



WHO'S BEEN WATCHING THE WATCHERS? AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL JOURNALISM

by Helen Ester

For me the question is: How do you study it [journalism] in a way which is both intellectually sound and scholarly and yet at the same time that attends to it, in terms of what it is: a social practice, a historical phenomenon, part of the political discourse of a nation and a people, and a piece of narrative art”
Professor James Carey (2000)

Watching the Watchers

The Prime Minister John Howard articulated the high value most Australians place on a free press, when he defended Australia's human rights record on television describing Australia as a 'gold-plated democracy and with a gold plated free press'. (Howard 2000).

It is noteworthy then, that it was not until 1988, eight-seven years after Federation and the creation of a national political press corps, that a scholarly analysis of the Canberra press gallery was published.

Published in 1988, Professor Clem Lloyd's *Parliament and the Press – The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery* sets out to achieve 'three simple objectives'.

- to explain how the press got into the Australian Parliament;
- to account for its subsequent relationship with the Parliament;
- to give some explanation albeit limited, of what it has done there.

Lloyd qualified the context:

This is neither comprehensive nor definitive; in no sense should it be regarded as either a history of Australian political journalism or of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery. Nor has it been conceived as a sociological study of political journalists and their milieu or as a contemporary analysis of how a Press Gallery system works. (Lloyd, 1988 : 2-3)

Post Lloyd

Three major publications followed Lloyd's that either extend his work by combining - to different degrees – sociological study and a contemporary analysis.

They are:

Parker, D (1991) *The Courtesans* Allen & Unwin 1991, Sydney Australia

Simons, M (1999) *Fit to Print - Inside the Canberra Press Gallery* 1999, University of New South Wales Press Ltd., Sydney

Payne, T (1999) *The Canberra Press Gallery and the Backbench of the 38th Parliament 1996-98* Department of the Parliamentary Library 1999, Canberra ACT – first published as 'Research Paper No.9 1997-98' - Politics and the Public Administration Group, Parliamentary Library 1998, Canberra ACT

All reflect a general trend in social science studies of journalism which 'are conducted from the outside rather than

from within' – where journalists are 'seen through the lens of social science, not through the lens of journalism' (Carey 2000).

Their methodology uses, to different degrees and effect, a model developed by sociologist, Herbert J. Gans in *Deciding What's News* - a study of journalists as an 'ethnographic community' at work in USA at *CBS Evening News*, *NBC nightly News*, *Newsweek* and *Time*. (Gans, 1979: Preface p.xii).

Gans's seminal work involved going into news rooms and:

- observing
- engaging in conversation about decisions
- sitting in on meetings

with the objective of discovering 'how journalists, select news – what they left out, how they reported stories and why they chose as they did' and 'what kinds of people they were' (Gans 1979 : Preface xii).

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Derek Parker's *The Courtesans* applies the Gans model unevenly placing an overemphasis on the 'kinds of people' in the Canberra Press Gallery, their socio-economic status, political preferences, allegiances and professional pretension. *The Courtesans* is unrepresentative in subject matter and time frame. Seven prominent and senior journalists are selected from a workforce of 150-200 and its focus is confined to a particular time- frame – the heyday of the Hawke Government in the 1980's. Nonetheless, in setting out to show that gallery journalists were 'fundamentally opposed to the Coalition's message' (Parker p.77) *The Courtesans* provides a forensic account of the inherent professional challenge journalists face of symbiosis with sources. The work is however circumscribed by the author's undeclared conflict of interest as an employee of Opposition/coalition leader John Howard. This shortcoming and a recurrent absence of substantial empirical evidence are examined in detail in reviews of *The Courtesans* by academics and journalists (Grattan 1991 and Ward 1992).

Margaret Simons's *Fit to Print - Inside the Canberra Press Gallery* is the clearest inheritor of the Gans model.

It is both conceived and executed as a sociological study of political journalists and their milieu where the author is a participant/observer carrying out fieldwork within the 'ethnographic community' of the Canberra press gallery. The four chapters headed *Watching; Telling; Feeling and Seeing* are personal narratives by a journalist about other journalists – but surprisingly the author does not analyse political journalism through the lens of professional journalistic practice and instead highlights her 'outsider's' status.

'At last I was in Canberra, but this time I was there to watch' (p.4-5), describing political journalists as 'These

people are watching for us, for those of us on the outside' (p.6).

