

Journalism 2004 Conference
“The Story Behind The Story”
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Merlyn Theatre CUB Malthouse

Adele Ferguson

Michael Harvey

Steve Waldon

AR: I think we'd be in a position to start today's proceedings, or this part of them. It's now two o'clock and consider it started. My name is Andrew Rule. I now work for *The Good Weekend Magazine* after many years at *The Age* and other places. I'd like to introduce our panel today who are addressing the topic "the story behind the story" and you have here starting on my left Adele Ferguson who is Chief Business Commentator with *BRW Magazine*, you have next to Adele, Michael Harvey the Chief Politics Reporter of *The Herald Sun*, so he's leading light in the Canberra Press Gallery, and we have on the far left Steve Waldon, a man who I've known for probably twenty-five plus years who's done virtually everything in newspapers and a lot of other things. Steve is currently a Senior Writer at *The Age* and he just wishes that they'd find something that he could do for longer than six months because he's done most jobs there. We will start today in that same order. Now I'll just tell you briefly about Adele. In her 12 years of journalism Adele has won at least four major awards for her coverage of prominent business events. Her analysis of companies and events is watched closely by the investment community. Her corporate coverage extends to the media, telecommunications and the new economy. That's the general feel good stuff. Why she's really here is that last year Adele won the coveted Quill Award for the best business story in any medium for her very tough revealing piece about the past of the then ASIC boss David Nott. Now Mr Nott for reasons of his own decided to resign shortly before Adele's piece was published. So you can make your own conclusions about that. That's certainly a feather in her cap. So without further ado I'd like to introduce Adele Ferguson to talk to us about the story behind her story.

AF: I'd like to say that it was the hardest story I've ever written in my career. It turned out to be a legal minefield, it was a war of nerves and it just ended up like a truck out of control. But before I go on about what happened in the past I'll just recap on the story in case you're not familiar with it. David Nott was the Chairman of ASIC which is the corporation watchdog. What that means is it's one of the most powerful regulators in the country and it can make or break a company and the people who run it and it has many times. And the story was about the secret past of David Nott and he had two years of his career that he never ever mentioned on his resume in *Business Who's Who* on the ASIC website. And what I did was I had a look at what that two years was and it was a two year legal partnership he was involved in where the partner he sat in an office with was involved in Sales Tax fraud. And it went right up to the High Court. The partner was banned as a director, he was struck off the Law Register and for reasons of the Crimes Act I can't say what actually happened to him. And I never heard of this section of the Crimes Act until I started getting involved in this story. And what happened was the day I decided to do it my biggest mistake was ringing up the partner and saying I'm thinking of doing a profile on David Nott. Within half an hour of making that call ASIC was on the phone to me saying we hear you're doing a hatchet job on David Nott. 24 hours later I got a legal letter from

David Nott had hired his own personal lawyers to say if you proceed with this story we're going to sue you. Have you heard of the Crimes Act, section whatever of the Crimes Act? And of course we hadn't. And what it said was anyone who's been involved in breaching the Crimes Act you can't say what they've done. So we then thought what the hell do we do because it was such a salient thing that this man had done. Because David Nott was the Chairman of ASIC we felt that it was important that the public know about his past because someone in that position should be beyond reproach and should have a very transparent past if they're going about investigating people who are running business.

So what we did was that we hired lawyers, external lawyers, we had our own lawyers who just poured over what we could do about this story and the conclusion was you couldn't breach the Crimes Act. So I went to the courts and I could read what happened with this case so it's public records but you can't actually print it which is extraordinary. Going to the Supreme Court I found that some of the records were missing. I did an FOI search to the DPP and found that some of the things had black things scrawled out of them when it mentioned David Nott. And it just made it just absolutely so hard to do the story. Contacts that said they'd help me dried up because they were afraid of if David Nott or ASIC found out that they'd been helping something could happen to them. So it just turned into an absolute nightmare. And you know probably every few days I was getting another letter from David Nott or Ian Collie threatening that they would sue us. And then suddenly there was a press conference and David Nott announced that he was retiring two and a half years before his contract was up. And his lawyers rang our lawyers and said don't assume that because he's resigning that it's got anything to do with the story you're about to publish. And even in the press conference he mentioned there's a story coming out but don't presume that it's got anything to do with that. So that then got everybody thinking well what's this story about? So there was a lot of speculation and then there was a lot of stresses about do we go early with the story because he's now resigned and it'll probably come out and all those weeks of work will be to waste.

