

## **Australian based foreign correspondents and their sources**

**By Alan Knight**

They (other correspondents) tend to pick the eyes out of our stuff, and then add their own colour and ingredients to make better copy. In fact, we do too. We go around in circles to an extent. Every morning I listen to ABC's AM program, which is a bit of an agenda setter. I also read the *Sydney Morning Herald*. We pick the best of theirs and they pick the best of ours. It's a kind of incestuous relationship that we all have. (Taylor 2001)

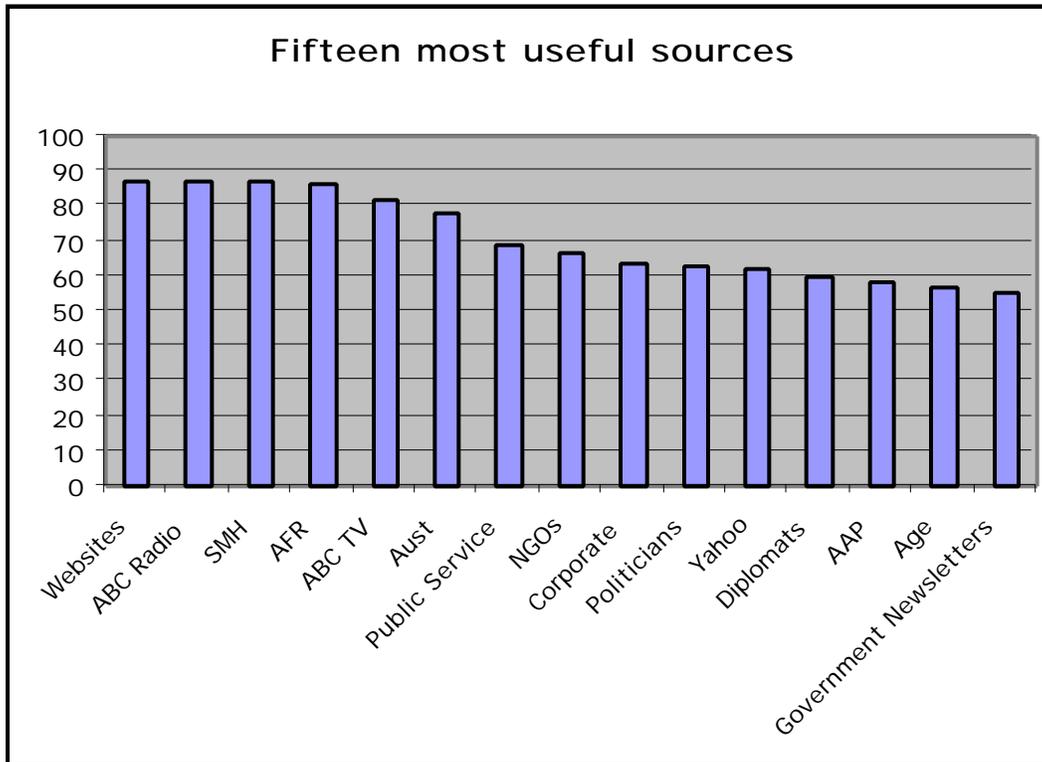
Veteran Agence France Press reporter, Jack Taylor

Australia is described to the world by foreign correspondents. But where do they get their information from?

Foreign correspondents based in Australia have rated web sites as their most useful source of information. ABC Radio was rated as the equally most useful source. ABC Television was rated third most useful. Quality newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (rated equal first) . *The Australian Financial Review* (rated second) and the *Australian* (rated fourth) continued to be a major, if not the most important source, for correspondents. Correspondents noted the importance of newspaper linked websites as accessible, updated sources of "branded" information.

Primary sources; public servants (rated fifth), non government organisations (rated 6<sup>th</sup>), corporations (rated 7<sup>th</sup>) and politicians (rated 8<sup>th</sup>) rated highly but less so than the leading news outlets.

The search engine, Yahoo (rated 9<sup>th</sup>), was seen as more useful than Diplomats (rated 10<sup>th</sup>), the domestic Australian newsagency, Australian Associated Press (rated 11<sup>th</sup>), the *Age* news paper (rated 12<sup>th</sup>), government newsletters (rated 13<sup>th</sup>) CNN (rated 14<sup>th</sup>) or the BBC World Service (rated 15<sup>th</sup>). This result, combined with the reliance on web sites, indicated the growing importance of the interactive Internet as a source of information for journalists. It suggests that correspondents were becoming less reliant on news agencies, the hard wired, international news distributors. This result may pose questions about the longer term future of these wire services which retail news and offer media release distribution to other news organisations.



## Sources

Journalists' sources can be both direct and quotable (eg: NGO's, politicians and corporations) or indirect and of unseen yet significant influence. These other sources can include other competing news outlets, creating "incestuous" news cycles.

Identified sources are supposed to be the readers' key to news reporting. They are designed to provide the context for the story, by allowing the reader to assess its contents.

