

The fewer the facts, the stronger the opinion? Problems with comment in Australian newspapers, by Belinda Weaver

A newspaper is of necessity something of a monopoly, and its first duty is to shun the temptations of monopoly. Its primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted. Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of presentation must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong. Comment is free, but facts are sacred.

C. P. Scott, 1921

Gathering news is still a newspaper's primary office. Increasingly, however, Australian newspapers offer more than news. They provide business forecasts, sharemarket advice, lifestyle sections, Budget specials, and all manner of targeted lift-outs and supplements.

They also offer opinion. The then editor of *The Australian*, Paul Kelly, stated almost a decade ago: 'Quality Australian newspapers decided in the 1980s to respond to the electronic media by offering more opinion and commentary.' (1993: 6)

On the whole, newspapers appear to take the Press Council's fifth principle – making fact and opinion clearly distinguishable – seriously. The labels 'comment', 'analysis' and 'opinion' appear beneath bylines. Opinion pieces are often placed on a clearly designated op/ed page. This is as it should be, according to Tom Koch: 'News, as we conceive it is ... about 'facts': what occurred at a specific moment with a specific series of actors ... The 'success', or 'failure', 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of these events ... are not facts but opinions.' (1991: 49)

However, a recent report commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority casts doubt on whether labelling or segregation of opinion works. (*Sources of News and Current Affairs*, 2001) Professor David Flint, launching the report, stated:

... sometimes comment is indistinguishable from news reporting. The signals or branding that journalists say indicate what is comment and what is news are either not understood or they are just not there... over 60% have difficulty distinguishing fact, news, from comment. (2001: 33)

Professor John Henningham, of the School of Journalism at the University of Queensland, believes that ‘comment has increasingly become entwined with reporting to the extent that it is often difficult to distinguish fact from opinion.’ (2001) Former Prime Minister Paul Keating, speaking to the Sydney Institute last year, condemned such blurring. ‘I’m not just talking here about the obvious sloppiness of commentators, but the routine use of headlines and placement to imply comment and to denote weight.’ (2000: 1)

Kelly warned that comment is not ‘risk-free’. ‘Editors know that interpretation and opinion is a double-edged sword; when it is intelligent and insightful, it enhances a paper. But when it’s not, it harms the paper.’ (1993: 6)

Certainly, some comment is trivial or poorly written. Leiter contends that having ‘something to say’ and ‘having the knowledge and resources to qualify as a commentator on a given subject’ are essential qualities. (2000: 493) Yet many columnists either pontificate on matters on which they are not expert or give an opinion so biased or personal that it adds nothing useful to a debate. Playwright Louis Nowra deplores this ‘noxious’ growth, singling out the ‘shouters and ravers’, the ones ‘trying to achieve a pseudo intimacy’ or columnists ‘who write as if the girls are having a bit of a natter down at the coffee shop’. (1999: 9)

But what about news reporting, where ‘journalistic orthodoxy dictates that personal opinion should be set aside and objectivity is the grail’? (Simons, 2001b: 6) Henningham believes that journalists ‘are increasingly encouraged to allow their own views and interpretations to come through in their stories’. (quoted in Conley, 1997: 285) This may well be damaging to the transfer of news, of verifiable facts to readers. If a paper is seen to be biased, or crusading, some readers may switch off. ‘Boldness of opinion ... can close the minds of those who do not share it ... journalists should be very cautious about stating opinion ... in news stories, lest they alienate segments of the audience.’ (Fuller, 1996: 88)

Michael Warby sees the referendum on the republic as a clear example of newspapers seeking to lead the public to a definite conclusion, and not just within the confines of opinion pieces. ‘Coverage and commentary was overwhelmingly for a “Yes” vote.’ (2000: 14) Warby’s was not the only critical voice about that issue. Complaining that *The Age* and *The Australian* published three times as much pro- as anti-republic material leading up to the referendum, Dr Nancy Stone, of the Samuel Griffith Society, said that ‘while it was a newspaper’s right to express its own view in editorials ... in opinion pieces, most readers would hope to see a roughly equal division for and against’. (quoted in Steketee, 2000: 1)

These days, most newspaper articles have bylines on pieces but, confusingly, not all of these stories or pieces are comment; many are straight news reports. Reporters of television news and current affairs may sign off a story with a comment, or may be ‘interviewed’ by the anchorperson as to a story’s meaning or significance. This is particularly true for political commentators who not only report events, but ‘explain’

what they mean. Flint sees this as a major change: 'From being reporters of news, our political journalists in reporting news have become, for better or worse, unelected participants in the political arena'. (2001: 27) David Conley worries that readers may not have access to enough objective information.

