

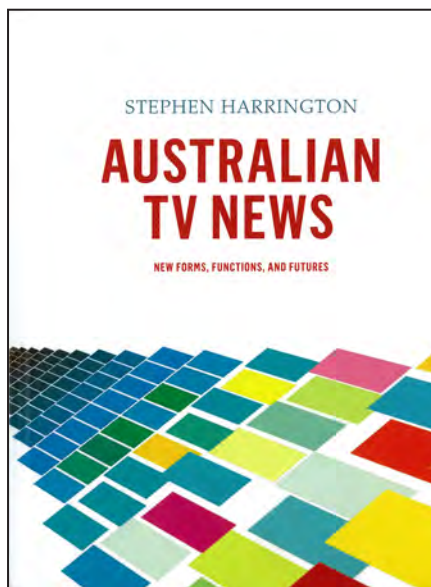
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A foretaste of TV's future

Australian Television News: New forms, functions, and futures, by Stephen Harrington, Bristol & Chicago: Intellect Press, 2013. 195pp, ISBN 9781841507170

THIS is a deliberately provocative book designed to address what the author sees as the main tropes of journalism studies and to redefine TV news journalism in a new digital age. It is built on three Australian programme case studies – the Network Seven morning show *Sunrise*, the Network Ten late evening conversational *The Panel* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's comedic *The Chaser's War on Everything*.

Harrington conducted in-depth interviews with 10 programme producers. He also conducted semi-structured interviews in focus groups with 45 people who had watched the programmes regularly. His interest is in how 'news' has been received by



a selected audience. More broadly, he wants to challenge the validity of the distinctions between tabloid and broadsheet journalism in professional and academic conversation and sees the distinctions as a barrier to understanding how new types of 'journalisms' are arresting the alleged decline of the craft.

The book begins with a spirited defence of entertainment values in TV news shows by long-time and popular *Sunrise* presenter David Koch. On the second page of the first chapter he lays out a table of 15 words each associated with tabloid (popular/soft/trash/personal/private/etc) and broadsheet (quality/hard/value/political/public/etc).

He appeals for a far more nuanced analysis of popular culture and its productions and an acknowledgment of the uses and abuses of their remit to inform and to entertain. He is not the first to take up the cudgels in defence of public taste. Catherine Lumby and many scholars of popular culture (including a subset of cultural studies academics from a feminist perspective) have done the same in the past 20 or more years. Nor would he be telling many TV news journalists something they don't know already. The flow backwards and forwards of television news and current affairs journalists between the public (ABC and SBS) and private sectors shows how much respect many in the industry have for both sides of the industry.

Reporters and producers from *Four Corners* (ABC) and *60 Minutes* (Nine) both attempt to balance the serious (content) and the popular (ratings) every time they write a script. In my experience at Seven and the ABC, TV news reporters are equally concerned to tell a good story in the most popular way.

To some extent, Harrington has set up a false divide—which may have existed more virulently in the 1960s and 1970s because of the Reithian tradition inherited from the BBC—but didn't need it to introduce the main thesis of his book: that new kinds of

comedic, conversational and satirical programmes are engaging TV news audiences. So are YouTube and Twitter. News sources are diversifying by the month. He also doesn't need to deny that traditional quality journalism is under deep structural stress. It is ironic that just as Harrington's book was being published, a similar study, by two Portland University journalism academics, also based on qualitative interviews with newsroom producers, appeared in the highly respected journal *Media, Culture and Society*. The study showed how six local TV stations in Portland, Oregon had lost resources. The result they said, was:

a multitasked news staff forced to provide fast-turnaround for multiple platforms, while seriously weakening investigative reporting, the quality of news production, and the utility of local news for the community. (Higgins-Dobney & Sussman, 2013)

There is no doubt that TV newsrooms in Australian cities are undergoing similar changes with similar effects.

Nor does Harrington need to deny the widespread distortions of TV news agendas in the highly competitive marketplace. A good current example is the obscene race to secure the most trivial interviews with

Australia's convicted drug-smuggler Schapelle Corby in Bali. The Nine Network, having spent years suggesting Corby's innocence, has now lost her exclusivity to Seven. A senior Uniting Church pastor, Tim Costello, was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as being told by then Nine Network owner Kerry Packer that he didn't believe in her innocence either:

And Kerry told me that this was how current affairs TV works—the audience was totally convinced of her innocence and so the network goes with what the public feels passionate about. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2014)

Excesses such as this example are partly responsible for the bad reputation and lack of trust many viewers have for news programmes. The Portland study reported the paradox that surveys of US viewers' opinions showed that 78 percent of Americans still get their daily news from local TV stations, but only 21 percent of Americans felt they had either 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in TV news. The same paradox could very well be true in Australia. This may be a key explanation for why US shows such as Jon Stewart's satirical *The Daily Show*, which Harrington mentions, have thrived with audiences disillusioned with their

traditional news. This may explain the success of the three programmes Harrington investigates. More could have been analysed along these lines.

Harrington's book is a very readable attack on the TV news status quo and the way it is regarded in academe. It suggests some reasons why the popularity of comedic and satirical alternatives have been doing so well for the past half-decade. However, it is not so much a review of the big news networks as an indication of where we might be heading in the future.

Reference

Higgins-Dobney, C. & Sussman, G. (2013). The growth of TV news, the demise of the journalism profession. *Media, Culture and Society*, 35(7), 847-864.