

The 'untouchables' era

Whatever happened to the days of the social sleuth? Things have really changed in the past 25 years of the Papua New Guinea press.



By **JAMES PINDER**

To be absolutely honest, it had to change, or really go down the gurgler through the challenges issued by radio and the idiot box (TV). Of the three media in Papua New Guinea, TV has lost its sting and novelty and, if anything, has slipped backwards in quality of content.

Due to lack of financing by the national Government, radio in the form of the National Broadcasting Commission no longer has the power, authority and veracity that it enjoyed in the late 1960s and early 1970s when it was under the wings of the Australian administration.

But fortunately the format of what is news, what you are able to talk about or write about and what you can't, has changed for the better in all three media.

In 1966, when I returned from Vietnam as a radio correspondent, I was suspended by the Australian Broadcasting Control Board for three weeks because in an interview on the Macquarie Broadcasting Service I had the temerity to speak about the high incidence of venereal disease in Vietnam in the human population. In those days such a thing was taboo — it was OK for me to speak about VD in cows, sheep, horses etc, but not humans.

Similarly in the press, a type of 'Big Brother Is Watching' attitude was ever present. One did not dare criticise the dealings of the parliamentarians, unless, of course, you worked for the Communist Party *Tribune* or the *Sydney Morning Herald* or *Melbourne Truth*.

Nowadays, not a newspaper issue goes by unless there is at least one story of misdemeanours or corruption or a sex scandal involving politicians. Certainly, under no circumstances did you utter one word against either the royal family or the clergy — they were the 'untouchables' as though by some divine or canonical law they had become the Anointed Ones. To do so amounted to high treason, punishable by being hung, drawn and quartered or excommunicated. Or, worse still, by getting the sack.

To get any news about the Catholic Church you had to read the *Catholic*

Weekly, for Church of England, the *Anglican*, and so on ad nauseam. By the same token, those same Church newspapers certainly did not give any free plugs to other religions. Just to point out the changes, this very issue of the *Times of Papua New Guinea* carries a rather enlightening article on the Mormons — the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Then of course, there were the social pages for the ladies (and in many cases, I use that term very loosely). Here we were subjected to week after week of matches, hatches and dispatches with the same old photographs of Mrs Marmalade Fortescue-Smythe sipping a cocktail or Mrs Cara Brett-Hall wearing the latest creation in hats at the races.

Woe betide any would-be intrepid news sleuth who ventured to write the actual truth about a social event. Better that he should never have been born. One such case involved yours truly who was sent off on his one and only social reporting assignment to the 'wedding of the year' in a country town in the Riverina area of New South Wales.

This (and I kid you not) is the story he filed upon his return from that earth-shattering event: *The bride wore some kind of white thing that left her pimply face sticking out one end and her skinny legs out the other. The groom wore his usual look of imbecility. The happy couple anticipate a blessed event within three months.* To this day I see no reason why the editor did not print same. After all, he was only reporting the facts and he was the man on the spot.

Compare that kind of attitude to today's *Post-Courier* and *Times* women's sections where every issue features stories of single mothers, pre-marital sex, contraceptives and so on. The bane of all editors was always the advertiser — a huge one ton vat of boiling oil hanging by a thread over their heads if they dared offend 'he who scratches my back'.

Today, modern newspaper bosses couldn't give a monkey's cuss about the sponsor's product, and are quite prepared to tell the advertiser to rack off and go ahead and print the story.

Here's one such from the *Spectator*, arguably the most staid magazine in Britain. The item comes from Enlightened Tobacco Company under this headline:

THEY'RE EVERY BIT AS GOOD AS OTHER CIGARETTES AND
EVERY BIT AS BAD. DEATH IS NO JOKE.

These cigarettes are made from the finest blends of luxury Virginia tobacco.

So they taste just like any of the other high quality cigarettes available.

And, just like any of these other cigarettes, they can kill you.

Tobacco companies generally shy away from any discussion of the health risks associated with smoking; their only comment usually being 'No comment'.

The Enlightened Tobacco Company, however, is different. A cigarette manufacturer that is actually willing to talk about cigarettes.

Of the brands currently available, those that advertise tend to use stylised

photography together with a colour easily identified with the pack. This retreat into the abstract is, no doubt, partly due to the stringent guidelines enforced on tobacco advertising. But doesn't it strike you as ironic that very often the only way to tell what these stylish images are trying to sell you is by the health warning at the bottom? And it is not just the advertising that is guilty of giving the wrong impression. There are the names of the cigarettes themselves. A quick glance at any tobacco contents shelf will show you just how many of them manage to conjure up an image of something expensive, stylish, sophisticated or exotic. Not so Death.

The outside of our pack disguises what's on the inside. Both the name and the pack should leave no doubt as to the risks you face. You may miss the health warning on some cigarettes but, like death itself, ours is unavoidable. Surely though, we're being a little hypocritical? If we really want you to buy our cigarettes, why do we seem to go out of our way to warn you against smoking them? We believe it's the only honest thing to do.

As far as we're concerned, we have a responsibility to remind you of the dangers. Like, for instance, compared to a non-smoker, a smoker is more likely to develop lung cancer, more likely to develop laryngeal cancer, more likely to develop heart disease, more likely to develop bronchitis and more likely to develop emphysema.

In fact the list of diseases that can be associated with smoking is as long as a queue in a doctor's waiting room. Doesn't it seem reasonable, therefore, that if we are contributing to the problem, we should somehow be contributing to the solution? That's precisely why the Enlightened Tobacco Company has made a start by giving ten per cent of all its pre-tax profits to non-vivisection cancer charities. Not that you should expect a miracle cure. The best way to avoid lung cancer, and indeed all the other smoking-related diseases, is still the same. Don't smoke.

But if you do choose to continue, despite the health risks, you've still got one more choice to make. And that is, what brand to smoke. Should you really choose one that refuses to tell the truth and has never admitted a link between smoking and ill health?

You know as well as anyone that it isn't wise to smoke. But that's no reason to allow cigarette companies to treat you like an idiot. Such commentaries can cost newspapers a lot of revenue. But in these days of factual reporting, who really cares?

A case of, 'It is better that one man should die for the good of the nation.'

☐ **JAMES PINDER** is the alter ego of Paul Cox, the Pinder's Watch columnist of the *Times of Papua New Guinea*.