... readers do not care about a reporter's opinions – they only want the facts ... Some stories, however, require interpretation. The central questions are whether the reporter has separated fact from opinion, and whether sufficient information has been provided for readers to make up their own minds. (1997: 285)

Keating doubts whether newspapers are willing to let readers decide. 'Australian editors far less than the best of their American, European and, increasingly, Asian, counterparts, seem prepared to give readers room to make their own judgments'. (2000: 1) Hugh Brown, editor of the Australian e-journal, *Online Opinion*, agrees. 'I'd rather be told that the government had announced policy XXX ... than be told that the announcement was a "damaging backflip". It's up to the voters to decide whether it's damaging or not.' (2001) Flint also believes that, increasingly, comment is pushing out fact.

Some months ago a federal minister was suspended briefly from Parliament. I wanted to read the facts ... I could not find them. There was a lot of interpretation, comparisons. But what actually happened? (2001: 33)

If comment is taking up the space traditionally reserved for news, then this is dismaying. As Koch states, 'For democracy to have meaning, its members must be able to act responsibly, and their ability to do so depends, in turn, on the availability of accurate and reasonably complete information.' News is one means by which they get it. (1991:3)

Cotton (2001: 3) believes that reporting on Parliament has declined, with Question Time the only event still extensively covered. Newspapers see themselves much less as 'journals of record' and no longer provide extensive coverage of parliamentary doings. Kelly states:

Committee reports don't get the attention they deserve. The media is far more interested in tactics than covering policy because it's easier for journalists ... The public, on the other hand, is more interested in results, the things that are happening that will affect them. (quoted in Cotton, 2001: 3)

Laurie Oakes agrees.

People aren't less interested in parliamentary proceedings these days. If the stuff was in the paper, they'd read it. However, I don't think newspapers will go back to that. They decided they had to go more with comment and interpretive analysis rather than just reporting what happened in the parliament. (quoted in Cotton, 2001: 3)

So why would a newspaper sacrifice precious news space for comment? Alan Kohler, columnist for the *Australian Financial Review*, may provide one answer.

An editor could hire a group of investigative journalists who'd investigate companies for three months and come back with a [true] story the lawyers would butcher. But, if he hires a columnist who says he thinks someone is a crook, it's defensible if it's a fair comment. It's a cheaper and more efficient way to go about the same process. (quoted in Stretton, 1990: 112)

Do commentators have more leeway with the facts? Alan Knight, Professor of Journalism at Central Queensland University, thinks they do. 'News seeks to establish facts through accurate, clear and concise reporting of identified sources,' he says. 'Columnists are journalists unburdened of any of these conventions and practices.' (2001) Sally White asserts that 'personal columns do not have to be balanced, fair or even accurate.' (1996: 29-30) Peter Craven, editor of the *Best Australian Essays* series, cites the recent debate about the 'stolen generation' as one that exposed some of the shortcomings of commentary. Describing much of P. P. McGuinness's analysis as 'shoddy', Craven states: '...a whole area of talk ... has been based on unreliable sources that have not been sifted.' (2001: 13)

Business commentary is another huge growth area for newspapers. But James Dunn sounds a warning about the 'mind-boggling diversity of opinion' there. Not all of them can be right, he reasons. 'While the information revolution has opened the entrails of the stockmarket ... what has not been democratized is the ability to interpret them.' (Dunn, 2001: 34)

Kelly expressed a concern almost a decade ago that 'the values of our own journalistic culture are too permissive about opinions and too cavalier about facts'. (1993:6) He states now: 'Opinion is devalued if it doesn't have authority. If you have, say, a 21-year-old writing comment, then you've got problems.' He stressed the need for outside experts, not journalists alone, to provide authority and balance. 'A variety of opinion is very important. If noone is thinking outside the tram tracks or the political parameters, then the debates won't be very interesting.' (2001) Opinions differ on whether Australian debate is balanced and diverse enough. Warby complains that the 'narrow-minded provincialism of the Australian intelligentsia' prevents their conceding 'a place for conservative ideas in the spectrum of public debate'. (2000: 14) Keating believes a 'right-wing punditocracy ... dominates the opinion pages of the newspapers'. (2000: 1) Both can't be right. But if commentators from left and right both feel badly done by, then perhaps debate is more balanced than they think.

The correction of factual errors in opinion pieces is one area of concern. Staff at the *Canberra Times* are bound by a strict code of practice regarding comment that states that 'Editorials, analytical articles and commentaries are subject to the same standards of factual accuracy as news reports'. The code explicitly states that 'where the words or actions of people are subjected to critical comment these are fairly represented so that readers can draw their own, possibly different, conclusions.' (Waterford, 2001) But such

stringency does not apply at all newspapers, particularly at the sensational end of the market. The recent Press Council case study, *A Matter of Opinion*, is an example (Australian Press Council, 2001b). A complainant called a reporter's statement that police had been 'itching' to kill a long-time criminal 'wild and irresponsible'. The editor of the newspaper did not grapple with the issues raised in the complaint personally. The journalist was expected to be self-regulating. Is this good enough?