According to *The Reuters Handbook for Journalists*:

..every Reuters story must be clearly and explicitly sourced for two reasons: to enable subscribers to form their own judgement of its credibility and to protect our reputation if a story is challenged.

Any contentious statement must be rigorously sourced . . . A subscriber should never have to ask of any element in a story: "How does Reuters know that? (Macdowall 1991 pp173/174)

Journalists often argue that sources are determined by the topics which make up the story. However, sources perceived to be prominent, sometimes supported by public relations operations, often create newsworthiness in their own right. While attribution to sources was presented in style guides as a yardstick of credibility, it was clear that there was usually an unstated agenda about which sources were credited and which are ignored. As van Dijk observed, not all sources were regarded as equally credible:

There is a hierarchy of sources and associated degrees of their reliability. Elite sources are not only considered more newsworthy [as news actors] but also more reliable as observers and opinion formulators (Teun van Dyke) .

This study sought to investigate not only sources quoted by correspondents but also consider those regarded as reliable enough to inform story creation.

## **Methodology**

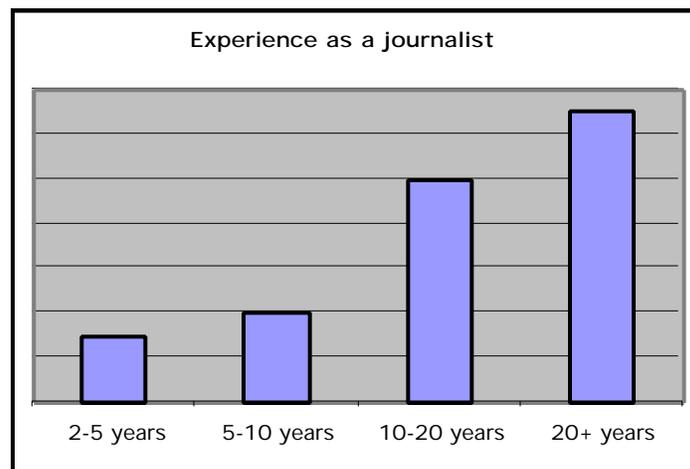
To investigate correspondents' stated use of sources, a computerised questionnaire created by Central Queensland University's Centre for Social Science Research, was sent by email to members of the Foreign Correspondents Association of Australia. The Association executive decided to back the survey and as a result thirty correspondents

responded. Their answers were lodged on a university based website, allowing results to be incorporated on a spreadsheet and analysed. Respondents were asked to rate sources as very useful, useful and not useful. Responses were scored and tabulated.

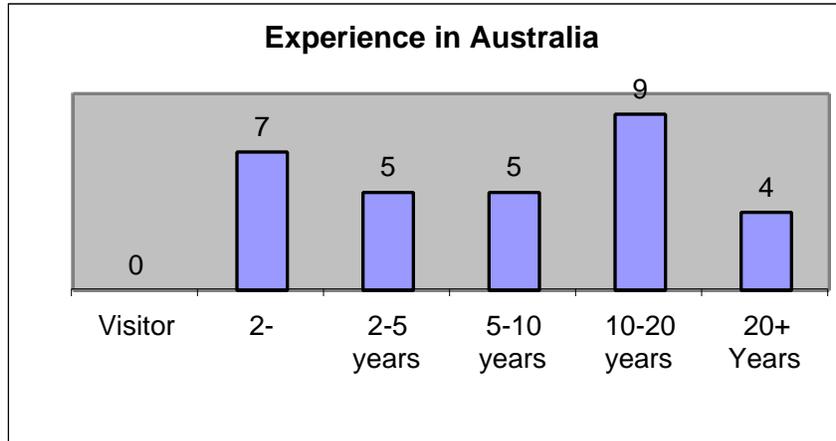
The questionnaire methodology was based on studies by Szende (1986) and Knight (1995). (The graphs included in this article are intended for illustration only and not scaled for comparison). Survey responses were contextualised by transcribed interviews conducted either in person or via a telephone recorder.

Thirty replies from Australian based correspondents were received to the 2001 survey.

Two thirds of the respondents were male.



More than two thirds were more than thirty-five years old and had been journalists for more than a decade. More than half worked for newspapers or news agencies. They were highly educated with seventy four percent having university degrees. Forty one percent claimed post graduate degrees.



## Websites and the Internet

We are now a major source of news and information for millions of people across the nation and around the world. More than that, we've begun to see where we fit in, in the journalistic landscape: More timely than print, more in-depth than broadcast, more interactive than either.

Rich Jaroslovsky's Presidential speech at the Online News Association's annual conference at Berkeley, Calif., Oct. 26-27:

The reliance on the web by Australian based correspondents indicated a shift in reporting practices by this elite, but admittedly computer literate group of journalists. The Internet with its access to original, identifiable sources, online news papers and media release services was preferred as a source to the news agencies which have dominated international news for more than a century.

