

**With newspaper circulation declining all over the world and TV news in crisis, what does the future hold for journalism? Is there a magic formula to restore the good old days? What is it?**

I was reading the other day the diaries of William Howard Russell, the great journalist who worked for The Times of London in the 19th century. I was trying to assess how journalism has changed over the years. See what you think. Poor old Russell has just returned from reporting the Crimean War, a campaign that has made him famous. The editor is puzzling over what to do with him and someone says "Let's bung him on the subs desk. That'll bring him down a peg or two".

So the editor calls Russell into his office and knowing Russell has no subbing experience, instructs him on his duties. "You are to read the copy of the reporters and exercise UNLIMITED and MERCILESS power in dealing with it, suppressing all suspicious adjectives and all statements not connected with actual fact". Well, 150 years later, they're still at it. No change there.

Even in the middle of the 19th century journalists had expense accounts. Here is Russell with the travelling newsman's lament that is as pertinent now as then. "I did my accounts for The Times this evening and find that I am short a good deal of money. How can this possibly be?"

He tries to negotiate a wage increase. To get the full effect, wherever Russell has written The Times, I am going to substitute The Age. "There has grown up a mystique that working for The Age is not so much a job as a way of life, akin to membership of some exclusive and dedicated order, implying a prestige that far outweighs any shortcoming in pay. This notion is naturally fostered by the management." Not much change there.

Finally that bane of all journalists – drink. "Woke up this morning with the intolerable flavour of claret and cold punch combined about me and wondered yet again why I did it all – especially the singing of those Irish songs."

So some things don't change. But others have changed dramatically. We have passed through – or are still passing through – the information revolution. We can argue over when this revolution began. Some say with the invention of the silicon chip. Others the founding of the internet or its exploitation to develop the world wide web.

But there was a more important event: the day that changed our world, that day in the late 70s or early 80s when the supply of information for the first time exceeded demand.

Until that day, information was a relatively limited and valuable commodity. An entire economic sector – the media industry – flourished on the basis of defining, processing and marketing the scarce supply of information. Think back a little, back to the days when journalists went out into the world, spiral-bound notebook in hand, to find the information without which the whole newspaper process could not begin. They went out on spec, full of hope and optimism, with no guarantee that they would be successful. If they weren't, then on some newspapers in the days when ethics were also scarce, they had to make it up.

Early in my career I worked on such a newspaper, Truth. Never work for a newspaper with the word "truth" in its title. Saturday afternoon with no story for tomorrow's front page, the editor said, "You're supposed to be an imaginative young man. Imagine me a story." To my everlasting shame I did. I invented a sex pervert who was terrorising women on crowded suburban trains. He was known as "The Hook" because his technique was to fashion a hook out of a wire coat hanger and conceal it up the sleeve of his jacket.

Pressed together in a crowded compartment, the hook would lower the coat hanger, hook a woman's skirt and gently raise it until he could catch a glimpse of the top of a stocking.

The editor was delighted. The only change he made was to have The Hook active that very Saturday evening, preying on women travelling into the centre of the city for Saturday night out. HOOK SEX PERV STRIKES AGAIN.

There were no denials from any of the authorities in any of the other Sundays and it looked as if we had got away with it. Then on the Tuesday morning my telephone rang and a voice said, 'Detective Sergeant Ray Iggleden, Bankstown police. Did you write that story about the hook sex perv on Sunday?' No good lying I thought. "Yes I did." And Sergeant Iggleden said, "Just wanted to let you know that we got the bastard this morning."

But for newspapers and journalists not willing to make it up, every day was a battle to locate that scarce commodity, fresh information. Western rounds, police rounds, the courts, parliament, the shipping round. I first met Graham Perkin when he was doing the shipping round for The Age and I was doing it for The Herald. We were friendly rivals, both harvesting information and there was never enough.

Then on that unknown day, because of computers, advanced telecommunications, the interconnection of sources and the speed of dissemination of the resulting output, on that unknown day the supply of information suddenly exceeded demand.

Although the precise date is unrecorded, we have an estimate of the quantum of information involved. [I am indebted to the author/journalist/computer expert, Sandra Jobson for this information] In a single 24-hour period, some 200 million new, identifiable items of information created, captured and communicated.

Also of interest is who came up with this figure. It was Reuters, not the news agency, but its financial information service, for the bulk of the 200 million new items were pieces of financial information. Today the figure for the amount of new information produced in a single day would be incalculable. We have entered the world of information overload, where the problem is not one of finding news but of fending it off.

