

4. Murdoch's flagship: *The Australian* newspaper two decades on

COMMENTARY

The power of the print media lies not simply in its capacity to attack opponents, but in its unwillingness to grant timely or sufficient right of reply in its Op-Ed pages. Perhaps the greater regulation advocated by Finkelstein would begin to change this. Amid all the restructuring and the rivalry, the opportunity for a more comprehensive review of journalistic regulation, broached by Finkelstein, may well slip away in the cross currents of the Convergence Review, the prospect of new media mergers and acquisitions, precarious federal parliamentary politics, and the turmoil of the broadsheets themselves. Yet it is a debate that we have to have; like our protracted debt crisis, it cannot be postponed indefinitely.

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WHEN ABC historian Ken Inglis devoted a retrospective article to *The Australian* in 1989, at the time of its first 25 years, it was neither a panegyric nor a personal tribute to its founder, Rupert Murdoch, by then an American citizen living and working abroad. But neither was it a damning critique of all that News Limited appeared to stand for. For those journalists who had lived through the turmoil of 1975 on the national daily, many, with long and angry memories, this may have seemed like betrayal. Yet *The Australian*, had, by 1989, developed a number of strengths, recovered its reputation and achieved renewed recognition from the public and working journalists.

It was never an easy task to write about a newspaper in depth, as I did (2008), especially one which has attracted greater expectation and enmity than most in its relatively short history. *The Australian*, after all, was a distinctive Murdoch broadsheet, not merely another tabloid, and one upon which Murdoch staked his claim to political influence and respectability. An innate capacity for ‘kingmaking’, inherited from his father Keith Murdoch, saw *The Australian* back a diverse group of politicians, starting with ‘Black Jack’ McEwen, then Gough Whitlam and subsequently, Whitlam’s arch political rival, Jo Bjelke-Petersen. The McEwen interregnum of December 1967, at a time of conservative party divisions, was itself a reminder of the potential influence of the newspaper in any leadership crisis or power vacuum. Even so, it was no guarantee of proprietorial success. The Whitlam debacle, the ‘Jo for Canberra’ fiasco, even Rudd’s more recent fall from grace are stark reminders of this. What *The Australian* can do, in the case of minority governments, such as the Gillard ALP government, is to wage protracted war on their legitimacy.

On reading and rereading *The Australian*’s past and present editorials, one perceives eerie parallels between its anti-Gillard stance and the intensity of its sustained 1974-75 campaigns, this in spite of our relative economic security. There are striking historical continuities in the way the paper goes about its business, this despite the absence of an obvious replacement for Gillard Labor, or a Malcolm Fraser waiting in the wings, as occurred in 1975. For the likes of even Murdoch, Abbott appears too erratic and ideologically unpredictable, while Turnbull is too centrist and unorthodox. Kingmaking without a king?

It is this relentless and personalised style of critical reportage which has earned the Murdoch press renewed political hostility in Australia, at a time when the focus of public and media concern continues to be on the criminal excesses of his London-based tabloids—papers, which even the irascible Max Newton as *The Australian*’s first editor, labelled ‘the worst journalism in the world’ Should we not be relieved and consoled by the more familiar antics of our *Australian*? Visually, it remains an attractive broadsheet, more so than its commercial rivals, and one which continues to cater for a wide audience on a great range of topics? There are still the arts pages, as noted by Inglis in 1989, which now benefit from colour production on weekdays as well as weekends; the weekday professional supplements designed to boost its flagging circulation; the finance pages, now broader in their coverage and buttressed by the *Wall Street Journal*; even the Op-Ed pages, so important for a national

paper, still crackle with opinion, though of a more predictable and personal kind than was once the case.

Critics of the Murdoch press, however, including David McKnight (2012), have recently reminded us that *The Australian*, for all its strengths, has a darker purpose, bent since the 1970s on reshaping its early journalism in its owner's reactionary image, with assistance from his editors, of whom Chris Mitchell is the latest incarnation. Yet Mitchell's contemporary influence remains exceptional on a paper littered with editorial casualties over the first two decades of its existence. Has Murdoch found his man? The only comparable figure to Mitchell is Les Hollings who, as *The Australian's* editor, then editor-in-chief, enjoyed a remarkable tenure during the 1970s and 1980s when the paper faced challenges comparable to those of today. It was left to Hollings to steer Murdoch's flagship, without great journalistic experience or distinction, through the post-Whitlam years and a recession, towards gradual commercial recovery. Will Mitchell be able to emulate his achievement?