Sixteen years ago, a study by Andrew Szende found that ASEAN journalists saw that the four big international news agencies (Reuters, Associated Press, UPI and AFP) as being among the most useful six sources. The two Hong Kong based news paper magazines, the *Asian Wall street Journal*, and the *Far Eastern Economic Review* were respectively second and fourth highest. (Szende 1986 pp 19/20.)

In a study by the author of Australian journalists in Cambodia in 1993, correspondents rated diplomats as most useful, followed by the weekly magazine, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, BBC Radio, the Thai newspapers and Radio Australia. Two of the big four international news agencies, Reuters and Agence France Press (AFP) were also in the top ten, reflecting their extensive use by the Australian correspondents' employers. The *Asian Wall Street Journal* and BBC Television were also rated highly. (Knight 2001 pp99/100.)

However more recently, in the United States, the *Annual Survey of Media in the Wired World*, noted that Internet usage by American journalists was rapidly rising, with journalists using the net for article research, increasing from 66 percent in 1995 to 92percent in 2000. 73 percent used the net to find media releases:

Ninety eight percent of the journalists responding this year say that they're online at least once a day to check email and spend 15 hours a week reading and sending email. ...Email now matches the phone as a first choice method of working with sources, and

there's no question that journalists are engaging in more dialogue with readers via email. (Middleberg, Ross. 2000 p 1)

In the author's current study, websites emerged as the most highly rated source of information for Australian based correspondents. (One might expect this result in a survey conducted by email). Even so, it was clear that gathering news from identified sites had become a routine part of an international reporter's work. *China Radio* Australian Pacific Correspondent, Yang Pin Yuan, said that the Internet was his first stop in his daily check of Australian media:

I start the day by switching on the computer to see what has happened overnight. I start to read the newspapers. I spend an hour on this each day and then I follow up by telephone. I am reading the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Australian*, the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* every day. It is difficult for me to say which is the best. They are all generally good but sometimes a certain paper is better on certain stories. The *Sydney Morning Herald* has a good online edition, which sometimes provides more background information than the paper itself. I go out three or four times a week to attend media events. Sydney is quite a busy place so we often get news to report first hand.

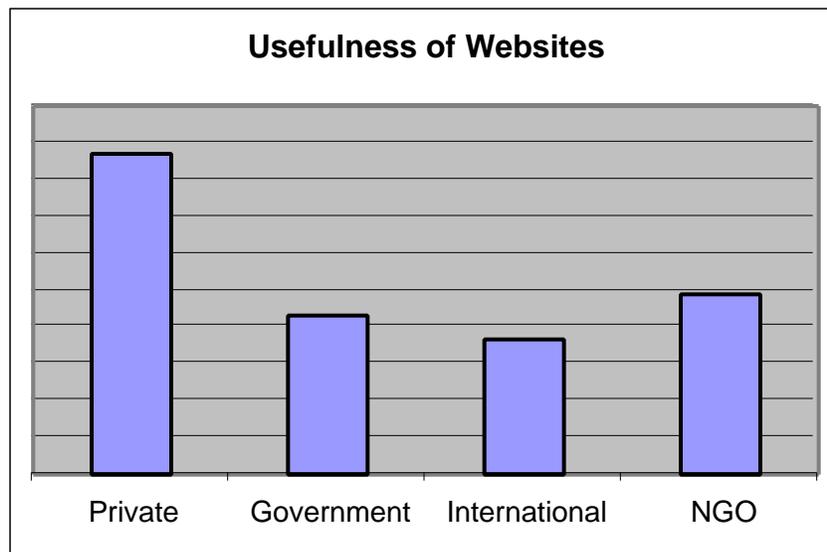
**Knigh:** What has been your biggest story in 2001?

The Tampa crisis is more interesting to the Chinese people and the government than even the elections. China has been fighting illegal immigrants too you know. We have had problems with

Chinese immigrants who wanted to enter Britain. We want to know how your government has handled the refugee crisis. This has been quite a big story in China and I have been sending many, many stories back home. They have the election also which adds to the interest in this story.

