



AUSTRALIAN  
**PRESS**  
COUNCIL

AUSTRALIAN PRESS COUNCIL  
CONFERENCE PAPERS

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# What Is News?

Earl Arts Centre, Launceston  
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## Contents ...

Introductory Address	
Professor Dennis Pearce .....	3
Welcoming Address	
Alderman John Lees .....	6
Addresses	
Senator Nick Sherry .....	8
Margaret Bartkevicius .....	12
Rod Scott .....	18
Intro to the Q & A .....	22
Q & A .....	23
Closing Remarks .....	28
About the Press Council .....	29

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# Introductory Address

## Professor Dennis Pearce

Welcome to this seminar.

My name is Dennis Pearce, and I am the Chairman of the Council. We are a big body of 21 people. The Council was established in 1976 as the self-regulation body for the print media. We don't deal with matters relating to the electronic media - only the print media. The significance of being a self-regulatory body is that it costs tax-payers nothing. The whole funding for the Council is paid for by the media industry, which is a significant saving to the people in general.

We have two principal functions. The one that attracts most attention is the complaint-resolution function. People who are disturbed about a matter that has been published in a newspaper are entitled to come to the Council. There is no formality about that. We are a body that functions on a very flexible basis. The persons who wish to lay a complaint don't have to be the people who are immediately affected by the item concerned. We dealt with one today which involved Mark Taylor, and the complaint had been lodged by an entirely independent person. Mark did not raise issues with us - the paper had apologised to him, but our complainant thought that it was improper that the newspaper concerned hadn't published a general correction for the edification of the readership at large.

We get around 400 complaints a year. Last year there were over that number, our biggest number, over 460. In terms of the resolution of complaints, around about 80% are dealt with informally by the secretariat, or by a new process we have adopted of public members of the Council acting as mediators. That form of resolution is achieved by putting the persons who are concerned in touch with the newspapers so that they can agree on things like a letter of response or a correction by the newspaper, or indeed just simply an explanation. We find that that deals with the concerns of most people. But a small number remain intractable, where the parties can't agree. They come through to a process of adjudication by the full Council itself. I make special mention of that because the Examiner had given us a very nice piece of write-up this morning, but the suggestion that was included there was that of the 400-odd complaints, 18 were resolved in favour of the persons who complained. That is a bit of an imbalance. It is 18 of that 20% that are not subject to an agreed solution. So they are the ones that are the most difficult to resolve.

It is often said that the Council doesn't have an adequate sanction to bring to bear on newspapers. The only obligation of a newspaper is to publish the Council's adjudication. But, it is a significant issue to say to a newspaper, "Well, you've got to publish a statement that you have made a mistake". Not many organisations, and newspapers are no exception, like to engage in a public shaming process where they have to publicly state that they have made a mistake. That is a greater sanction, I think, than many people give it credit for. I like to think of the analogy of the restaurant that has to publish a critical review in its window. You can't imagine really that they would like to do that. Well, newspapers don't like to publish a critical adjudication either. So, the Council has a degree of power that is sometimes not fully

recognised.

That is one of our functions, the complaint-resolution function. It is an important one, and it probably formed the reason why the Council was established in the first place. But the Council has another, and significant, function and that relates to issues of press freedom.

It needs to be noted in that context that while one talks about - a phrase that is often bandied about - that we in this country recognise freedom of the press. Freedom of the press is really the freedom of the people to be informed. It is not some sort of open-ended sanction for newspapers to do what they want because they are newspapers, or indeed because they are television stations or radio stations. It turns entirely on the concept that, in a free and democratic society, the people are entitled to access to information. A primary way in which they get that information is through a free press.

So, the Council is always concerned to ensure that the press in this country remains free. To that end, it takes up issues such as constraints through defamation law, through contempt law, through privacy laws, and it also pursues issues where it is essential to the functioning of the press to get access to information, such as through freedom of information legislation.

The Council spends a good deal of its time pursuing these sorts of issues, that are intended to maintain that freedom of the press, but always recognising that the basis for that is the making of information available to the public. And because of that desire to meet that task that it sets itself, it wants constantly to publicise issues relating to freedom of the press. And that is why we move from Sydney twice a year to hold our meetings in other centres. When we do that we find that it attracts a degree of publicity of the existence of the Council. That has a useful effect in bringing to people's attention

that they can make complaints about their local newspapers, or the national newspapers. But it also enables us to bring to the attention of a community issues that relate to freedom of the press.