Fit to Print is a 'snapshot' of some of the practitioners of political journalism rather than an account of how the Canberra press gallery works as a whole and like Parker, Simons focuses on only a small proportion of the 150-200 strong work force – something that is noted in the following review.

Simons illustrates process without explaining function.... *Fit to Print* fails to tell us what the press gallery is exactlyand ignores the majority of its members. Instead it concentrates on a few television correspondents and the political teams of the big four papers *The Australian*, *Financial Review* *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

There is a floating population in the press gallery of around 200 members ranging from one person newsletter operations to huge offices such as the ABC and AAP.

Simons also ignores the vast output of the wire services, the work of correspondents for the popular tabloids that actually serve the majority of newspaper readers and the impact of commercial radio. (Shananhan 1999).

Trisha Payne's, *The Press Gallery and the Backbench of the 38th Parliament*, is a thorough analysis of the relationship between backbenchers and the press gallery as it was manifested over five months during the term of the 38th parliament following the landslide Liberal victory in 1996. The analysis of political journalism is based on information gathered from interviews with fifteen journalists and monitoring of media reports in all major metropolitan dailies, AAP, the *Bulletin* magazine as well as some news and comment on the ABC radio's AM and PM.

Payne's work canvasses the relationship of political journalism to the issue two-party dominance in the Australian Parliament and the part that it plays "in stifling the emergence of publicly recognisable MPs' contribution to public and political debate". (Payne 1999 p. 10).

It shares with the other two publications the 'spectator's' or outsider's view of political journalism.

It is evident in analysis of political reports and in interview with backbenchers and Gallery journalists that a strong, mutually valued working relationship exists. It is sustained in an environment of contradictory elements and balances of trust and mistrust, approbation and disgust laced with cynicism and a constant maneuvering for control that characterises the best of games. (p.24)

Work in progress

My current research takes as its starting point theories of media and democracy and the definition of journalism within that. It takes into account the self-definition of political journalists - which in turn, will be measured against outcomes, drawing on methodology used by Knight and Nakano in their analysis of the work of foreign correspondents reporting the handover of Hong Kong to the Peoples' Republic of China in *Reporting Hong Kong*:

"In this book, three communication researchers with journalistic backgrounds illustrate the process of media reporting as well as the product. We attempt to bridge the gap between media analysis in living-rooms and anecdotes from the field by interviewing journalists by observing them in their work context and by comparing their reports against each other, against the local coverage and against the official record. (Knight and Nakano 1999)

For the purposes of this work political journalism is defined as a specialist round where news values and other

news gathering techniques are applied at the point of tension between demands for accountability and the magnetic pull of secrecy inherent to the exercise of power - the place where effective journalism should facilitate 'the visible means by which many people can gather information about a (powerful) few' (Thompson 1994: 43).

Other key areas are agenda, and journalistic strategies (if any) used to handle the centrifugal force of co-option. Interviews will draw directly from previous work such as the comprehensive survey of over 1,000 political and non-political journalists in *Political Journalists' Political and Professional Values* (Henningham 1995) and the survey of 286 journalists and 50 opinion leaders in *Reviving the Fourth Estate*. (Shultz 1998 :145), both of which demonstrate the placed on 'occupational self-definition' (Shultz 1998 :145 and Henningham 1995 :Table 5 : 327).

Henningham's *Political and Professional Value* garnered a 90.1% response from the 1,068 journalists – about a quarter of all journalists employed in mainstream news media.

It revealed a strong nexus between professionalism and a functional definition of journalism. There was between 70 - 89 percent agreement between three types of journalists (non-political journalists; non-Federal political and Canberra press gallery) that it is of "extreme importance" to "investigate claims and statements made by the government" and 70 to 84 percent that journalism should "provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems" which compared with a percentage response of only between 25-30 percent that it should "provide entertainment and relaxation". (Appendix A: Henningham, 1995).

Whilst this may be seen to be a collective 'pat on the back' such a view is difficult to sustain because of the large number of respondents and the inclusion of non-political journalists.