**Knight:** The Tampa story was centred in remote location. Was it therefore difficult to cover?

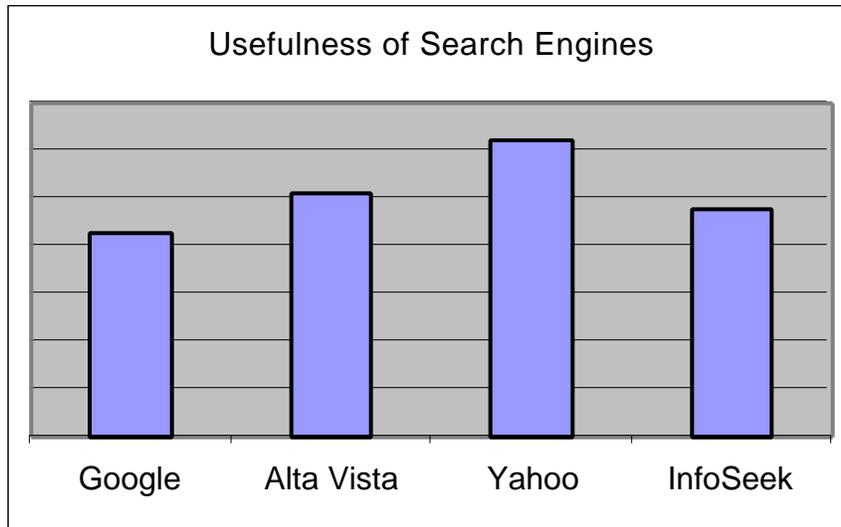
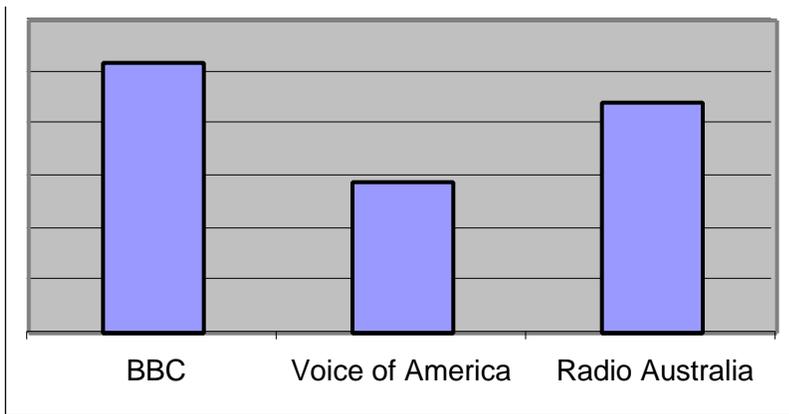
Oh not all. I was just relying on the electronic media, the newspapers and the TV. I think the Australian media was quite quick on this issue. (Yang 2001)



*New York Times* Correspondent, John Shaw, began his career as a foreign correspondent four decades ago, filing his stories from Saigon via Morse code and telegraph. Shaw said that the Net had made correspondents work much easier, allowing them to scan the local press for story ideas and check the international media for home country angles. Authenticated corporate or government sites were becoming a primary source:

Sometimes when you're doing research, either as an Australian correspondent or as an Australian correspondent corresponding for overseas you won't be referred to the company officer, or the company spokesmen, or even the company art house public relations person you'll often be referred to the website...you see 'see our website'.

Now there are two aspects of that: they can be very useful because they have a great deal of basic information on them which is simply time wasting to talk on the phone with anybody, but websites are increasingly being used, I believe, by companies, by NGO's, by governments to shunt journalists away from sources and into the perceived wisdom of what they say is a fact of life on the website, and that is a very interesting point which is coming more and more under debate. I've had quite a number of instances recently, where people have said, 'look to save all of our time just have a look at our website'. You do that, you look at the website you go back and say, 'well look I've got all the stuff off the website', and they say, 'well look that's it, we don't have anymore'. (Shaw 2001)



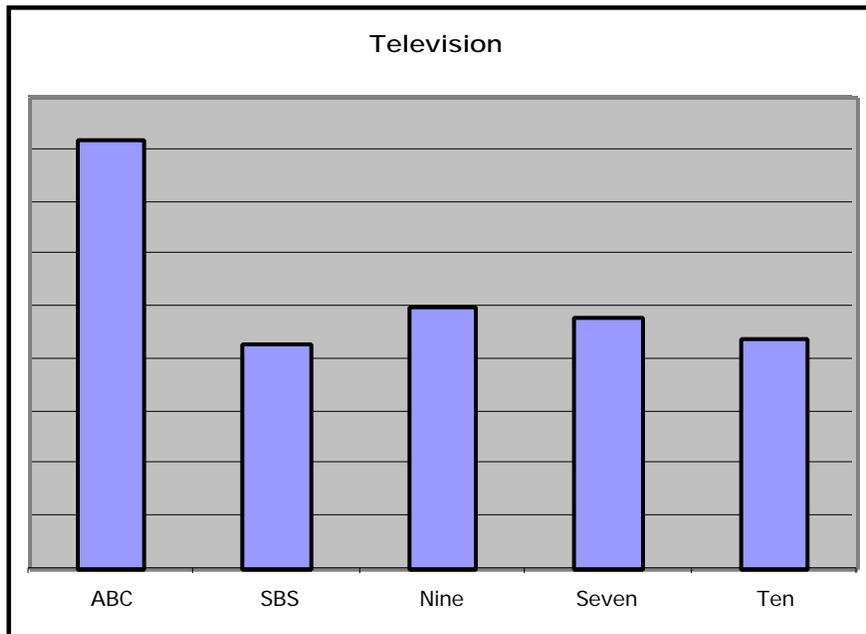
## **Radio and Television**

ABC Radio (rated equal first) and ABC Television (rated third) were overwhelmingly seen as credible. ABC Radio was significantly more popular than SBS Radio (rated 18<sup>th</sup>), even though the latter provided non-English speaking programs. Channel Nine News (rated 17<sup>th</sup>) was seen as useful