So what we did was we decided instead of running it *BRW* we'd run it in the *Australian Financial Review*, and we did. And he came out with a press release denying it but has never sued. *BRW* ran it the following week and it got a lot of television exposure, it got picked up the newspapers and radio. So it really had quite an impact. Really at the time I was seven months pregnant and I was running around and it was very stressful and I was thinking why the hell am I doing this at this time? I could be doing other things as I'm about to leave. But the thing that made me decide to keep going was a few things. One, this Crimes Act, how outrageous it is. We're meant to have freedom of speech and people can hide behind a section in a Crimes Act and not reveal what really is happening. And secondly it makes you think about how much due diligence do governments do when they hire these people. And that was the reason why I wrote the story and why I continued on when it seemed like everything was just going crazy.

AR: Thank you. Not only it is a good story but told within the time which is a fantastic attribute for a journalist. I've certainly got some questions later when we ask questions in another 20 odd minutes so I hope people here have some too because that's something we all need to know about this draconian thing. And I think Adele probably knows more about it than the rest of us.

Our second speaker today is Michael Harvey. As you can tell we are doing it in order. As I said before he's Chief Politics Reporter of *The Herald Sun*. He's one of that gallery in Canberra that people like to disparage, often unfairly I feel. Michael Harvey started as a cadet at the *Melbourne Herald*. I remember he looks about 28 now well he looked about 14 when he started. He claims that his career in journalism was sparked by a desire to be a golf writer. And in fact if I remember correctly I think he and a partner in crime might have published the *Hackers Guide to Melbourne Golf Courses*, or something, which I think still sells around the world. That's why Michael wears nice suits. It's not from his wages. It's from the golf book. He's worked most things in journalism, possibly not quite as many as Steve Waldon, but Michael's worked the police rounds, courts, transport rounds, state rounds and Canberra repeatedly. He is a recidivist. He goes back to Canberra all the time. They can't keep him away. He's also been Deputy Chief of Staff for his sins. Why he's here today? Last year he won a Quill Award for the story we'll all remember about the ugly incident in the Senate chamber late at night when strong drink had been consumed by Senator Andrew Bartlett. I won't say any more than that. Over to you Michael.

MH: Thanks Andrew. Good afternoon everyone. How do you do? Pleased to be here in my Peter Jackson two-for-one suit sale special. About as good as it gets. My story that I'm going to tell is in many ways in contrast to Adele's recollection of her story she worked on insofar as there was no big lead up to the Andrew Bartlett story. It was in a way very explosive in every sense, not just the nature of the story but the way in which it occurred. It was a genuine news story that was up against deadline which had to be acted on very quickly and it's very flattering to be the person here talking about it but in fact my two colleagues Gerald McManus and Jason Frenkle worked on this story as well because it required a bureau effort to turn it around and confirm it in a very short space of time.

The Andrew Bartlett incident came at a time when the Democrats were in trouble anyway and their problems had been characterized by basically ??? large stories every day about their internal bleeding and problems. The Democrats are great for journalists because they just tell you what's going on in fairly graphic detail. But we hadn't expected something like this. So this was a Friday afternoon and in fact I wasn't working. Fortunately I had my office phone switched through to my mobile and got a call as you do from somebody who was aware of broad outline of what had occurred the previous night in the Senate chamber when at a Coalition Christmas party Andrew Bartlett had absconded with a number of bottles of wine. When he'd been challenged to return them he then embarked on, as he admits, a fairly aggressive and at times abusive confrontation with a female Liberal Senator and that continued on into the Chamber where he was seen to physically accost her and there were several witnesses to this, one of who must have spoken to somebody who was in another state because that's where I got the initial tip from. And so its one of those situations where you're on a day off and you're thinking this is a great story. I have to do it and you drop what you're doing and go into work.

What was the key to getting the story up? Because obviously on television that night or in subsequent nights when the story was played out, there was actual camera footage of Andrew Bartlett with Jeanie Ferris, the Liberal Senator, and you can see the horrified looks on people's faces as they witnessed what was going on. On the day

of writing the story we didn't see that footage. We assumed something must have existed but there was no way of getting access to it. So we had a tip that Bartlett had assaulted somebody and that was it.

