

REGIONAL MEDIA: CHALLENGES AND CHANGE CONFERENCE

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TRANSCRIPTION OF SPEECH BY JACK WATERFORD

“Overview of key issues and challenges for contemporary editors”

JACK WATERFORD: I had no idea that I'd be speaking at such a bench but it inspires feelings in me that are nothing whatever to do with the shearers strike or the trial of the Kenniff's or anything like that, but some that come a little bit closer to home.

This was the court that was presided over for over thirty years by Frank Brennan who was surely the most colourful judge Australia has ever known. The father of Sir Gerard Brennan, who ultimately became a Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia; old Frank would in effect hold a press conference here in court every morning at which he would denounce the evils of Communism and the shocking service at the local service station, the appalling behaviour of the Communist member of Parliament from around here, the disgusting and disgraceful behaviour of the Queensland Supreme Court which had just over-ruled one of his decisions, and so forth. He was not the first Judge to be impeached in Australia, that honour belongs to Justice Angela Vasta, with whose fate I also had something to do, but he was, I think, put up for impeachment more than any other Judge that Australia has ever known, and this was his court. Not just that, but in this court my late and not terribly lamented father-in-law practised for some years. He was a leader of the Queensland Bar. Never particularly warmed to me because he was deeply Methodist, he disapproved of smoking, and drinking, and gambling, and divorced people, and Catholics, and people from Canberra, and journalists, and I think I was sort of the absolute full-house of everything that he loathed and despised. But on one very celebrated occasion he was appearing in this court for a woman accused of murdering her husband and all sorts of evidence was given by scientific experts talking about how much poison had been administered and how it had been administered and various things like that. And my father-in-law, Sir Arnold Bennett, had a mixture of the stuff made up and drank it in the court and was watched with very close attention by the jury for the next five or six hours. Luckily he didn't succumb, the woman was acquitted.

I want to begin this discussion about 20,000 kilometres from here in what's now effectively a suburb of London in Basildon in Essex. Basildon is one of those happy places that has always been a fairly marginal seat and accordingly lavished with political attention. Indeed, it gets rather more than most because it has the distinction of being a seat which, since 1945, has always gone the way of the government which has been elected and accordingly it's much studied by political scientists who think that deep within the psyche of what some call Basildon-man, or Basildon-woman for that matter, lie true clues about what the voters are thinking, where they are going and what they

expect of politicians and their community and each other. As I say it's always swung with the government of the day. It was Tory through the 1950's, and it went to Harold Wilson in 1964, it went back to the Tories, and then back to Harold Wilson again, rejected Jim Callaghan and went for Margaret Thatcher's party: and some of the changes demographic and social thinking very much reflect the developments of Thatcherism. It stuck with Margaret Thatcher's replacement, John Major, for one term and now it's been held twice by Tony Blair.

Over the Thatcher years, the surveys done by a whole host of organisations, but particularly what's called the Danoz Group, has suggested that it bought many of Margaret Thatcher's ideas about the role of government, about resentment, about the development of a welfare state and some approval for winding it back, and now it backs, if you like, the Blair Third Way, Thatcherism with a human face. And it's not just voting patterns which are being looked at but whole packages of attitudes towards society. Our Basildon voter of today, those who study it tell us, is scarcely a connected person at all. In what all of us imagine is an ideal society we meet the community in degrees, there's me, there's my immediate family - in my case my wife and my four daughters or perhaps more accurately the three daughters who immediately live with me at the moment, then there's the somewhat extended family - the daughter who's not there, my son-in-law, my grandchildren, my two brothers and their nine children, and my four sisters and their five children and all of my nieces and my nephews, and of course there's a whole package of spouses and partners they have, and then there's an even more extended clan and believe you I've got them; I've got ninety seven first cousins and about two hundred and fifty first cousins once removed. There are the people next door many of whom I've known for many years, there are the local shops where I've been shopping for years; I mean most of the shopkeepers and the checkout chicks know me. There are my work colleagues and in many cases their families, personal and professional friends and colleagues and there are people in sporting clubs and groups and other associations or places I often go. People I'm on nodding acquaintance with, from the postman to people that I admit casually at work or with friends. Lots of rings of people amongst whom I move comfortably out in to a wider world increasingly perhaps less comfortably as they are less my clan and are the more remote strangers. Rings of people increasingly less intimately connected with me but through whom to some extent I can retreat to when the world seems a tough place.