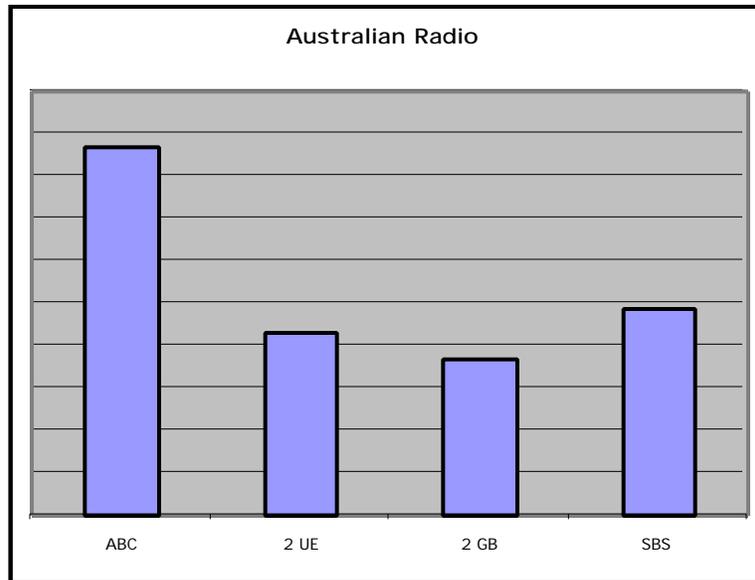
The Australian national broadcaster, the ABC hired its first journalist in 1934. In 1936, the first Federal News Editor was appointed to control a national news service which was

relayed to all States except Western Australia. News broadcasts now included material written for radio while 'backgrounders' were provided by 'prominent students of overseas affairs'. In 1939, a Canberra correspondent was engaged who began a nightly review of the proceedings in Parliament. News sources were also expanded by the engagement of many local news gatherers.

The Australian Broadcasting Act was passed in 1942. The ABC expanded its news department, building on the talent and expertise already developed during the war years. On 1 June 1947, the ABC's independent national news service was inaugurated. It became the largest, most comprehensive, independent news gathering body in Australia with full-time staff correspondents around the world. With more than six hundred journalists, the ABC, a public funded corporation, was Australia's largest integrated news organization.



ABC Television began broadcasting in 1956. The weekly current affairs program *Four Corners* began in 1961. In the same year *Profiles of Power*, a series of interviews with prominent Australians, became the forerunner of the popular weekly program *Monday Conference*. Six years later, in 1967, the weeknight program *This Day Tonight (TDT)* began. (<http://www.abc.net.au/corp/archiv.htm>)



Peter Higgins, the Australia based correspondent for the US ABC network said the ABC was favoured by journalists because it was usually reliable:

Journalists are trained to verify their sources and we are told to hear something from two or three sources before you believe it. But the ABC does that as well. They have already verified material because of the network that they are and the integrity that they have. In most cases you can trust what it is they say. There may be instances where they have been misled, but ninety nine percent of the time you can believe or trust what they say.

Knight: Why did ABC Television rate lower than ABC Radio?

I think the immediacy of radio [gives it an advantage] From a journalist's point of view; by the time a story gets to television, it is a dead story anyway. It's a constant vigilance, listening to radio, whether it is listening to bulletins or as background noise. It's is an ongoing thing as is the Internet.

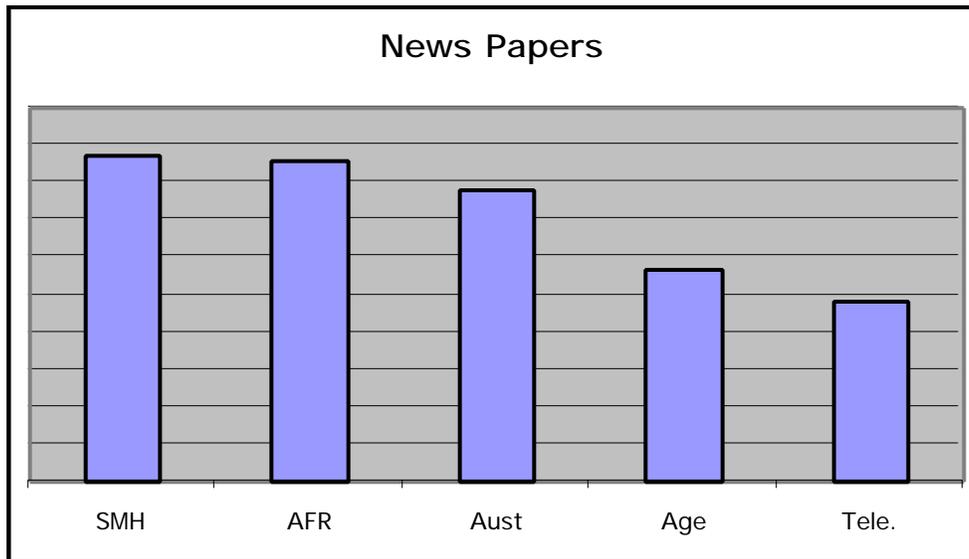
Knight: Why did 2 GB and 2UE [commercial radio stations] rate poorly? Was it because they were merely Sydney based?