This is our first venture back to Launceston for a while. We have been to Hobart in the meantime, and to other places in Australia. Launceston is of particular significance to us because two members of the Council are from Launceston: Caroline Gale, who is a public member; and Lloyd Whish-Wilson, who is the General Manager of the Examiner. Some of us didn't know until we came here quite how old, what a distinguished longevity, the Examiner has. Lloyd sees it as perhaps being the second oldest newspaper in Australia, although as soon as one newspaper makes a claim of that kind there are a whole heap of other newspapers that come along and claim parentage that extends back to 1788. But Lloyd can at least say that his newspaper is one of the very oldest, and we have appreciated the attention the Examiner has paid to our visit, and the assistance he has given us. So thank you for that, Lloyd.

One of the things that we do when we move away from Sydney, which is always a good thing to do and I can say that because I don't live in Sydney, is that we do hold a seminar. We try to hold a seminar that involves local people, that involves issues that are germane to the interests of the local area and which deals with broad issues that we can then further publicise in our publications by way of reproduction of the speeches that have been given at the seminar.

Our seminar for tonight is, "What is News?". An issue that is one that is constantly troubling papers, and it is an issue that constantly troubles the Press Council. Where does one draw the lines on what is news, what is entertainment, what is anything else that you might like to use as a label for the sort of material

that does appear in the various forms of the media.

There has just been a recent statement by an English judge - I don't normally quote from English judges but this is rather a good one - that I think is worth putting in the context of tonight's discussion. Lord Nicholls there said, "Above all, the court should have particular regard to the importance of freedom of expression. The press discharges vital functions as a bloodhound as well as a watchdog. The court should be slow to conclude that a publication was not in the public interest and therefore the public had no right to know, especially when the information is in the

field of political discussion. Any lingering doubt should be resolved in favour of publication". It is an interesting concept, this notion that the press has the dual function of not only watchdog, which is pretty commonly asserted, but also of bloodhound.

Now we have three speakers tonight, who I will introduce a little more formally in just a moment, Senator Nick Sherry, Margaret Bartkevicius and Rod Scott, but first I would like to call on Alderman John Lees - your Mayor of Launceston - to formally open the proceedings.



# Welcoming Address

## Alderman John Lees

Thanks very much, and good evening to you.

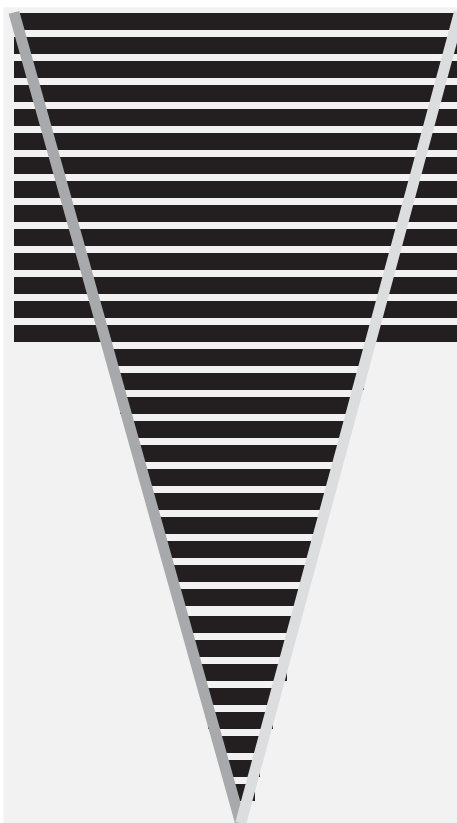
Yes, what is news? I just want to take a moment or two to talk about something that won't be as in depth and it won't be as newsworthy as the three speakers are going to touch on, but I think it is important. I read just recently that the spin doctor who took Bill Clinton from governorship to president had a very simple sign on his desk, which said "It is the economy, stupid!". The number one issue to the American electorate at that time was the economy. And the stupid? Well, that's history now - and that was news. As Mayor of this city I am in the business of governance and our sign might well say, "It is not that it is the economy, but it is the community, stupid!".