Basically it was a case of using contacts so myself and my two colleagues hit the phones essentially, ringing every Senator that we knew to try to find out about this. It was late at night. There weren't that many people in the chamber. Finally someone mentioned the name of Jeannie Ferris and there was no great mystery to this. Simply we approached Jeannie. She was still at Parliament House the day after. She was still very badly shaken and upset by what had occurred. There are a lot of incidents that happen in Parliament House that are to do with drunkenness even sometimes to do with aggressive physical behaviour. But this one took place in the Senate chamber and that's what made it very much a compelling story that had to be told. And I think Jeannie recognized that and she was happy to talk to us about it although as I say she was still very shaken up. What was important was that she had written a letter to Andrew Bartlett that morning and this was possibly where Andrew made a mistake in what was a sequence of a several mistakes. In order to try and pacify Jeannie the next morning, he sent her around a bottle of wine. I could see where he was coming from, however that enraged Jeannie and she penned a fairly sharp letter to him which when we called on her, she had only just sent and so she handed it to us and that was very much a fundamental part of the story.

Where we had difficulties on deadline was actually speaking to Andrew about it because he was on an aeroplane traveling from Canberra to Brisbane and couldn't be contacted. So there was about an hour and a half of very tense discussions with his office who were aware of the situation, not wanting to talk about but not wishing to lie and say that nothing happened. But they were worried about how much information we had. I think they were worried we had footage of it and so we had a fair bit of leverage in trying to get confirmation because clearly I'm going to my editor with a story that involves a Senator accosting, assaulting and abusing a fellow Senator. We needed to be able to put his side of the story in. It was quite a long time before we could. But by the time Andrew was prepared to make a statement, his office had more or less confirmed everything.

What was the value in this story? Many people questioned us on the ethics of it and there were very serious ethic considerations in writing the story although it wasn't a big issue because Bartlett was relatively unknown to the public. He'd only become leader not that long beforehand. Everyone knew that he had a depressive illness. It's something that he had spoken about before and so you think carefully about the effect of writing a story which was clearly going to and **did** make his life hell for quite a while. And so we had a lot of discussions between ourselves and between the editor over writing the story. But the bottom line for us was that this was a previously unwitnessed sort of incident that happened in the chamber. One Senator who's a leader of a party assaulting another Senator. It's interesting because the observation was made that people in Canberra get drunk and carry on all the time. It doesn't always happen in the House. But I can remember back in the eighties there was a politician who had dressed as a chicken and walked into the Parliament and that was a terrific story because he did it in parliament. You can wear costumes anywhere you like but this was in parliament. And I think it was the same with this particular story.

It was a new story which provoked a wider discussion about behavioural standards in the workplace and I think a lot of people felt that what Bartlett did would have been punished in other areas, other workplaces and so it raised the question of differing standards of treatment for elected representatives compared to everyday Australians. And I should say in conclusion that Bartlett has always been a good sport about this story. It did weigh heavily on our minds even though it was going to be a big, screaming front page story. He's been a very good sport. He acknowledged that he did it and he took the view that it was always going to come out at some point and even though no one could tell at that stage he's the first to acknowledge that there have been some benefits flowing from it in terms of how he looks after himself and that doesn't discount the fact that it was a horrific time for him for a couple of months after the event happened. But we were pleased that we got the story confirmed, stood up, interviews with everybody and in on deadline on a Friday when, as my colleagues know, it's impossibly tight deadlines for late breaking stories.

AR: Thank you Michael. I'm sure everybody remembers that story. While you were speaking it struck me that the line with depressive illness between what is really a pretty happy ending in a sense, a fit healthy Senator that knows bungee jumps and doesn't drink and takes flowers home to his wife, and is going along fairly well. We can all smile about it now. The difference in how that ended compared with how it ended for a close friend of Steve Waldon, where a depressive illness ended in tragedy, it's only one step and these stories can zig or zag, somebody's life can be snuffed out by one mad act and that's what Steve is going to address. He wrote a story or co-wrote a story with Julianne Davies which involved a close friend of his and I personally found it one of the most affecting stories I've read in recent years. I re-read it this morning and I still find it affecting. And I suggest that all you if you can't remember it or didn't see it to look it up and read it. In fact you should do that for all these. Thank you Steve Waldon, over to you.

SW: Thanks Andrew. Unfortunately my story as it was begins with a tragedy in that's the death by suicide of a friend and everything that stemmed from that. When Jeff Barger took his life we couldn't believe it. He was such a steady man and friendly, capable, dependable – all of those things, he appeared to have none of what you call the key perhaps indicators of depression. He had no gambling problems, he wasn't having an affair, no issues like that, no health worries. And yet for some reason he took his life.

We went to the funeral and you could see how ashen people were. There was just complete stunned silence and people acknowledged each other with maybe a bit of a nod, but there was hardly a word said. And we went away from that and I failed to understand what had gone on. But we knew his wife obviously was incredibly distraught so I called around a couple of weeks after the funeral and said Tilly 'how's it going? Is there anything we can do?' and most people would do. Her main thing was she didn't understand what had gone on. She was upset of course and traumatized but she was also a little bit angry – and she was angry with herself that she hadn't picked it, that her husband would sort of disappear and take his own life.