Commercial networks have vested interests. It could be weighted one way. You have to think more carefully about what you hear from them.

Knight: How do you cater for an American radio audience?

US ABC is a true radio network, with stations from one end of the country to the other. People in California want to know more about Australian lifestyle, whereas New York is more interested in hard news stories. There are not many hard news stories that make it across the Pacific though. (Higgins 2001)

## News Papers



Newspapers remained the intellectual powerhouses of journalism, with large pools of reporters and editors creating stories which fed newsagencies and spun off into online editions. News papers are still foci for the specialist reporters necessary to produce steady stream of informed reports. They have extended their influence through branded web sites (eg; smh.com.au) which carry selected stories produced in the first instance for printed text. As the publisher of the *Tribune* Publishing group, Jack Fuller put it, newspapers retain the power to put subjects into community conversation:

After all what are they talking about on talk radio? Television does not do the routine, ground level reporting that is required to keep track of what is going on across a large metropolitan area. It does not have the staff to cover the complex jigsaw puzzle of political jurisdictions and social networks of the modern ... metropolis. This gives the papers an ability to do what is often dully described as agenda setting. It is actually much broader than that. It is the ability to get people to look here rather than there

and perhaps see what they otherwise wouldn't. So while there is no monopoly there is power. (Fuller. 1996. pp85/86)

The *Sydney Morning Herald* (rated equal first) , *Australian Financial Review* (rated second) and *Age* (rated 12<sup>th</sup> ) newspapers all belong to Sydney based Fairfax newspaper group. The SMH was founded in 1831. Fairfax is ranked as one of Australia's top 50 listed corporations, and has a market capitalisation of over \$3.2 billion (September 2000).. (<http://www.fxj.com.au/>)

The *Australian* (rated fourth) was the national flagship for the world's largest international media group, News Corporation Limited. News Corporation whose major shareholdings were a series of Murdoch family trusts, had extensive international investments in the print/electronic media and other industries. Outlets include the *Sydney Telegraph* (rated equal 19<sup>th</sup> ) *London Times*, the *News of the World*, the *Chicago Sun Times*, British Sky Broadcasting and Fox Studios. (House of Reps. 1992. p 78)

### **NGO's, Corporate Representatives and Politicians**

NGO's are now making themselves heard in a way and places that were unthinkable even ten years ago. Every elected politician, from the President of the United States down to the Mayor of South Sydney Council, is being forced to come to terms with the acceleration and sophistication of their invasion and co-option of political processes for their own ends.

"The Influence Epidemic", *The Bulletin*, May 9, 2000.

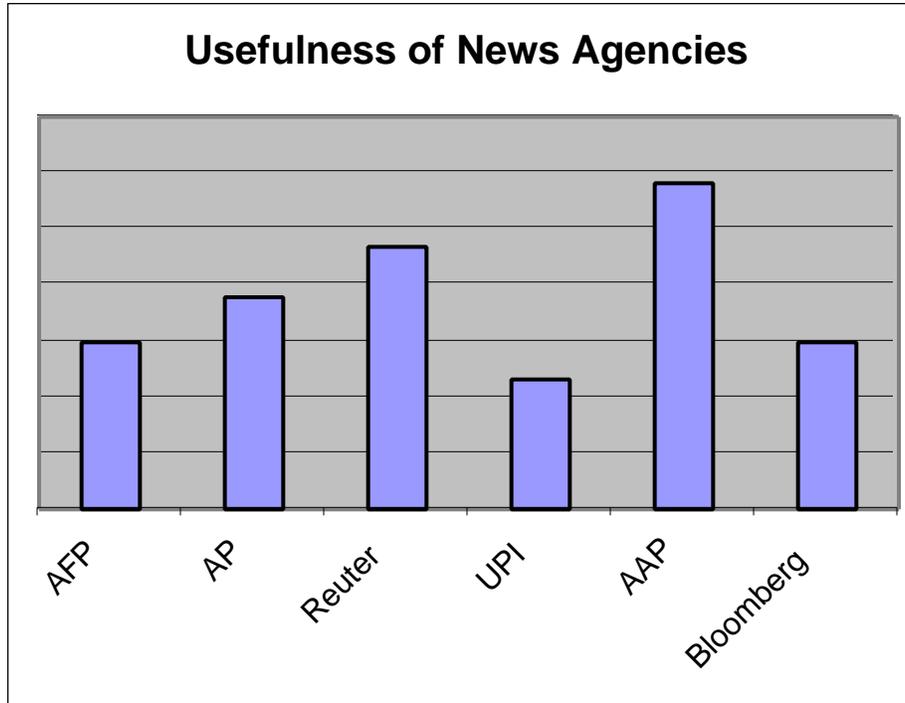
Non governmental international organisations (NGOs) (rated sixth) were seen as more useful than corporations (7<sup>th</sup>) and politicians (8<sup>th</sup>). This may reflect the high profile NGO's active in stories nominated by correspondents as of interest to their home audiences eg; illegal immigrants, treatment of Australian aborigines and the environment.