A theory of pragmatism

Questionnaires will canvass a wide spectrum of views inside and outside political journalism about the way Australian political journalists operate and how this relates to the philosophic tradition of American pragmatism, and test the assertion that;

" the problems of journalism are, at base, philosophical problems. They involve question of definition and function'. (Lloyd 1999)

It will take as a reference point the journalism research perspective at Columbia University USA, which is grounded in the tradition of American pragmatism because:

...the conversation of journalism and the conversation of science are not two different things, they differ only in the sense that the audience to which they are addressed. Inevitably the conversation of journalism, because it is part of the structures of partisan interests and conflict, cannot be safely insisted way in a labor or a university....The central point of American pragmatism is the solving of problems. I think American pragmatism fit well with journalism. It has respectable parentage (Mark Twain, John Dewey, William James) in spite of Bertrand Russell.' (Carey 2000: p23)

American pragmatism antecedents lie in philosophic traditions which forged the evolution of European knowledge

and culture – expressed as early as 1132 by the the infamous and rebellious monk Peter Abelard in the Prologue to *Sic et Non* – when he declared ‘by doubting we come to inquiry and by inquiry we perceive the truth’ 1132 (Clanchy 1997); and 200 years when French philosopher Voltaire “stand firm, as the quintessential enlightened sceptic; never trust the statements of other in the absence of clear and unshakable evidence” (Altschull 1997).

A functional definition

The way in which journalists function at the fulcrum of the see-saw between political secrecy and transparency will be examined through an analysis journalistic practice, particularly the application of news values. It will take into account recent research by Murray Masterton who distributed 2,5000 questionnaires to decision-making journalists in newspaper, agency and broadcast newsrooms in 151 different countries accumulating convincing evidence that three core news values are present in all journalism – Consequence (Impact) Proximity, Conflict , and that these three, together with Human Interest (stories about people) Novelty (unusualness, bizarre, rare) and Prominence (about prominent people) are six values “so far ahead of any other in acceptance level that the rest don’t count internationally”. (Masterton 1999 : 87-92)

Issues and methods

Agenda setting and ‘humidicribs’

A senior Queensland ABC reporter recently likened her time in the Canberra Press Gallery to being in a ‘humidicrib’ (Delaney, 2001) – a view that resonates in regional and rural Australia where there is an entrenched view that the national political process is by definition, out of touch with reality. Nonetheless anecdotal and some statistical evidence (Ester and Macallister 2001) shows the concept of an out of touch ‘humidicrib’ is applied to any media or journalism not identifiably local – whether State, regional, or nationally based.

Payne (1999) suggests that backbenchers are cut out of the media like by the way political journalists apply news values, noting that:

One backbencher...concluded that there was greater value of using the media than the parliamentary process as an alternative access to political power. (Payne 2000 p.9)

However from the point of view of journalistic practice, it is not the news values themselves, but how they are applied which results in turn, from how journalists (who come from all parts of Australia to report on the Federal parliament) define their role. Is it, for instance, to give the readers back home a running commentary about what their local MP is doing? or is to provide a State/ provincial view of the national political power game, to provide readers with a regular dose of national politics?

The Elite Corps

This work will encompass the on-going debate about the importance of maintaining a well-informed corps of journalists who have the political and intellectual capital to keep watch on national politics and test the veracity of the assertion by Parker in *The Courtesans* that:

It is hard to believe that the end of the Gallery should it come about would be detrimental to Australian politics. In the end it does more harm than good: in its basic lack of even-handedness,

in its disdain for the principles of democracy and in its narrowing of the range of political options. It is an institution which has grown too powerful for the system in which it exists (Parker 1992:180).

This raises questions about the role of talk-back radio variety TV shows and the internet which can bring the powerful into first hand contact with electors and avoid the mediation of gallery-based political journalism. The Prime Minister, John Howard for instance, as a matter of strategy rarely holds press conferences and favours direct contact and has clocked up a record number of appearances.

Last year John Howard conducted 234 radio, TV and door stop interviews (today's substitute for the almost defunct press conference). That did not include speeches, media releases, national broadcasts or innumerable other public appearances. And that was in a non-election year. (Steketee 2000)

Conclusion

This work will extend the discourse about political journalism taking it in different and new directions because it will be an analysis which applies a 'journalistic lens' rather than a sociological ethnographic one. This will be achieved by including a substantial range and number of working perspectives from the inside journalism both within and without political reporting. The range and number of interviews will be structured to ensure a range of experience from new recruits to the most senior opinion makers and selected to ensure a balance of interstate metropolitan and regional publications and broadcasters.

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