What happened then was without our bidding she just told us the whole evening leading up to Jeff's death had unfolded. I didn't have a pen and paper on me at the time – I don't think I would have taken notes anyway – because here she was just

telling us in plain English everything that had gone on. It was an incredibly compelling story but it was also a very private story. It was just something she was telling friends. But as I was leaving she said 'you know Steve I wish there was some way I could make Jeff's death count for something. This is ridiculous – are men doing this?' I said 'I don't know Tilly, I don't know if men are doing this'. And we left it at that.

A couple of days later I spoke to Julie-anne in the office about it and she said 'yes it's just awful' and we started doing a little bit of research and found that while a lot of attention had been paid to, quite rightly, to the issue of youth suicide and other cohorts of suicide people, everyone seemed to be missing this group of middle aged men with apparently no troubles taking their own lives. And we started ringing around and looking at statistics and as soon as we started talking to the psychiatric and medical fraternity they were 'oh my god you've got to write about this, we've been trying to get the government to listen for years. There's this group of men and they're probably unidentified depressives and they're killing themselves. And we aware of it and we can't get anyone to listen.'

I spoke to Tilly again and said 'Jeff seems to fall into this category' and she said 'I'd like to tell his story'. It was as simple as that. I'd like to tell his story and I was a bit taken aback and thought oh gosh you know, we're all sort of traumatized by this event and I don't know if I want to write it. But her view was who else could write it. You knew him and you do the job. Over a period of two or three interviews we went through the whole thing again and we went and visited the family in the Western District of a young farmer, or not young farmer, nearly middle aged farmer, who like Jeff Barger was a very successful and admired person and took his own life for no apparent reason. His family agreed to speak to us and in fact were quite happy to do so and we also spoke to some survivors of suicide. It took a few weeks to put it all together and to form a picture of what this was. We knew we had the narrative of one man but we thought it needed to be much wider if this was a societal problem.

In the end of course we ended up with way too much material and then started having to sort of to pick through it and go 'what's really important here? What are we trying to say?' And of course there was a couple of very very serious discussions with the senior editors of the paper because suicide basically has been a taboo topic. But we were really emboldened or encouraged by the all the people said 'no, you must talk about this. It's wrong to not have it in the public. We need a forum. We need it out there and we need to start talking about it'. If the widow, if it's her wish that, or she feels that some good might come out of telling the story about death of her husband, okay then let's go ahead and do it.

When it come out Julie-anne and I arrived I think about eight thirty at work on the day of the first part of the series and no exaggeration our phones just ran hot. No sooner did we put the phone down, it was ringing in your hand. We were taking so many calls from people wanting to tell their story. We hadn't anticipated that, we couldn't cope with it. About ten thirty we both ran out of the office to a café and sort of sat down looked at each other and said 'what have we done? And how are we going to cope with the influx of inquiries and other traumatic tales?' And we also heard from the switchboard that they'd never received so many calls wanting to talk to two people in memory. And they just couldn't handle the number of calls that were

coming in about the topic. So we knew we were probably right, it was an important issue. It seemed to have struck a chord in the public and a lot of those stories are still coming in now. A good year later.

AR: As I said I've found a very moving story and it's well worth another look for anybody here who's studying our craft. Steve has a very natural style that a lot of us would do well to look at – see how he manages to get complex emotions on paper in simple words.

Now we have quite a lot time left to ask questions. So feel free. Now we'll have Linda and Tom, moving around with microphones so that you can just put your hand up and snag one of them and question away to your heart's content. I'd perhaps just like to lead off. Adele, I was fascinated by the Crimes Act thing, this has ramifications for many of us, and I'd like to know anything that you found out about the Crimes Act that you think you could share with us, about how you can get around it, whether in fact if somebody's found guilty under the Crimes Act I presume that can't be held from the public, it's only if they were involved in some way?

AF: Yes that right. So if for example somebody goes to prison for breaching the Commonwealth Crimes Act you can't write about that. But you can go as far as to say there were police raids or you can go into everything but you can't say what happened.

AR: You can't say what happened even if they're convicted and go to prison.

AF: Yes. So you can actually go the courts and get the verdict, so it's public record, but you can't, if you knowingly know about the Crimes Act you can't talk about it and say this person has done time or you can't write about it. It's extraordinary.

AR: Can you give a layman's version of what the Crimes Act says? What's the short version?