Now the problem is that the studies of Basildon-man in Britain are telling us that much of this is breaking up; for our Basildon-man increasingly the wide world is immediately outside his front door, and increasingly it seems a scarier place. It's not because of crime, though sometimes perceptions about crime, which is a different thing altogether, may play some role. Our Basildon-man is not so connected he doesn't have any sort of personal relationship with the butcher, the baker or the postman. He doesn't mix with work colleagues after work, or belong to any clubs, at least not to any sort of clubs where there's any sort of intimacy; a club to him is just another big and impersonal place; he draws his money from an ATM; the local council's got absolutely nothing to do with him; it's just another big impersonal monstrous and grinding bureaucracy that he's frustrated with; he's got a lot fewer relations than his parents did, but he scarcely sees

them anyway except for his immediate family. He scarcely knows his neighbours. If home is the castle, the drawbridge is right up because the moment he goes out he's amongst strangers. And in this mix are a whole host of resentments, even rages, about a world which seems so much more impersonal, a lot less friendly, about people who live on the dole or sickness benefits, or people who are different say blacks and whose difference seems threatening in some way, about governments that seem to just take, take, take, and hardly give you anything back; about banks who treat you as a cipher and bloody strangers that ring you up offering you things that you don't want, about keeping up at work and increasing insecurity of a job; about children who regard you as a dodo and who, when they leave your household, will very quickly become strangers as well.

Now this sort of atomising society is to some extent being replicated in Australia and not just in the cities. Indeed, it's often more apparent outside major metropolitan centres or in large regional cities such as this or in the country towns if only because the pace of change and the consequence of it are far more obvious than in larger areas. Its effects are seen not only in the occasional bursts of resentful popularism, as with say a Pauline Hanson movement, but in evident resentments even rage, about a living environment that people seem no longer to be able to control, about a polity that you no longer seem to be able to much influence, and in evidences of a breakdown in many of the community structures we all thought we once knew. In a little country town its epitomised as much as perhaps by the town's capacity to sustain a footy team, as it is by the town's loss of yet another bank, or the police station, or the local hospital.

Now this sense of disconnectedness is one of the major threats to the media that we know today and the more local the media is, the greater the threat. There's a high proportion of the population out there who are seriously turned off the media, they are just simply not interested in news or even much in information. With about 40% of population and, if this is a little bit more noticeable amongst younger ages, there are segments in all age groups, there are people who wouldn't take your paper if you delivered it to them free. And it's not just because they are getting all the news they want from the radio or the television, indeed just such people will change stations when there's a news or current affairs broadcast, unless it's a mere entertainment such as John Laws program. And it's certainly not because they are into new media such as the Internet, indeed the Internet is big, but it's being used only by that proportion of the population which are information hungry, that very proportion of the people who devour every paper they can lay their hands on, who turn up the radio on the hour when the news is coming on and who watch news and current affairs shows on television. These media can and do complement each other; they don't compete at all. Now there's some evidence that the proportion that's turned off is increasing; it is and it's a worry, but some of the evidence of it is exaggerated and I should just discuss couple of points first, before I talk about the people who are really turned off.

You don't prove, for example, people are simply turned off by showing that a newspaper circulation is in decline, or long-term decline, even with a fairly static population. When that happens, often, editors and general managers think that the problem is that well we're not growing a younger audience as fast as we're killing off the older one, and often

we do things to try and make the paper seem young at heart, with-it and meaningful, viable and relevant, just the sort of thing in fact which often turns off the established readers, while not at all impressing those who are turned off. Actually there's demographic that has a lot more to do with that particular phenomenon than anything else and that's just simply the increasing age of marriage. A newspaper buying habit is something which most people seem to acquire like a mortgage and babies when they get married and they settle down. And three decades ago most of us were doing this in their early twenties, twenty in my case, but increasingly people are not doing it until their thirties and so we have only irregular buying habits in a very substantial demographic zone. By age thirty five however, the propensity of people to buy a newspaper is about the same as ever it was. But amongst the people who are atomised and disconnected, the people just don't care about the news because it just doesn't affect them much one way or another, or get depressed by it because it seems to emphasise their powerlessness against a big and impersonal world, the newspaper seems to have less to say anyway. Who cares about the old formula about sport or local sport particularly when you can't be bothered to go now that you can watch national sport on TV, or the weird goings-on at the local council which to them is not a group of their friends and neighbours in concerted action but yet another big and inflexible bureaucracy. Or stories about the lives and achievements of men and women in the community when in truth there's not a real community at all, merely people sullenly living near each other.

Now I don't want to focus on the politics of such a situation I simply want to point out that newspapers and other media are quick to suffer from such a disengagement and as they do suffer their response it to becomes less relevant and less engaged and they themselves are often a major part of this sense of defeat which is breaking such communities up.