Take America with its wall to wall, 24-hour cable TV information environment. There the life span of a news item is reckoned to be about three minutes. So great is the pressure of incoming information, that all except the most important items have to make way for new items queuing up behind them. They enjoy some 200 seconds of media limelight and then they are gone.

We are drowning in a sea of information so deep that the richer and busier of us are prepared to pay to avoid it. One example: in a media world in Britain where newspapers struggle and titles disappear, the success story is a magazine called *The Week*. *The Week* undertakes to read all the newspapers and magazines on its readers' behalf, decide what is important, then cut it down to manageable lengths. Nothing is sacred. Everything goes through this process. "This is what happened" – 50 words – "this is what it means" – 50 words "this is what is likely to happen next" – 50 words. New book out "Long version of what it is about" – 200 words. "Short version – 25". Summary of the critics' views" – 75 words.

Readers buy it to avoid reading newspapers or watching TV news and yet to feel that they know what is going on in the world. Of course, some of them still watch TV and read the occasional newspaper but their initial loyalty is to *The Week*. So those who do read papers come to them – as do people who listen to the radio or watch teletext – already knowing the newspaper's main news stories.

Journalists realise this and this is what is behind the desperate search to offer readers something else to compensate for it, the search for the magic formula that will bring readers flooding back, a return to the good old days when information was scarce and news was king.

So today's highly-paid editorial executives are the persons who are thought to possess some magic touch that puts them in tune with what the public wants, albeit backed up with reports from agencies tapping into focus groups of captive cross-sections of "the audience". Some think that more and more "lifestyle" sections are the answer; others say more celebrity journalism, a sort of daily version of *Hello* or *OK* is the way to go.

Many believe that bigger is better – the more sections a newspaper has, the more readers it will attract. My former editor on the *Sunday Times*, Harold Evans, held the view that a newspaper was like a supermarket – you enter it, you choose what you want and you ignore the rest. I suspect that this is true because I have yet to meet anyone who will admit to reading every section of the increasingly large Saturday newspapers.

So how are we to overcome this problem of a flood of information? We have to redefine what our main task is. It is no longer to break news – although it is satisfying to do so – because, as I said earlier, many readers will have already seen it on TV, or heard it on the radio. Nor is it to tell readers how we feel about the news, a style of journalism called "therapy news" full of indulgence and sentimentalism, dominated by the reporters' own emotional reactions.

The reporting of Diana's death and funeral was a disgrace to journalism. As reporters fought to be first to reveal how it affected them and how soon they broke down and cried, when what the nation was crying out for was an analysis and possible explanation for one of the most amazing events of the century.

The magic formula is to offer your readers an explanation for what has happened, an account that will put matters in context, slot them into a historical framework, enable the reader to understand. This is not easy. To do it, a journalist needs time to reflect, to

read, to consult – free from the pressure of deadlines. David Halberstam said that the reporting of the Vietnam War was fatally flawed because journalists tried to cover it as a daily breaking story. No one paused to reflect, "to look back and see where we had been, and to try to understand where we were going."

If we can help our readers to understand, then we can aspire to become the public intellectuals of our society, perhaps even the popular philosophers of the day. I'm sure many of you have already been thinking along those lines because good journalists constantly reassess their role. We are lucky to be able to do this. In other parts of the world, the role of journalists and newspapers is clear and constant. They are an arm of government, an integral part of the ruling process and any idea that journalists would question that role, that there might be even the slightest doubt that this is what their media is for, would be met with bewilderment and incomprehension.

It's hard to imagine that back in the 30s, the editor of the *Volchiser Beobachter* ever said to his secretary, "Send this piece back to Heir Hitler and tell him it doesn't work." Or the editor of *Pravda* ever telling his staff: "Lets do an in-depth piece on Putin. How did he get to be leader? Who swung the votes and how? Lots of quotes and colour stuff about smoke filled rooms. I want to be able to smell the intrigue." [You know how editors speak.] And then the section head saying, "But how are you going to get it past the proprietor" And the editor replying – as editors are known to do – "Aw, we won't tell him till it's in the paper."

