

Hold the Front Page! We Need Free Media, Not an Order of Mates

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The other day, I stood outside the strangely silent building where I began life as a journalist. It is no longer the human warren that was Consolidated Press in Sydney, though ghosts still drink at the King's Head pub nearby. As a cadet reporter, I might have walked on to the set of Lewis Milestone's *The Front Page*. Men in red braces did shout, "Hold the front page", and tilt back their felt hats and talk rapidly with a roll-your-own attached indefinitely to their lower lip. You could feel the presses rumbling beneath and smell the ink.

This was the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*, where I learned to report crime, courts, sport, killer bees, Rotary meetings and the arrival of almost famous people from that mysterious land, "overseas". The proprietor was a former boxer, Frank Packer, immortalised in Cyril Pearl's *Wild Men of Sydney*, and knighted for his vendettas against anyone to the political left of Pontius Pilate.

"Sir Frank" was seen on the editorial floor on Saturday nights after the races. If his horse had lost, fear and loathing were a presence. Once, he cancelled all the late editions and exiled the production staff to the King's Head, where their necessary return was negotiated from a phone on the public bar.

My only encounter with Sir Frank was when I foolishly boarded a geriatric lift precariously filled with the corpulent proprietor and his two gargantuan sons, Clyde and Kerry. "Who the fuck are you?" said Kerry, later to find distinction as the money bags behind World Series cricket.

The training was superb. A style developed by a highly literate editor, Brian Penton, who had published poetry in the *Telegraph*, instilled a respect for English grammar and the value and informed simplicity. Words like "during" were banned; "in" was quite enough. The passive voice was considered lazy and banned, along with most clichés and adjectives — except those in the splenetic editorials demanding all Reds went to hell. When I boarded a rust-streaked Greek ship for Europe, I was sorry to leave; I had begun to learn about the craft of journalism and about those who controlled it and used it and why.

A lesson that endures is that when the rich and powerful own the means of popular enlightenment and dress it up as a "free press", bestowing a false respectability called the "mainstream", the opposite is usually true. Sir Frank turned out to be a minnow compared compared with Rupert Murdoch.

Murdoch bought the Packer newspapers in 1972 and today controls 70 per cent of Australia's capital city press, along with dozens of local and regional newspapers. In

Adelaide and Brisbane he owns almost everything. Two conglomerates dedicated to a doctrinaire, often extreme world view — Murdoch's News Limited and Fairfax Media — control 86 per cent of the Australian press.

This absence of choice and real dissent, let alone "balance", extends to the national broadcaster, the ABC, a progeny of the BBC run as a corporate hierarchy. There are honourable exceptions, of course, among them Philip Dorling, Kate McClymont and Quentin Dempster. Unlike the US and Britain, independent online journalism is rare. The result is a sameness that seems remarkable and demeaning in a first world, educated society.

Murdoch's augmented obsessions rule. The Labor government of Julia Gillard is loathed by his newspapers. This is inexplicable as Labor's policies are more or less those of the conservative coalition of Tony "Mad Monk" Abbott. When Communications Minister Stephen Conroy proposed timid post-Leveson regulation, he was depicted as Stalin in the fashion of the Sun in London. When Labor's prime minister in 2010, Kevin Rudd, announced a modest tax on the mega-profits of the mining companies, he was deposed by his own party following a propaganda campaign across the media, largely funded by the mining lobby.

Public perception of non-conformist minorities, especially Australia's indigenous people, is often taken from the media. These unique first people are seen as "bludgers" – spongers. This inverts a truth that is never news: a parasitical, lucrative white industry is effectively licensed by federal and state governments to exploit indigenous hardship.

Like America, Australia in its early colonial days had a vibrant press, a "medley of competing voices", wrote Edward Smith Hall, editor of the crusading *Sydney Monitor*. Journalists were "the voice of the people" and not of the "trade of authority". In the late 19th century, there were 143 independent newspapers in New South Wales alone. By 1988, the empires of Murdoch, Fairfax, Packer empires and Alan Bond, later imprisoned for the country's biggest corporate fraud, dominated the "mainstream" as an exclusive Order of Mates.

This is true across much of the democratic world. The medley of voices on the internet has dented monopoly media power, though the same monopolies are now consuming the web. "Social media" are largely introverted, a look-at-me peep show for the digitally besotted. As the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta approaches, hard-won rights such as the presumption of innocence are buried beneath the tentacular might of corporate systems.

Ironically, in the "information age", censorship by omission is a weapon of this power – the silencing of whistleblowers without whom journalism can never be free, and of a compliant, privileged "left". Militarised policing, displayed recently in Boston, consumes an America waging "perpetual war" and now threatening China. In Europe, a savage class war rages from Greece to Spain and Britain. It is no surprise that newspapers in thrall to this corrupt power are ailing.

Edmund Burke mythologised the press as a Fourth Estate. Today, we need a "fifth estate" right across the media and in journalism training and on the streets. We need those like Edward Smith Hall, who see themselves as agents of people not power.

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