NGOs are founded by private individuals from different nations for the pursuit of common aims; not by states through international agreements. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "NGOs include profit making organisations, foundations, educational institutions, churches and other religious groups and missions, medical organisations and hospitals, unions and professional organizations, cooperatives and cultural groups as well as voluntary agencies."(OECD 1988) NGOs include: Amnesty International Greenpeace, Community Aid Abroad and the Olympic Committee.

A number of respondents complained about Australian government and public service sources that they believed saw foreign correspondents as a low priority:

Government and other officials need to take foreign media much more seriously than they currently do. Often ministers' press secretaries do not even return calls from non-domestic news media, which doesn't help journalists trying to write serious stories. (Anon 2001)

## News Agencies



Australian Associated Press (rated 11<sup>th</sup> ) was the most popular news agency with correspondents based in Australia. AAP was formed over 65 years ago as a cooperative delivering overseas news to the national media from bureaus located in London and New York. AAP claimed to be Australia's largest independent originator and aggregator of news and information, serving the media, government, business and financial markets. Four different groups owned AAP; News Group, Fairfax Group, West Australian Newspapers and the Harris Group. (<http://aap.com.au> 2001)

Founded in 1851, Reuters ( rated 20<sup>th</sup>) was a British institution, the news agency of the British Empire, with its expansion following the imperial telegraph cable network. British government outposts made up a significant proportion of its subscribers. Reuters became a private company in 1916, with the British Foreign Office as a major share holder.<sup>1</sup> Celebrating the newsagency's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Reuters.com website claimed Reuters "quickly established a reputation as a prime source of fast, accurate and unbiased foreign news.

Today, Reuters is the world's leading news and financial information organisation, providing information and technology to help people around the world to make crucial decisions.

Information it supplies to banks, the media, other businesses and private individuals. (reuter.com 2001)

The Associated Press (rated 23<sup>rd</sup> ) was founded in 1848 by six newspapers seeking to cut the cost of telegraph-distributed news. AP claimed to have grown to an organisation serving more than 1,500 newspapers and 5,000 broadcast outlets in the United States. AP services

were printed and broadcast in 112 countries, with the newsagency supplying news to more than 15,000 news organisations. (ap.com 2001)

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<sup>1</sup>Read, op.cit., 124.

Tony Vermeer has been the Editor in Chief of Australian Associated Press since 1996. A former Canberra political reporter, he joined the newsagency in 1984. Vermeer denied that the growing popularity of the net as a source of international news, even among journalists, posed a threat to wire services:

People have often seen the web as an alternative news source, but in fact it is an alternative market for agency copy. The most trusted news sites on the web are usually those associated with established media. Established media have always used agencies to produce their product. Agency copy is littered throughout the web. When people call up breaking news, more often than not is agency news they are reading. The reason for that is that agencies are specialists in accurate, real time reporting. That is what they have done since their inception, back since the days when AP's copy was the first to arrive in London with the news of Lincoln's assassination. That was a one-line snap from the workplace. Those sorts of skills and abilities are e just as highly prized in the world of the Internet. That fact that e Internet is there, showcasing these skills, is more an opportunity than a threat.

Knight: Why was Australian Associated Press rated more highly than Reuters by the Australian based correspondents?

Correspondents working in Australia are interested in Australian news. Reuter, AP and AFP are international agencies. Our brief is pretty simple. We are an Australian national news agency. Our business is Australia; we look at every story with Australian eyes. We look at providing a national coverage as broadly as we can. If you are a foreign correspondent working for a foreign news

organization and you are based in Australia and you are looking at getting your news from an authoritative source that has been around for a long time, there is us [AAP] and the ABC and a few others around. Reuters and AP are fine organizations but they are writing their news for foreign consumption. Our stories are raw material for foreign correspondents.

Knight: What do you see as the future for the news agency business?

AAP's future is continuing to adapt to the challenges of the net. We used to be a text only news service and for the net that is not quite all you need to be. We have added an audio service and domestic and international pictures to the mix. We have a limited facility to produce video for niche sites and that helps us become more marketable in the new media. We are not losing sight of the fact that our core business is in the traditional media; newspapers radio and television which are the broad media landscape of Australia. They are the customers we are interested in serving as fully as possible. But we have to add value to the core product. We are looking at page ready, material ready to go straight into a newspaper. We are looking at more data on the wire, as opposed to just stories. All these things allow you to keep as many balls in the air as possible.