AF: Well that's essentially what it says. It's a tiny little, there's probably about 300 pages to the Crimes Act, with all different sections, and there's this one section in it which is about three paragraphs long, which actually says if someone has been breach of the Crimes Act and you know about it. So if you don't know about it and you don't know that the Crimes Act exists you can actually talk about it. But if someone points out – yeah it's really bizarre.

AR: Lesson number one, don't find out about it.

AF: Yeah exactly.

AR: Ignorance can be bliss. Now some questions for any of our speakers.

Hi. My name's Michelle. I'm from Latrobe Uni and I'm to finish studying. I was just wondering how many of you are members are of the MEAA? How you found working if you are freelance, if you are union members? How you ???

MH: Yes I am in the MEAA.

AF: So am I.

SW: Yep.

AR: They're all Bolsheviks, particularly the chap from the Canberra Press Gallery. As you know they lent over backwards to look after Mark Latham, which brings us to a question Mr Harvey. That was a story, your story, on Senator Bartlett, you and your colleagues. It was an example of a story about behaviour being made public because it was in the chamber. I assume that by inference there are a lot of stories, and I think you referred to, a lot of stories that don't become public. Would it be true to say that during the campaign two of Mark Latham's most senior advisors had a very strong dispute with him and resigned, in fact left, after having a blue with him? Is that true and if so has it been written anywhere? I mean, I come from a position of ignorance. I don't know. Maybe it has. Maybe you wrote it and I didn't see it.

MH: I might have written it from a position of ignorance. Look it's been alluded to but not expressly explored. *The Bulletin* touched on it this week in some detail. What Andrew's referring to is that Mark Latham's Chief of Staff and his Media Director are no longer with him and effectively for the final weeks of the campaign played no role. That was mainly to do with personality differences even though by definition these people work very closely with the Leader. I don't think particularly in the case of the Chief of Staff they necessarily jelled personally. Both people were, if you like, inherited from Simon Crean after the leadership change it was felt continuity dictated these people stay. And so it didn't quite work out. During the campaign Mark Latham was taking advice from a lot of people including senior members from his own staff other than those two. But also when they travel they have members of the parliament with them and in his case it was John Fawkner, the New South Wales Senator, and Stephen Smith, the ex-Rooster or serving Rooster I'm not sure, the West Australian who had actually voted against Mark Latham for leadership but was brought back into the fold. And so there was a lot of advice been taken from these people. Personality clashes definitely were part of it. Was it reported at the time? I think it was possibly alluded to in a couple of columns. Was it a big story? Well people weren't quite possibly able to confirm it expressly. You certainly couldn't get the two individuals concerned to talk it and they still haven't.

AR: If you could, would it make a story?

MH: It goes to the general issue of Latham's, I suppose, fitness to govern, somehow reflected in his fitness to run a good show in his own office. But also I think in press gallery reporting conflict is often at the essence of any story. So it would have been a story not a huge story. *Herald Sun* would probably take the view that these people are not well names, known names publicly. Although the Media Director was a well known journalist actually so a lot of people would have known her. It's a story that would have run if people had talked about it. It was just suspected at the time that they were frozen out. It wasn't a bit announcement. It was ??? that people become aware of.

AR: Are there other stories that I mean I suppose it was an open secret for many years the affair between Kernot and Evans and so on. But there must be a lot of stories there that can't or aren't written for whatever reason.

MH: Yeah, that's true. Canberra is an amazing place where there's a lot of pressure and long hours and people let off steam in many ways. Drinking is one of them. During sitting weeks of parliament late nights are the order of the night. And so that can lead to all sorts of situations. You referred to one on-going situation of an affair between two people that had direct implications for the way public policy was conducted in this country. So that was one. I didn't know about it because it was at a time when I wasn't there but equally it wasn't something that people seemed to talk about. I didn't know about it. But there things at the moment that you could say that if we were in Britain they would probably be a story.

AR: They'd be on page one.

MH: But they don't impact upon the way public policy ...

AR: Do they involve fishnet stockings?

MH: It's funny. I've got a friend of mine in London. She worked for *News of the World* and I rang her up the other day and said 'where are you by the way?' and she was in a hotel in Brighton. She was in the room next to some MP no-one had ever heard of.

AR: Wine glass against the wall.

MH: Exactly. They had listening equipment, because he was on a fling with his mistress on a weekend fling. And I said 'oh is this guy, who is he?' He's never had any publicity hardly ever beyond his local media. But that's a standard operation for her to do for her job.

AR: Good job. You can look forward to this.