I believe that the survival of regional newspapers, as with all other media, whether in broadcast forms or metropolitan newspapers, turns on whether they are the natural source of information to which anyone would want to go to get information and whether or not they are or aspire to be the centre of debate within their communities. An editor has to want all of his or her readers to think that their newspaper is the logical place to look on the subject of local or regional interest. It is the place where different views on it are going to be expressed and the place where a reader with an opinion to contribute would think automatically as being the place to express it. And the papers that are too timid about offending anybody, least of all powerful interests like advertisers, or which are concerned not to damage local morale on questions say about local decline or this atomisation of the community, are writing their death warrants by making their papers less, not more relevant. And the people who want bland products that have got not sense of cheek, not eccentricities reflecting both the personalities of the writers and the personality of the town, or who think that newspapers are done to a formula and can be 'chief of staffed' from five hundred miles away, are creating bland readers who are less likely to continue with their newspaper buying habits. And frankly, I think, that all too often, we have responded with formula, with checklists of mechanical tasks which become more significant than the debate and the sparkle and the personality, which make the modern newspapers looked simultaneously both a little bit more professional and

professionally presented but a lot more disengaged and not really telling the stories about our lives and about our communities. Where the paper could be in effect the paper of the next town or a town five hundred miles away as long as one struck out some place names and substituted others. They are not papers that give readers a sense of themselves or which in fact accentuate a sense of despair. If you thought of me as a stranger that was planning to go into a community say of five thousand people and called for the last month's newspapers, would I be able to deduce from those papers a sense of what makes this town tick? what they are talking about? what they are arguing about? what the dynamics are which shape their economic futures and their social futures? If I was going to get into an argument about a local matter in a local pub, would I have the information to hold my own? Are there any stories about people or about things that I'd be like to remember a year hence as just so typical of this town and of this community?

Now well some people of course say that the answer to all of these problems is a sort of relentless localism, I don't necessarily entirely agree with that, but I don't necessarily think that we all agree about what localism is. I think all news even international news is local if it relates particularly to the situation and needs of the community. Not all local news has to be sourced locally, if it's relevant to the community and if it helps arm people for the debates. But news or features in effect which are taken off the shelf may not be local even if it's about people in the town if its not shaped and formed for the needs of the people in the town.

We are living in an age in which there have been massive changes in communications technology and where it's possible on the one hand to send copy hundreds of miles away for the paper to be made up; on the other hand possible to get press releases and other material instantly via email and on the net and so forth, I'm not yet convinced that we are making anything like enough use of it to make our papers more relevant to our readers. If I want to go out into a country town or a regional community or somewhere, I want to know the things that are going on which I can establish fairly well in Canberra of which I'm well capable of regionalising or localising. Material such as where are local agricultural reports and what not from central sources can be very easily customised to be locally relevant. The sort of things that the agricultural papers are doing very well, but by and large the large community newspapers are not doing well at all. Material such as state and local shire tender information is now usually on the net and is a valuable lead into economic stories as well it's just simply raw information people are interested in. And you know with the relentless sort of publishing of every little club and society material or what not, we're often ignoring some of the central trend data that people are noting and putting down. And then there's the fact which has been made use of increasingly, that we all too often have yet to perfect the fact that every sports club or another social and cultural health group can feed in so much more information not least of a names nature via email etc. Now the populations in regional areas are older than the average and their regions are still shedding young people; we all of course want younger readers, but we should stop prostituting our products in a futile attempt to find them, and in the process, alienating established older readers. The readers of newspapers are always older than the demographic average in any event and I think we have to begin by accepting that. The average age of our readers is say fifty, and two thirds of our readers are over the age of

forty, that's the truth after all. I think we've got to begin writing for them we've got to address their interests and concerns; those concerns, I might say, very much involve concerns about a disappearing youth base in their region and the fact that the young men and women are leaving these areas for economic opportunities. We have to stop feigning attempts to connect with younger readers except by the good reporting of interests of all, because such readers will come if you've got a good paper

I think that nobody should die in a community of under two thousand people without a decent obituary and which is chatty and not some sort of extended CV. I think generally that the funeral should be reported too, and if you can't get enough deaths to keep the paper up I think you should go systematically back and pick up some of the deaths that you've missed over the last fifteen years. I don't think that anybody should die in a community of under thirty thousand people without a decent obituary too. I think it's a part of the charm of the journalists that they can charm obituaries out of readers, but I think it's also a part of the art of journalism that the journalists use such occasions such as death to meet people, to make connections and to get a sense of the community.

Now why should I make such a big thing about dead people, late readers as it were? Its death so often that gives a sense of life and meaning to those who are left. It's an obituary or a good one at least, that one can write of the things which tell each about the sorts of people we are and where we all live and how we fit in with each other.

I was on ABC Lateline a few years ago and I was on it with a couple of other old journalists, soaks like me who, as with so many of these sorts of long and wanking sessions, were moaning about the good old days and how things are not so good these days and so forth. And we're all sort of stroking our beards and talking on in this sort of vein and Brian Toohey I think it was said something like, "Of course, when I was a boy the typical young journalist was a country kid, they were probably sort of Irish and Catholic and had probably been to something like a Marist Brothers boarding school and they sort of had a bit of a chip on their shoulder and they went into journalism not because it was glamorous or a path for advancement or anything like that, but because it was sort of exciting to mix with cops and politicians and other nere-do-wells".