Knight: Baron Reuter once defined news as political events, disasters, economic news and spectacles. Will there still be a demand for hard news?

We have seen that in the last few months. September 11 (the Trade Towers attack) showed there is a real hunger for hard news

among the general public. They may be cynical about the media in their day-to-day lives but when something important happens, when something that makes your mouth drop open with amazement happens, people turn to sources they know and trust. Hard straight reporting has been decried in the past. They say people want little bells and whistles. The last months showed that getting the story and getting basic information out to people is just as important as it always was. You need to have that core business right. (Vermeer 2001)

The newsagencies Agence France Press (rated equal 28<sup>th</sup>), the interactive business news service Bloombergs (rated equal 28<sup>th</sup>) and United Press International (rated equal 31<sup>st</sup>) were regarded as less useful.

Australian AFP's Jack Taylor worked as a reporter and a "back bench" journalist for the Sydney Morning Herald and the Sun Herald before joining the Agence France Press (AFP) bureau in Sydney. He said that correspondents used agencies because they were fast, reliable and accurate, "without spin or varnish":

We don't have the political spin which creeps into a lot of the newspaper reports. We are straight down the middle. Some times it is taken to a ridiculous extent. Reuters will not use the word terrorist, even when describing the attack on the World Trade centre which Reuters says was described by Islamic militants, not terrorists on the grounds that one man's terrorist is one man's

freedom fighter. We at AFP don't go that far. But we must try to make our product appear completely unbiased and that is important when you are reporting to 160 countries in six languages with every conceivable political belief that you can imagine.

(Taylor 2001)

While agencies were seen as a reliable source of stories, some correspondents also saw them as a threat. The London *Telegraph's* Mark Chipperfield said that global communications could allow foreign editors to locate correspondents and demand they match agency cover:

If you talk to any foreign correspondent around the world and their biggest nightmare is getting called up at two 'clock in the morning with 'we've just seen this on the wire, you know, AFP or AP have picked up some story, we want you to do 500 words'. It's a complete nonsense. (Chipperfield 2001)

## **Conclusion:**

Correspondents have embraced new media as a cost effective source of information. Most respondents regularly cross check websites, with electronic and print media. In doing so, they were in danger of ignoring stories not featured by the mainstream press.

Correspondents co-operating with the survey were asked open-ended questions to criticise the reporting of Australia. Forty percent thought that their own foreign coverage of Australia was not balanced. There seemed to be agreement that coverage was fair but selective, with emphasis on easily obtained colour stories. There was a perceived need for more serious stories:

More real stories (politics, economics, human rights) instead of the tired old kangaroo and Crocodile Dundee crap. It is done to a certain extent, but not enough. Kangaroos are easier to cover and sell....

One correspondent blamed local media, which other parts of the survey indicated were significant sources for foreign media covering Australia:

Too often the foreign press corps reflect the work of the local media organisations and do not have enough time to initiate their own material using own sources.

There was a need for "more resources, more experience, more space" in their respective news holes. The correspondents were frequently critical of reporters reinforcing stereotypes of "macho men and cuddly animals". Reporters needed to be sensitive to local customs and ideas:

Get journalists out of their offices and into the countryside and the cities, talking to people and attending events. Cover Australia as they would any "alien" country with an exotic culture. Just because Australians speak English, it doesn't mean that their cultural underpinnings can be taken for granted and be seen as

merely a slightly different version of U.S. or U.K. culture, which is what usually happens.

Correspondents were asked why problems identified with reporting had not been addressed? They blamed:

- Commercial interests
- Perception by gatekeepers that readers, viewers etc were not that interested
- Lack of quality of some reporters, particularly the ones that only come here on "holidays", doing just the "nice" stories.
- Editors at home, some of who only wanted clichés
- Australia's relative unimportance to the world

## **Interviews**

Chipperfield, Mark Sunday Telegraph. 5.7.01

Corleis. Jurgen Axel Springer Group 3.7.01

Higgins, Peter (US) ABC Correspondent. 30.10.01

Juergensen, Corina Freelance 5.7.01

Masato ishi, Kyodo news Service 5.7.01

Shaw, John New York Times, 6.7. 01

Taylor, Jack , Correspondent, Agence France Press, 24.10.01

Vermeer, Tony. Editor in Chief. Australian Associated Press 4.11.01

Woods, Jacqueline Kyodo News Service 5.7.01

Yang Pin Yuan, Australia Pacific Correspondent, China Radio 31.10.01

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John Fairfax Ltd <http://www.fxj.com.au/>

News Corporation <http://news.com.au/>

Online Journalism Review <http://ojr.usc.edu/>

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