MH: Fortunately in Canberra we don't. People might remember during the campaign, or before the campaign, a Liberal MP from Sydney called Ross Cameron who just came out and said 'I'm an adulterer and if you want to vote for a bloke who's a good family man, don't vote for me'. And he promptly lost his seat. Now I mention that because we had actually known a lot about his personal life, I mean everyone did, and one of my colleagues actually got up one morning or came home one morning from a late night. He shared a house with a girl and he's walked in and there was Ross Cameron in a towel in his kitchen. ???? That was that. We talked about that in the office. What do we do? He's not the family minister, he's not actively discharging family policy but it was fairly close because he was a very family values oriented politician and so in the end we thought should we have written something on that? That was very line ball.

AR: I got the impression and I'd like other people to ask questions here please I'm just trying to keep going, I got the impression that he leaked that story to a colleague of mine, I have never spoken to her about it, a little bit ahead of somebody else

publishing a tougher version. He thought well I'll come out first and I'll tell the story my way.

MH: It's a bit like Adele's situation with David Nott in that sense.

AR: Yes.

MH: I never saw whatever the story was that was coming maybe it was no worse than what he admitted because there wasn't anything published that was like a big bomb going off. It did seem like a preemptive strike.

AR: We have another brave questioner.

Q: Nick Henderson, RMIT Journalism student. You've talked about hitting brick walls when you're trying to research these stories. How much time and effort do you put into breaking these really big stories if there's no contacts that are willing to speak? How much time will you put in to try to break that story and when do you say enough's enough and just have to bury it because there's just no way of getting around?

AR: Would Adele like to answer that one?

AF: I spent about six weeks, seven days; I was totally obsessed with day. Seven days a week just pouring through documents and trying to work things out. Yeah, you're right there is a time when you have to say enough is enough but I just didn't want to give up on this. I was so close and I had so much information that I was just determined to break it.

An inaudible question is asked here.

AF: No. No I haven't. You really can't afford to use the ??? after a couple of weeks if it's not going to work out. You don't really have the luxury of pursuing them for a long time and then just saying it's not working.

AR: Thank you. We have another question up the back here first.

Q: Kim Healy, Journalism graduate, Monash post-grad student. I have a question for Steve. With your story on Jeff Barger did you find that there was an issue because it was a personal friend who was relaying the story, there was an issue with having to not be completely honest in the story in terms of protecting his reputation, and if that had been an issue would you have gone ahead but without using him as an example specifically for the big issue regarding undiagnosed depressives in middle aged men? Do you understand my question?

SW: I think you're asking me was there anything that I could have reported but chose not to?

Q: Yeah, to protect his reputation because it is obviously someone that you knew personally.

SW: Fortunately the honest answer is no, there was nothing like that which made it as easy as it could be. I mean it was never going to be easy but it was comforting not to find out anything that would have tarnished his reputation or explained his suicide for reasons other than depression. But that wasn't the case. He was as he appeared to all of us - a normal good caring man.

AR: Over here.

Q: Kate Stoll, RMIT Journalism. My question, like you said Steve, suicide's always been a taboo topic in reporting. With the recent child pornography stories and the suicides that have come from that, what was your professional reaction to those incidents, of those men being named and then the suicides?

SW: My professional reaction was to think 'here we go again'. But my private response was one of being horrified that something could drive people to this. I think it's right to report them. There's not much point to building this wall of secrecy and defensiveness around a topic like suicide, particularly now that we have all the professionals saying it won't go away and we're better off actually discussing it sensibly in public forms such as the media than ignoring it and hoping it won't happen again - it will happen. You think that how people allegedly involved in child pornography thing have taken their lives you obviously me like Michael, Adele and all of you would have thought, they must have been incredibly afraid of the shame that was going to be brought on them and they just couldn't face up to it. It's terribly sad. It's just terribly sad. But not reporting it is not the answer. Responsible reporting is necessary but not reporting it is also wrong.

AR: I think Tom has another speaker.

Q: I'm following that Steve. Do you think running the series in *The Age* has made any difference? Is it easier to talk about suicide now?

SW: I'd like to think so. I'd like to think so. But the important thing is when Tilly said look doing this I don't want my photo in the paper, and she said no I know I have to have my photo in the paper. People have got to see that this is real people we're talking about, I'm a real person, I'm suffering and I want this to have an impact. Because don't forget her motivation was always to make Jeff's death count for something. She couldn't make any sense of it otherwise. And she said if just one man looks at this and he's borderline and he says I'm going to seek some help, she said then it was worthwhile and on the day of publication I popped around to her house that night and explained the Julie-anne and I had had a pretty horrid day on the phone and I asked her how she had gone. She said Steve I've had a call from a man who's a teacher in South Australia who saw the story and he said I am exactly like your husband and I reckon I was within a week of killing myself but I've read this and I know I can't do it. I'm going to seek some help. And she was just delighted. It was the first time I'd her smile in a few weeks.

