

MELBOURNE PRESS CLUB QUILL AWARDS  
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“Quality in Journalism”

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Firstly, may I say how much I appreciate being asked to give this talk tonight on what is a special occasion for journalism and writing – an occasion recognising some of the quality of what we do and in particular what we write. I am also rather apprehensive about speaking so late at night in front of a room full of journalists, not always known for their moderation or their safe treatment of people on stage during award presentations.

I congratulate ? on winning the Graham Perkin Australian Journalist of the Year Award, and also all other winners tonight. Graham Perkin was a great editor. As written in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, Graham’s success as editor “owed much to his ebullience, to his infectious enthusiasm for journalism, to his dominant – sometimes domineering – personality, and to his willingness to bear the heat of criticism.”

You will hear me talk later about training. Graham did not believe that training alone produced good journalists – “Intuitive ability runs first for me, intellectual capacity second, training third”. Nowhere is there any mention of “quality”.

One of the less known philosophers, Anaximenes, specialised in quality. He also believed that air was the substance of all life. We needed it to live and to grow – nothing mattered more. Today we talk about the quality of our air, the quality of life, the quality of journalism.

We walk along the street and see signs which say “quality alterations” or “quality butcher”. A shoe shop states: “quality at your feet”. Another boasts “quality you can taste”, “quality you can trust”. What is this enzyme of our virtue that makes us want to enter in? Quality for one person may have a totally different meaning for another. As Robert Pirsig points out in his book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, stone to a prisoner who has been trapped behind it for years, will have a different meaning to the sculptor who works with the same stone, and sees beauty in its form.

When I was a schoolboy at Cranbrook in Sydney, a fellow student was struggling to give an answer to what I thought was a fairly simple question. I called out across the classroom, “use your gumption,” an utterance which brought about subsequent punishment. It was a phrase often used by my father – I rather like it. Pirsig says: “I like the word gumption because it is so homely and so forlorn and so out of style it looks as if it needs a friend and isn’t likely to reject anyone who comes along. I like it also because it describes exactly what happens to someone who connects with quality. He gets filled with gumption.”

The Greeks called it *enthusiasmos*, the root of enthusiasm which means literally “filled with *theos*,” or God, or quality. To Pirsig a person filled with gumption is at the front of the train of his own awareness, watching to see what is up the track and meeting it when it comes.

Quality therefore is something more than simply the state of something we think to be good. *The Age* to a *Herald-Sun* reader can appear to lack quality whereas the *Herald-Sun* to an *Age* reader is probably seen as popular journalism, lacking the quality contained in the pages of *The Age*.

Our responsibility as publishers of media in any of its various forms, is to inform our readers, our audiences, our listeners etc. of what is happening around our communities; of what is happening in the world and to interpret events as we see them. We are in a special position of responsibility, and yet we also have power – power not necessarily to persuade, because our audience is intelligent, but power to put a strong view.

Perhaps quality is only achieved when you have the time to produce it. The current trend to do as much as possible as quickly as possible, denies the investment of heart and soul in a work of truth and quality. So often quality is in the detail; and the precision; and the execution.

Quality is often a matter of taste and for this I revert to my “quality butcher”. Sometimes the sign will say “quality meat”. Frankly there is not much point in having a quality butcher if you do not consider the meat to be to your taste. And tastes differ. Therefore quality differs and is often subjective. A film will rarely have universal appeal, and so it is with words – a particular book may win the Booker prize for Literature and not appeal to many readers.

Perhaps as a poet friend says, quality is judged in the mind and in the bones and in the spirit. “How close is quality to integrity?” she asks. “You know quality when you compare – something you have been doing or tasting you thought was the best possible until you realised there was more, better, of quality – then you know the difference.” And surely we know when something is of poor quality.

This is no doubt all rather obvious to most of us in this room. But when Fairfax Media announced it was going to reduce its overall staff by 550 and 120 of those would be journalists, suddenly there was a smell that quality journalism from the great Fairfax organisation – the largest media organisation in Australasia and still mostly in the hands of Australians – was about to die. I have no need to tell you who was expressing those sentiments. They are best ignored.

Reporting in my days was strictly facts; no interpretation; both sides of the story; no embellishment. But even today, facts are not out of fashion. In a wonderful book called *The Elements of Style* published as recently as 2005, it says: “Unless there is good reason for its being there, do not inject opinion into a piece of writing. We all have opinions about almost everything and the temptation to toss them in is great. Opinions scattered indiscriminately about leave the mark of egotism on a work.”

I doubt there is a media person anywhere who really knows the destiny of news and information. In a world where the Internet barely existed 10 years ago, who among us has the temerity to tell us what will be 10 years from now? We are all in a learning process, but more in a state of uncertainty. I am not prepared to make predictions about the future because technology moves so fast that almost anything is possible.

It is a profound irony of the Internet, however, that the medium’s infinite choice leads to ostrich-like behaviour among its consumers. One of the Internet’s most important and profound dynamics, in my view, is that the net acts increasingly as a divider, not a uniter.

More and more, I find, people go on to the net not to see what is different, but to find that which conforms to their world view – to see news, and views that reinforce where they already are.

It is hard to imagine that for reliability and quality of whatever sort, the pool of journalists that now scan the screens and tap the keyboards at newspaper offices, will not continue to provide well-written, accurate and properly assessed reports and opinion pieces for the consumption of an increasingly intelligent “readership” throughout our communities.

“Not long before Michael Griffey was found bludgeoned to death in his outer suburban garage, his body tacked to the concrete floor in dried blood next to the wheel of his beloved Monaro, the father of three joked he was worth more to his ex-wife dead than alive.”