In terms of editorial personality, Mitchell is a more recognisable News Limited type than was Hollings and closer to the likes of a Max Newton or Owen Thomson in his larrikin edge and brash anti-intellectualism. It is worth remembering also that Hollings had to take the paper through a technological revolution during the 1980s of the same scale and intensity as at present, with large redundancies occurring across its printing and journalistic workforce. One striking difference from the present, mentioned by reviewers of my own book, was the high level of resistance to restructuring offered by print journalists as well as printers at that time, in spite of the prevailing economic recession. Today's more muted reaction to downsizing is a consequence of declining union membership perhaps, but also the anti-union legacy of 1975 and Murdoch's more pervasive media power. According to Robert Manne (2011), the paper still has its internal critics, but the tenure of its current editor and the speed with which News Limited announced its recent redundancies, confirms the ascendancy of an executive culture which, by the 1980s, had become renowned for union-bashing and an aggressive international brand of Cold War politics. The difference between then and now is that *The Australian* of the last century enjoyed periods of liberal editorship under the likes of Adrian Deamer in the late 1960s and early 1970s and David Armstrong as well as Paul Kelly during the 1980s and 1990s. Can we hope for such a balancing act in any post-Mitchell editorial scenario, or are we, as Robert Manne alleges, in the firmer grip of an 'unusual ideologue' and a 'cultish' publication'?

Subsequently, Manne argues, there were new enemies for *The Australian* to oppose during the first decade of the 21st century. Prominent among these are the Greens, emerging as the third force in Australian politics. Previously, *The Australian* paid scant attention to minor parties, preferring to report and lobby only the major parties. But Manne shows that *The Australian* has sufficiently demonised the Greens for their then leader, Bob Brown, to coin the term ‘hate media’ and join the push for greater regulation of its journalistic attacks. Behind the anti-Greens reportage lies the larger scenario of climate change, and while Murdoch may have professed to have ‘seen the light’, as he once did on the need for government intervention in the economy, his national paper has showed no sign of reviving the investigative work which characterised its early features on the threatened Australian environment. In broadening its attacks to include science writers and publicists, and airing the dubious claims of climate sceptics, *The Australian* has gone into reverse and done us a national disservice, at a time when public information about science is urgently required rather than repetitive and lopsided commentary.

For the most part, however, the recent charges levelled at *The Australian* by Manne and others—jingoism and distortion in its war reportage, historical and cultural polemics over the nature of indigenous dispossession, the accuracy or otherwise of the ABC and the limitations of Labor leadership, all have precedents in the newspaper’s earlier files. Most recently, with the publication of Finkelstein’s Independent Media Inquiry report, we have seen a concerted campaign by *The Australian* against its academic critics, many of them experienced journalists, who appear to agree with the thrust of Manne’s critique to the point of wishing to place greater regulatory restraints on the Murdoch press including its outspoken national agenda-setter.

The power of the print media lies not simply in its capacity to attack opponents, but in its unwillingness to grant timely or sufficient right of reply in its Op-Ed pages. Perhaps the greater regulation advocated by Finkelstein would begin to change this. In the current turmoil of the broadsheet media, one looks instead to Fairfax journalists for a more considered perspective. The two major groups have engaged in memorable duels in the past, with *The Australian* loud in triumph on behalf of its proprietor. Most recently, however, Fairfax has made capital over the British tabloid scandal and the Leveson Inquiry, alleging subsequently (Chenoweth, 2012) that News Limited newspapers are to be ‘cast adrift’ from its more profitable entertainment base in a newly created News Publishing division.

It is of course the fear of imminent extinction, either at the hands of Murdoch or the economy, that drove *The Australian* editors throughout its past, but Mitchell, in reply to Fairfax (Mitchell paints brighter picture, 2012) remains upbeat about both a print and digital future. *The Australian's* heavy investment in a new group web site, estimated at as much as \$30 million. by Chenoweth, along with its recent erection of a pay wall for its online sales, confirms its awareness of changing economic realities, albeit couched in familiar anti-Fairfax rhetoric. Mitchell claims his online *Australian* is outpacing the *Financial Review* on account of its breadth and readability. Amid all the restructuring and the rivalry, the opportunity for a more comprehensive review of journalistic regulation, broached by Finkelstein, may well slip away in the cross currents of the Convergence Review, the prospect of new media mergers and acquisitions, precarious federal parliamentary politics, and the turmoil of the broadsheets themselves. Yet it is a debate that we have to have; like our protracted debt crisis, it cannot be postponed indefinitely. And when the next 25 years of *The Australian* newspaper comes to be written, in print or online, it promises to be as absorbing and dramatic as the first.

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