AR: At the back.

Q: For Adele, Andrew Brown from St Bernard's College, with the threat to the law suits, how do you respond to them?

AF: I've had a number of threats from different stories and you really just have to ignore them. Often it's just chest-beating before you put the story out and you really can't be intimidated. If you think you've got a story to tell and you've got your facts right, you really have nothing to be afraid of.

MH: We might Andrew Rule about his Geoff Clarke series.

AR: What was that? Geoff who? I've got several Geoffs who don't like me. Jeff Fenech has also just issued something.

Q: My name's Natalie Dragon. I'm studying at Deakin University. Basically I was just wanting to ask how you cultivate your contacts and where your main sources or ideas for stories come from.

MH: Perhaps I could start. From my point of view my job is that I technically have to know everyone in parliament which is not quite always achievable. But certainly writing for a Victorian newspaper I make sure hopefully that I have access to all the Victorians and form some sort of relationship, and often it's through showing interest in specific policy areas where you know this person is worthwhile and if there is a genuine news impetus to it to get involved and talk about issues and show your interest and gain a sort of trust in terms of how you are interested in writing about those issues. And then there's the other dimension to it, which is hard in Canberra sometimes where most nights you are usually out doing a contact dinner or something like that and some people you like and some people you don't and the difficulty sometimes that you have to be careful about getting close to people which is the same in any field of journalism but there's always going to be negative stories to write about people and you've got to be able to make the hard calls when that time comes. But the contact making is simply knocking on doors, ringing up, doing the old fashioned journalism stuff – putting yourself forward and showing an interest. That's the best way I can describe it.

Q: This is a question for Adele. You said that you had felt that this article in the Criminal Act was against freedom of speech and freedom of information which are our basic human rights, let's say. Have you or your organisation thought about the possibility of starting some legal action to change that.

AF: No we haven't. We were thinking of doing a series of stories after that David Nott's story came out but we were advised by our lawyers that it would look a little bit too, it would be too close and people would start to draw too many dots together and they'd be able to sue us. So it's probably something for another day but it something that all of us should really think about because it really does impinge on freedom of information, freedom of speech.

AR: Has that story harmed David Nott's career, apart from resigning from ASIC? What is he doing now?

AF: Well interestingly he was doing nothing, then I read *The Financial Review* a couple of days ago, and he's just been appointed a Director of the health company Mayne. So that's really the first thing he's done since he resigned.

Q: Can I just jump in with a quick one for Michael, just a quick question? Is there a sense in the Press Gallery of watching out to not bite the hand that feeds you in a way, about printing stories and things like that, at all, amongst journos?

MH: It's a question that is asked a lot and Andrew alluded earlier to criticisms of the Press Gallery and where certain allegiances might be, but particularly when a lot of what you do is reporting the news and that set piece things have happened on day, well that's fine we can hopefully do a good job of that. But where you try to make the mark is getting story before everyone or breaking a story and you do rely on your contacts and so look I've been in many situations where I've had to write, because I do commentary and analysis sometimes as part of my job, and so you've got to put an opinion in and there's no point going soft or being half baked in these things. So I've had to make hard calls about people that I have a good relationship with. No, look most people in politics can roll with it. Bartlett is a classic case like I have a very good relationship with him and we often talk about that story. I probably wish I hadn't used a few sort of colourful expressions in what was a news story – you know how he wears how he wears the purple shirts and he said he was the purple-shirted, purple-faced Senator or something like that. Anyway, we can talk about that and laugh. Most of them will recognize that public life you are going to get whacked a lot and if it's fair then that's okay. It's when reporters are unfair, palpably unfair in going after somebody, I think there's an issue there. But do we watch ourselves and not want to miss out on the next story (end of tape)

Look the point of the question is a fair one. Like when I see him around parliament and that do I go the other way or feel terrible. The first couple of months when he remember stood aside not down from the leadership and was coming to terms with his problems, you knew that it was horrific what he was going through. And so I didn't talk to him for months. He didn't talk to anyone. He's a very mild mannered individual so he's not a hater. Other people might have been and I might have thought twice about placing my trust in them in a situation like that. But Bartlett he's just said the story was always going to come out. You guys got it first. Good on you. In fact, when we won that award you talked about he was the first person to ring and say hey that's fantastic.