And then he began complaining about the blandness of some of the younger journalists of today and the fact that increasingly that they came from middle class backgrounds and lacked both 'a nose and a feel for news and what made communities tick'.

And Philip Adams said, "mmmm, what do you think about that Jack?"

And I said, "well, speaking as a country kid of Irish/Catholic background who went to a Marist Brothers boarding school, it seems to me to be absolute crap, but who knows!"

I think that there are increasing sort of problems that are arising in our journalism today from the fact that our journalists are increasingly far better educated. My late deputy

editor and I once agreed that we wouldn't hire each other these days given the calibre of journalists that are coming before us, but increasingly less technically close to our subjects and our readers on the street, and increasingly formula-trained and formula-directed by people to cover bases but without getting time for doing the thing that journalism can and must do first and foremost and that is tell stories.

Now, it's a great racket journalism, it really is a fabulous thing. I've been in it now for over thirty years and I'm still in it I suppose because I haven't been found out yet. But while I've had some sort of toughish times and goodish times and things that at times well I've thought were mechanical I've just never thought of a job where one gets paid basically for doing rather what one likes, wandering around indulging one's curiosity, being allowed indeed encouraged to drink lots of coffee and do lots of crosswords and sit around with a licence to perve on other people and satisfy all sorts of simple curiosity about things in the world. But its a great license and if you are not primarily using it to tell stories, if it just is another trade, if it's worked up in such a way that is really a sort of a mechanical composition process like compositing in the old back room, then I don't think that either we are providing, if you like, value to our employers or value to our readers, the first people that we serve. The chip on the shoulder thing that Brian Toohey talked of I don't think is necessarily a political aim so much as a sort of a view of what's different about the world, what's changing, is this really working, all of these sorts of things and I suspect that an awful lot of the curiosity about the world, or sometimes because we increasingly come from such common backgrounds, the capacity even to recognise it is changing. I think as I look around the place that the feeling amongst journalists, particularly young journalists, that they are increasingly cogs in the wheel, part of a grinding sort of production process and not engaged in an exciting licence to perve and look around is increasing; and I'm sure that that's in part accentuated by the fact that the newspapers on which the world and particularly in the regional media, have become such grinding factories so formula-based with checklists of things to do increasingly particularly with the regional weeklies and what not, subbed and produced hundreds of miles away and even often news edited by people who're never been in the community at all. I think that we've really got to reflect on the fact that our papers have lost an awful lot of their personality and become much too formula-driven and they are understaffed by very bright and very able, but very under-trained and probably under-supervised journalists, who have little of the time to actually develop the news and tell stories.

Now some might say that this is the consequence of profit structures and the way newspapers now must face the world, but I tell you from several perspectives that these are simple facts of life. That those who settle for the second rate are condemning not only the future of their media, but all too often their communities as well. Now I talked a little bit before about Basildon-man; I think as well as some other social research that I read in recent years on what's been called the 'brass band theory'. There's a major study being done by some medievalist scholar of the rise and the fall of city states in Italy from before the Renaissance through until really the 19th century, and the question the person was asking was: Why did some communities flourish? why did other one's collapse? why did some flourish for a while and then collapse abruptly? why did some always struggle on

and the suddenly flower and so forth? And his 'brass band theory' was that the sorts of communities no matter how small, we are talking often of communities, villages of only five hundred people that had brass bands were the ones that survived. The one that had community institutions and links and connections with each other. Quite recently I've seen some American research as well and it has identified much the same thing in another way and that was popular identifications of regional economic zones that were 'go ahead' where things were growing and developing compared with places which were in decline. What was identified as the critical factors there were not just the social networking and groups but what you might call a 'tolerance factor'; the shorthand for which might be attitudes towards gay people, but there were other things as well. But the sorts of communities where gay people were welcomed, were not discriminated against, which had if you like a gay social scene, were the sorts of communities which were doing well. The sorts of communities which were turned on themselves and where the institutions of the community including the media were to some extent turning on the places were the ones in decline. Now, of course, it need not be gays at all; it might be equally attitudes towards Aboriginal affairs, or social liberal views about a whole host of things, the welcoming of immigrants into the community. And I don't mean by this if you like the obsession of what the Prime Minister no doubt would call the 'chattering classes' or whatever, I just simply mean a basic open, welcoming community where debates are going on. Now debates are in fact going on in every community but if they are not happening in your medium; if they are not happening in your newspaper, if a person in your community has got a really strong bee in their bonnet and they don't think automatically 'I've got to express this view to people more widely and the place that I'm going to do it is in your newspaper', then the chances are probably that you are more part of the problem than you are the solution.