But we have the privilege in Australia of deciding how best we fit into a democracy, of asking ourselves "What's it all about?" Of course, we're not the first of the tribe to ask this. Russell wrote 150 years ago, "All a journalist wants is to see what is done and describe it to the best of his ability". Surely we can do better than that and indeed Russell did, rallying against British military incompetence in the Crimean War to such effect that he brought down a government. My own paper, *The Sunday Times*, announced in its first issue on 20th October 1822:

"We promise that our journal shall be the consistent and faithful reporter of existing circumstances, and the free and independent commentator on public men and public measures, at once representing things as they really are, and unfolding the secret springs by which government is activated." Getting better but it has a certain dated Victorian flavour about it.

What about the late George Munster's description of his weekly, *The Nation Review*; "lean and nose like a ferret". We're getting there. I had a colleague who is a Quaker and I heard him on several occasions refer to journalism as "the Lord's work". I asked him about this one day. He said Quakers believed that it was possible to have a secular vocation. That, if you did your everyday job to the best of your ability, that if you behaved ethically to those with whom you came into contact, that if you took the opportunity during your day to promote a little more understanding, and, if the occasion arose, you defended the weak and underprivileged against the powerful and well-connected, then the name of your job was irrelevant – you were about the Lord's work. And then he said, "Good journalism does all these things and often does them more than other occupations."

You'll note that he said good journalism – journalism that produces stories that are in the public interest, not stories like the one which appeared in a certain British newspaper not so long ago as part of its coverage of a local election.

It featured on page three, a photo of a well-endowed topless girl call Maria Whitaker, "a true blue beauty" who had been "lusting on the hustings" for her local Tory candidate, one Greg Knight. The paper further informed its readers that Knight was by profession a solicitor, and that therefore Miss Whitaker had told him that he could "handle her briefs" any time he liked.

That's just the beginning. I monitored this paper over a 10-day period and found the following headlines: "Kind Act Led To Love Torture", "Just A Naked Run At Twilight", "Girl Rapist Sent To Jail", "Sex Manual Was Too Hot For Teacher" and "Mistress Was Tied To Table." Now the intriguing thing was that not one, not one of these events had taken place in Britain – it was all those over-sexed foreigners again.

Do we want to be remembered as journalists who wrote stories like these, or do we want to be remembered as journalists who helped make their paper the conscience of the community? Who kept an eye on the behaviour of politicians and big businessmen. Journalists who could not be bought or intimidated – and if an editor stood up to the proprietor [if not all the time, we're only human] at least some of the time, an editor who gave his most obsessive reporter his head when the story warranted it, the editor who was prepared to pay the price, whatever it was, to print the truth.

One of the reasons that journalism is such an exciting craft is that you can never tell what effect even the smallest story will have until it is published. Time magazine published an item in 1962 about thalidomide victims. [Thalidomide, you will remember, was a drug sold in the 1950s and 1960s as a remedy for morning sickness that caused some 8,000 deformed births around the world.] It was read by an American, Thomas Diamond, and his wife, who noticed that the deformities were the same as their own baby son. Coincidence, they thought, because everyone knew that thalidomide had never been marketed in the United States.

A few months later the coverage given to the case of Sherry Finkbein, the American woman who had taken thalidomide in pregnancy and who had gone to Sweden for an abortion, enlightened the Diamonds. Thalidomide had not been marketed in the United States but it had been given out to unsuspecting women for clinical trial. The Diamonds' son became the first test case for thalidomide compensation in the United States. The publication of the Time magazine article and the stories about Mrs. Finkbein thus had repercussions far beyond anything ever envisaged by the journalists who wrote these stories.

The 26 thalidomide children born in Quebec thought that they had lost any chance of compensation, because local law required that personal injury compensation cases had to be started within one year of the injury – and they did not know within that year that thalidomide was the cause of the injury. But a Cleveland law firm that had successfully handled other Canadian compensation cases, thought that Arthur Raynes, the lawyer who had fought

the Diamond's case might find a solution, so he introduced the Quebec victims to him. Raynes worked out a way of suing for the Quebec victims in the state of New Jersey and won them handsome compensation. But how did the first lawyer know about Raynes? He had read about him in the newspapers. Every editor here today has examples of apparently insignificant stories that have turned out to be real movers and shakers.

There has to be a market out there still, for a newspaper that does not treat its readers as idiots. Which will not trivialise the news, which will report and interpret and reveal and campaign and which will do it in an interesting and authoritative manner – something Graham Perkin strived for.

There are three roads open to us. We can take the naked run at twilight while handling the filling of Miss Whitaker's briefs.

We can take the middle of the road anodyne "how to furnish your patio" lifestyle journalism.

Or we can opt for my friend, the Quaker's road of an important and decent vocation.

Thank you.