkward questions I can. If the guest is up to the task, they can answer impressively and persuade the audience of the strength of their point of view. The 'contest of ideas'. As often as not, the talkback callers add to the questions and the answers, thus providing a dialogue about whatever is the topic of the day. Anyone can join in – all you need is a telephone, a bit of time to invest in sitting on hold until it is your turn, and off you go. What can be more democratic than that?

The ideal form of talkback for me is when callers turn out to be the very people you would arrange an interview with if you could find them. If we are talking heroin injecting rooms – a reformed junkie calls in, followed by a woman who lost a daughter to the drug. If we are talking about the war, the caller on line 1 has a brother fighting in the gulf and the bloke on line 2 was in New Guinea in World War Two and thinks not enough is done for veterans, neither then nor now, line 3 is an Iraqi refugee who came here

after the last gulf war and so on. They tell their personal stories and connect it to the policy issue. It beats talking to politicians and academics all day every time. We are exposed to ideas and people we otherwise could never meet, whose stories would not be told.

I also need to address the other FAQ, frequently asked question. Do we screen callers? I understand it is now common and accepted practice elsewhere but we do not do it. We reserve the right to warn off the mad and the bad, the poets and conspiracy theorists and those that will give the lawyers an ulcer. But we do not tell people that they can not go to air because they are saying the wrong thing. If we are taking calls about the environment, we do not want someone talking about parliamentary salaries or health insurance and so on. I understand it is now regarded as acceptable in the USA in talk radio to stage manage the calls – after all, the talkback component of a show is too valuable a commodity to leave to chance. To my way of thinking that is wrong and a denial of what it is that is the very strength of the medium in the first place. But that is America, anything can happen and it ought not surprise us.

Before finishing, I briefly want to talk about the war coverage. There has been a huge reaction to the events in the gulf. We have presented intense coverage of the military and other aspects of the gulf war. We have had very little criticism, although some of what has been delivered is very personal. So be it – that comes with the territory. It is an indication of how wide the rift is in Australia and how certain the opposite sides are that they are the one's that are correct. The other issue raised is how much time is spent on the war coverage and how so many other local issues are going unreported in the meantime. Some callers and letter and email writers think we have done too much on the war – most think it appropriate. If there is one consistent request it is for more depth in our analysis. I have had literally hundreds of people writing to me or sending emails asking for this that or the other theme to be taken up on the show for further scrutiny. It is just not possible to do it all – but people obviously feel that they want to be heard, both for and against the government's position. It is also my opinion that the existence and extent of usage of the Internet has changed the information circuit for everyone, and now newspapers, television – both cable and free to air – and even that most immediate medium of all, the radio, is a secondary news source. With the websites being open to everyone, you can now moderate your own coverage of global events, surf sites from the Jerusalem Post to Al Jazeera, the *Guardian* to the *New York Post*, the Pentagon to the PLO. After you have looked at them all in rapid succession, you decide what to believe and what emphasis to put on the different versions of the truth presented to you. And then there are the blogs – the internet diaries, purporting to present a personal account of unfolding events, The world will never be the same. The media will never be the same.

Now it is a brave man who stands between an audience and their dinner and I have no intention of delaying any of the far more interesting and pressing conversations you will have over dinner, so thank you all for listening, I am happy to answer questions, and good night.