

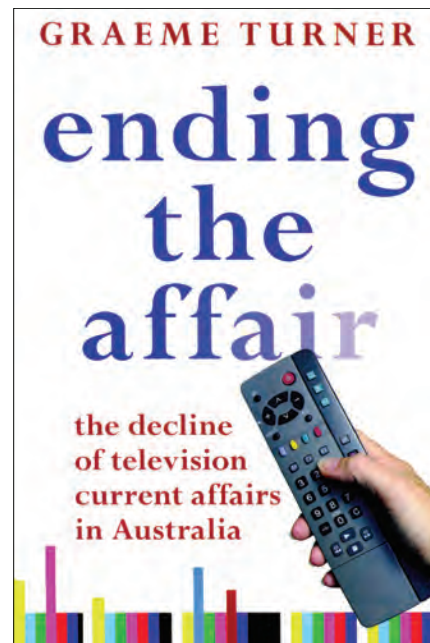
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Current affairs – endangered and facing uncertain digital future

Ending the Affair: The decline of television current affairs in Australia, by Graeme Turner. Sydney, UNSW Press, 2005, 173pp. ISBN 0 86840 864 6.

THIS IS a most important book, especially for those concerned about the journalistic mission and its interplay with the effective functioning of democracy. The central question posed by Graeme Turner is whether there is a future for ‘serious’ current affairs, serious as opposed to the downmarket or tabloid fare which viewers are being treated to on both sides of the Tasman.

Turner is in no doubt as to the significance of this question. He is an academic who has made a detailed study over many years of the changes



in current affairs programming in Australia. He holds to a principled position on why current affairs matters:

The value of an independent, reliable and ethical means of interrogating the news of the day, while providing informed and expert comment, is fundamental to an open democratic society (p. 156).

His analysis of the situation in Australia finds the reality woefully short of this ideal. Content focuses on sport, personality, celebrity gossip and consumer affairs, with the corollary that

the notion that current affairs should follow and explain the daily news has all but evaporated. Political coverage, notably the extended political interview, is no longer seen as a fundamental media responsibility, at least by the commercial television networks, which hold a dominant share of the ratings.

The causes of this phenomenon are less clear cut. Much is put down to the effects of increased competition since the mid-1980s, with changes in channel ownership, and the high prices paid putting a premium on the pursuit of advertisers and hence ratings.

But social and cultural changes are also given their due, with audiences said to be turned off by traditional news and current affairs formats. The response of the broadcasters has been to bring more and more entertainment values into their journalism and to push further and further down market in an attempt to stem the fall in ratings, or indeed to reverse the trend.

Here we come to the central dilemma posed by Turner's book. His contention is that the move downmarket has not resulted in higher ratings, indeed the opposite—going downmarket has simply led to beached ratings. Implicit in his commentary is the belief that there is an audience for the more serious fare, for

stories and analysis that deal with the issues that impact society. If only the broadcasters would be bold enough to take this route, audiences would come. The notion of audience disaffection with the current offerings and hankering for something meatier has been mirrored in New Zealand with the call in early 2006 by 32 eminent persons for less trivia and more programming that reflects the dynamics in our society.

Yet at the same time, Turner points out that there have been several unsuccessful attempts by the commercial networks to deliver more serious content and quality public affairs. He cites programmes such as *Page One* (from Channel Ten) and *Witness* (Channel 7) as attempts to move upmarket but notes their failure to hold audiences. The response of the broadcasters was to reject this approach and revert to a more populist agenda (as an extreme response, when *Page One* failed, Ten turned to *Hard Copy*, an unashamedly tabloid American format).

While the commercial networks have virtually surrendered the journalistic mission to the pursuit of ratings, Turner rightly expects more from the national public broadcaster, the ABC, funded to the tune of some A\$800 million by the taxpayer and with a core constitutional responsibility to deliver public affairs pro-

gramming and to report the nation to itself. Unfortunately Turner concludes that pressure from governments and critics, in the form of threats to cut funding and allegations of bias, has reduced the potency of the ABC's coverage of current affairs. He declares that 'the once formidable ABC news and current affairs machine is now running on empty', instancing the fact that there are now fewer investigative stories than three decades ago, and bemoaning a situation where political interviews are ritual encounters bereft of expository material providing a context or springboard for such occasions.

Given such a gloomy analysis, are there any signs of hope for the future? Surprisingly enough, one such portent can be found in the United States, where Turner cites research showing that audiences for National Public Radio—a network with a commitment to traditional notions of quality and fact-based reporting—have increased by 64 percent over the past five years. He might equally have drawn attention to the steady audiences for National Radio in New Zealand, enabling it to claim that it is the number one station nationally in terms of reach.

Indeed this book should resonate deeply with all students of the mediascape in New Zealand. We have seen a very similar change in the na-

ture of television current affairs programming, notably since deregulation and competition in the late 1980s. Viewers of the rival so-called current affairs shows at 7pm—*Close-Up* and *Campbell Live*—will have observed how few items have any connection to the news of the day, and how even fewer shed any light on the fundamental questions affecting society. The weekly programmes—*Sunday, 60 Minutes* and *20/20*—are little better, frequently obsessed with looking back rather than forward and overworking crime and personality stories.

Again, as in Australia, we should be looking to the state broadcaster TVNZ to be leading the way in providing quality current affairs, as now enshrined in the TVNZ Charter. Yet there is surely a shortfall here, with no long-form, hour-long one-topic programme (the ABC at least has *Four Corners*) and no replacement as yet for the axed studio interview programme. Some would argue that the public broadcaster, reinforced in its public remit by the Charter and the Labour reforms since 1999, has simply failed to distinguish itself adequately from its commercial competitors, especially in the crucial area of current affairs.

Looking ahead, the whole question of whether traditional current affairs is an endangered species, a

question that Turner and this reviewer would agree is vital to the effective functioning of democracy, needs to be set within the emerging context of the digital future. When there are myriads of channels to choose from, when linear television has given way to video on demand, and when the younger generation of digital natives are trawling the internet or relying on comedy or satirical shows for their knowledge of the world, how can the journalistic mission continue to be fulfilled? There are no easy answers to this question, but Turner's book provides an exceptionally useful analysis to fuel the debate, a debate that must be had, with as wide a range of participants as possible.

It would seem appropriate that the final word on this topic be given to one of the true giants of current affairs reporting, Ed Murrow, as celebrated in the recent film *Good Night, Good Luck*. His reflection on television in 1958 remains utterly apposite today:

The instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes and it can even inspire, but it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.

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Not the perfect solution, but at least some hope

Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World, by Hugh Miles. London: Abacus, 2005, 438pp. ISBN 0349118078

The Al Jazeera Phenomenon, by Mohamed Zayani (ed). London: Pluto Press, 2005, 222pp. ISBN 0745323332.

AT THE beginning of this century, the Israeli author David Grossman wrote:

In the impossible relationships that exist in the Middle East each competing ideology has for years appeared to suffer from almost complete blindness to reality's complexity. Each is certain that the other is not telling the truth (Grossman, 2001).

One of the hopes attached to Al Jazeera is that it will introduce a level of objective, rational debate to Mid-