AR: Well he's a good sport. That says a lot for rugby union. There's a lady at the back with a question.

Q: Nicola ???, I'm a Year 10 student from ??? Grammar School. Adele, you talked about the problems with the Crimes Act and of being sued. As a journalist do you feel that sometimes the idea of a person's democratic right to freedom of speech and press is unfairly compromised, and in the end that the laws that are currently in place prevent such democratic freedoms from actually being maintained?

AF: Look we have very stringent laws here. It's much worse than in America. You can print a lot of stuff. And I think in journalism freedom of speech is very very difficult for us and so it's often a really battle. Truth isn't always the only cause for defense in Australia which is sad.

AR: It can be very sad. Believe me. We've got probably five minutes tops, four and a half would be better. So couple more questions. Over here. Gentleman in the middle.

Q: Michael ??? from Melbourne University. This is a question I guess specifically for Steve, but maybe Michael or Adele you may have something to add to this. Steve, in your story, in researching your story, you obviously speaking to people who you only just met about intimately personal details, and I'm just wondering how did you approach the relationship that developed between you and them, I mean, were they just a source of information and how were they relating to you I mean, did you ever have people who were obviously looking at you as a friend, someone to talk to, did that ever cause any difficulties for you?

SW: We didn't really have any problems. I think sometimes we assume that in tragic circumstances like that people are going to be very unfriendly or they'll see the media as a villain. But mostly my experience has been that in tragic things people are often happy to talk and they may even find it therapeutic. If they trust the person that is presented and it's really just a matter of, I don't think there's any great secret to it. I'm sure Michael and Adele would agree, if you're upfront with people and not in their face in a particularly difficult story like that, you can just ask them and if they say I don't want to talk well you respect that of course, you don't browbeat them. But generally once they start talking, they just talk, they just talk. You don't have to do a lot of prompting. Then you got to be careful that if they've made any conflicting statements about facts and things, that you sort that out with them.

MH: I'll just add to that. I remember from Police Rounds experience for me, I used to be always really scared about going to do what you call 'intrudes', basically intruding on people's grief. I didn't like having to do that but it's often where a very important story's come from. One thing I did realise after a while was that grieving people for whatever reason have generally been speaking to police and ambulance people in very sort of clinical detail about their loved one, and that's for procedural purposes or they've been talking to members of their family and often in a situation like that families can't talk about it. Sometimes and it's often a lot of the time, you are the first person they can talk about their feelings and just let it all out. You're not a counselor but equally, I found I didn't have to feel so backward about doing that part of the job. Sometimes people welcome it. You don't exploit it but you recognize that.

AR: That's a good point. Well made Michael. I think that journalists are often criticized and yet in those situations remain friendly with people they've written about for a decade. That does happen. Lady in green.

Q: Hi I'm Chloe from Deakin University. My question's for Steve. Steve, with your obvious personal involvement in your story, did you find it challenging as a journalist to get into words what you wanted to say, obviously because you were grieving as well, was it one of the hardest stories you've ever had to write?

SW: Easily the hardest I've had to write. But from the start when Tilly first said to me perhaps we should tell Jeff's story in the paper, I was partly reluctant because I thought well I don't know if I want to write the story but that's pretty weak and I decided that I almost had a duty to it and she wanted me to do it. As to the writing, once we'd done research and we'd spoken to a lot of people and it came time after

three or four weeks of doing this to form a picture in our mind about what the story was going to say and we realised that after all the research we'd come full circle. We were back with the main story which was why did Jeff Barger kill himself? That I'd been at the funeral so I knew a lot of what had happened and it was all in my head. To sit down and write the main story, it might surprise you to hear, it was very easy. It just came out. I wrote it in about two and a half hours and it's quite a long piece. I just started and I got to the finish and I thought that's it, I can't do any better and it was okay. There's a lot of stories, as my colleagues here will tell you, that don't work like that. You can agonise over 40 centimetres sometimes and just can't get it right. It's exasperating.

AR: I'm afraid that brings us to the end at 3:55 sharp. We have to finish here to allow the next session which will be moderated by Bob Kersley here and on the topic of 'getting started', I think, which is something that will interest most of you. I'd like to thank our speakers today. They are three of the nicest people in our business. You could do worse than read what they write and learn from it. Just one parting shot on the issue of doing intrusions, there was a beautiful piece written by Garry Tippett on this in the latest Walkley magazine, which I think says a lot of what we all feel about intrusions but rarely express as well as Garry has. Thank you.