According to Matthew Parris writing in *The Spectator*, this was an Australian report by a Milanda Rout – surely a pseudonym -- and used by Parris to support his contention that writing and journalism has improved and not deteriorated over a considerable period of time.

“I submit that English journalism is getting better,” he says. “That today’s readers are better served by today’s commentators and reporters than was the case half a century ago. Tattooed into the eyelids of the modern journalist is a simple truth: your reader is not your prisoner. He can always turn away. I often fail in the attempt, but hardly a paragraph is written by a modern columnist or smart reporter without addressing to himself the unspoken question: am I keeping their attention?”

Parris says that pace, clarity and impact must never be far from our thoughts. He is not suggesting we dumb down to suit various tastes, but I think it points to a greater emphasis on training both in our universities and around our own newsrooms.

Ariel Dorfman, in describing the life of Harold Pinter, the great playwright and poet, said: “He showed me how dramatic art can be lyrical without versifying; can be poetic merely by delving into the buried rhythms of everyday speech. He suggested that the worst hallucinations of fear are not immune from the pendulum of humour.” This itself is quality writing; quality journalism and selected and published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* for just that reason.

Poetry produces its own quality. This by Johanna Featherstone, Artistic Director of The Red Room Company:

#### **EXPECTATION**

Shell frills, sea crockery, beetroot stained  
weeds press and echo their selves into sand  
small hands collect these and other objects  
abandoned by the deep. Far, not so far  
boats nose the horizon and it is morning,  
before even breath assembles the way.

We cannot expect journalists to produce the copy and stories we think to be good quality for our various audiences, unless we give them both the basic training and the thoughts that ensure they adapt to changing tastes. Within all of this there is a need to write intelligently, using the correct words that make up our great language. Probably the most guilty of bad language are the sporting commentators: “Now Brett Lee is real quick”. I think you know what I mean. They get away with some appalling use of grammar, and yet it is the newspapers that are accused of losing their quality! How often do you see mistakes on television captions?

So how are we going to maintain quality in our newspapers; in the provision of information in whatever form? How are we going to do what Matthew Parris wants and constantly engage the attention of our audience – our readers; our customers? How are we going to get people to accept that, after comparing, our material will be judged best and of quality?

It is really very simple. Quality is derived from the basics. A good backhand down the line is not intuitive. It comes from basic training and hours of practice. It requires concentration – an eye on the ball, good rhythm and natural talent. So too good journalism.

The basics are:

- Rigorous factual accuracy
- Completeness in reporting
- A sense of expertise in the subject matter so that the reader has a sense of learning something new
- Strong concern and empathy for the community
- Clear sharp writing for news; inspired and creative writing for features
- An absolute separation of reporting from analysis and opinion

- An editorial sensibility driven by a sense of intellectual curiosity

What do publishers need to do in order to produce the quality pavlova described above? They have to get the recipe right, and select “quality” ingredients. This means having editorial leadership committed to the above values. It means having a head chef like Graham Perkin so you have a critical mass of editorial talent with meritocracy in the editorial ranks, promoting the best and managing out the worst.

Almost invariably there are at least two sides to a story, so the task for the journalist is to seek and determine the truth. The publisher must be able to publish knowing the content to be correct and to be the truth. Publish and damn the consequences.

But in the pursuit of this truth and excellence that brings about quality, it is important to remember the hazards faced by journalists around the world. There are undoubtedly more threats to lives of journalists outside Australia than within it. Jo Chandler writing in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* recently said: “in this other reality – in the haemorrhaging Democratic Republic of Congo, or across the border in Rwanda, in Mozambique, the country I have just left, and its woebegone neighbour, Zimbabwe – the practice of journalism is a matter of aspiration. It is a distant, glittering prize. It remains fundamental to the evolution of functioning society and credible democracy. Journalists shining light into these dark places bring the prospect of security and safety.”

Chris Masters, who retired from the Four Corners program after 25 years in journalism said good journalism is like good drama. It is life. He said that spending much of his time working with smaller communities was a benefit. “It is much harder to absolve yourself from moral responsibility when you are in direct touch with the audience,” he said. “Journalism is supposed to connect with society.”

Max Suich, former editor-in-chief at Fairfax in a recent talk said: “The real issue for the media in Australia is the quality of the job it does for its readers, viewers and listeners through the recession, and whether the editors and their senior staff protect the quality of their journalism or merely use the gloom and recent staff cuts to excuse poor performance.”

My personal view is that journalism will not suffer through restraint. It will in fact force mediocrity to retire to the bench, leaving the best players to operate for the occasion. The way we can ensure we have the best players and the quality of ingredients to produce the quality product, is to get back to the basics; to train extensively and be demanding about selection and retention. There are many talented minds and individuals. We should be tapping into this resource while at the same time retaining those with experience and talent. This is not a choice. We have a public responsibility. We live in a special country with comparatively few restraints. We must never fail to fight for our freedoms and in particular, freedom of the press. With a world economic crisis, it is critical that we as journalists serve our communities responsibly.

We can be like Norman Mailer who said arrogantly in relation to his writing: “I’m going to be the champ until one of you knocks me off.” The Mohammed Ali of writers. I think I can safely say that on behalf of Fairfax Media, we want to be the champ – the very best there is.

This has been a special night for me where some of our best journalists have been and will be recognised for their degree of excellence and their quality. My hope was merely to “keep your attention.” But as you no doubt have perceived, the effort to define quality in journalism is a challenge. Quality is endless. Writing and reading are endless processes of looking and weighing but never concluding. We need to apply gumption. It is not unlike Justice Potter Stewart in 1964, who, when ruling in a pornography case, famously wrote:

“I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced ... but I know when I see it.”

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