The lack of swift and prominent redress is a major problem for people who have been wronged. Many people resort to letters to the editor to correct mistakes that would otherwise stand as fact in the public record. Keating, who contends that 'fact-checking is not only foreign to the journalistic culture, but antithetical to it', believes that the 'quick and graceful correction of error is a rare event'. He calls for a 'speedy and prominent right of reply'. (2000: 1) Richard Walsh concedes that: 'Papers obsessively correct absurdly trivial errors ... but often fail to correct major mistakes, except under threat of litigation.' (quoted in Keating, 2000: 1) It should be so simple. 'If it is wrong, correct it. Promptly. And where those who read the error, heard the error or saw the error are most likely to receive it.' (Flint, 1999: 12-13) But this is unlikely, as Keating complains:

The likes of [Alan] Ramsey can impute and misinform in cinemascop on the opinion page on Saturday; the correction will be in a small box generally at the bottom of the page on Page 2 on Tuesday; with none of the positioning and a fraction of the readership. (2000: 1)

Journalistic egos may be part of the problem. Margaret Simons recently castigated political journalists for not coming clean about past mistakes.

A basic requirement is the ability to admit error – not only factual error, but also errors of judgment and prediction. But this isn't how political journalism works. When the political journalist has been surprised or alarmed, ignorance cannot and must not be exposed. History is quickly rewritten...The journalist is always all-knowing. (Simons, 2001a:15)

Kelly finds that only too easy to accept. 'Nobody wants to admit they're wrong. *Nobody*.' (2001)

In many cases, there may be a lack of agreement of what the 'facts' really are. Chris Nash, Director of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, believes that the 'definition of fact is strongly influenced by the social experience and perspectives of the journalists, and target demographics of the publications'. (2001) Koch would agree.

The assertion, for example, that 'drugs are evil', and that only more monies will combat their spread is not truth, but a premise, albeit one accepted daily by reporters who write and editors who run stories based on its validity... news requires a system and technology that will allow it to examine and verify the assumptions that subjects state as 'fact' and are typically reported without comment as 'truth'. (Koch, 1991: 50)

But can any such system liberate journalists, even those with the best intentions, from the imperative of ‘hype’? Glover (1992: 31) doubts it.

... a commitment to the truth, in the wider sense of the word, is the one thing most obviously lacking in Australian journalism... The reporter’s commitment, in practice, is to boosting the significance of the story ... The result is not only that people come to mistrust the word of journalists, realising one must turn the heat down on every story by a couple of degrees to get near the truth, but also that people will simply turn the knob to ‘off’.

So the problem lies not in comment alone, nor in comment’s increasing seepage into ‘straight’ news, but rather in a journalistic culture facing the pressures of commercialisation, sensationalism and dumbing down. It may also be hard for journalists to hold on to their ethics when faced with the temptations of celebrity journalism. However, Professor Mark Pearson of Bond University warns that ‘with the cult of personality you can’t forget there’s a cult of accountability’. He encourages journalists to develop ‘media literacy’ to assist them to become self-regulating. External regulation does not seem to be an answer. Flint describes that as ‘a solution which is worse than the problem’. (*Media Report*, 2001)

Given that opinion is here to stay, what other steps need to be taken to improve it and disentangle it from factual reporting? Craven suggests giving ‘writers the space to articulate their arguments fully and to present the evidence for their views’. (2001: 13) Kelly calls for diversity of opinion and the use of outside authorities and experts to provide it. (2001) More emphasis on fact-checking would also be a start. Pearson calls for ‘a lot more public literacy about the media’ and cites a need for ‘the school system to teach people better at an early age, how to read and interpret the media’. (*Media Report*, 2001)

Why is this issue so important? Warby contends that ‘the printed word has the ring of authority to it. The authority of the printed word is magnified if it comes from someone considered reputable.’ (1999: 6) Brown says the ‘media have an aura of authority that most consumers don’t question – they just accept that “it was in the paper”.’ (2001) Newspapers need to get it right the first time, in news reports *and* in comment. Simons states:

We live in complex times, and these days, most important news stories need explanation of the facts, as well as straight reporting. Good journalistic commentary should act as a kind of information brokerage, translating the facts into knowledge – something we can think and argue about. (2001a:15)

Provided they *are* the facts, of course.

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