The single issue and focus for us is our community - its needs, and wants, and how we can involve them in the city and our future. If we forget that, then it is we who are stupid. Some of our strategies for involving our community have been done in conjunction with the city's other key stakeholder - that is the Examiner newspaper. The newspaper, like ourselves, knows that there is really only one issue and focus for them too, whatever way we might dress it up, it is about the community. They are also in that business of community building. Just one example, of which there are many of the partnership. There are rumblings in the city that the regional retail status that we have enjoyed in the past is decreasing. You know the story, the retail is sluggish, the city looks tired, nothing is happening. The response from the City Council? We embark on a three-year

program to rebuild and revitalise the CBD. The newspaper, to their credit, publicly supports the program, runs progress stories and helps open each stage with much fanfare and promotion. The result? The city looks good, the economy is stimulated. A successful community building relationship. There are many other examples of that.

Given all this, though, I don't want you to think that our paper does not fulfil its other role of commentating on how we are performing. I can assure you they do. We have had our fair share of beatings and that is the nature of mature relationships. You disagree and you debate. Again, it is all news and I think it is worthy of print. Through the times of disagreement, though, we invariably come back to same objective, the one we have in common, that is our community.

Ladies and gentlemen, from the Council I am delighted to welcome each one of you. Welcome back after ten years. I look forward to the debate tonight of what is news. I know that at the end of the day that the quality of the newspaper here with us - and this is not just simply because Lloyd is here, and all the other Examiner people, but it is the community building that counts. Again, I welcome you all to Launceston and declare this seminar duly open.



**Professor Dennis Pearce**

Thank you very much, John. Can I just say again that the Council is delighted to be here in Launceston. It is my first visit, and it is a lovely place.

Can I now introduce our three speakers. What we propose to do is to hear from the speakers and then the floor will be open for questions directed to any one of them.

Our first speaker will be Senator Nick Sherry, Labor Senator from Tasmania. Nick has been in the parliament since 1990 and is thereby well equipped to talk about what it is like to be the subject of the news.

So I call first on Senator Nick Sherry.



## Senator Nick **Sherry**

Thanks Dennis, Mayor Lees, ladies and gentlemen, particularly to those of you who come from interstate. Welcome to Tasmania.

Rod rang me some months ago to suggest I speak here this evening and, of course, I am sure it was motivated by the fact that as a politician, political life, public life, I have had my fair share of reportage over the years. It was suggested that when I came in tonight that I was to

# The Politician

what would be considered political success.

News gathering is also obviously time-consuming. There seems to be a greater emphasis placed on excitement, controversy, sentimentality and often factual information takes a second place to the opinion it arouses. News, factual information, is sometimes a victim of the financial pressures because of the time spent that is necessary to collect that information. There is much greater focus on market demand to capture the public's concerns, to maximise relevance, and I think that is overwhelmingly driven by the bottom line, the dollar. I don't criticise that, as I said earlier I think it is inevitable and it is part of our changing society.

Public figures today, particularly those elected public figures, have to expect a far greater degree of scrutiny and accountability. And, as I said earlier, by and large I think that that is a good thing in our society. There are, however, some areas of news reporting that have been traditionally out of bounds, particularly the private lives of politicians. This is the area of controversy that I touch on today. Where should the media draw the line in reporting about the private lives of politicians? What is legitimate news?

It is not an easy issue because many politicians wrap themselves in their family in a public sense, and often wrap themselves in so-called traditional family values. And I submit if by this behaviour they exhibit through other behaviour in their holding of political office, an element of hypocrisy in public life, then they become legitimate news. Because you can't have it both ways. But it is often difficult to draw the line because personal circumstances can vary significantly from politician to politician. And I would like to give here a few examples of some of the difficulties that can arise.

There has obviously been some recent media coverage of Cheryl Kernot's

difficulties. I recall coverage of the accident that occurred with Cheryl Kernot's furniture van about 18 months ago, and I submit that that in terms of the private life of a politician is not appropriate to cover. It is in no way related to her public duties. The recent attempts to infiltrate her hospital, in various disguises by some members of the media, to take photographs and/or talk to her I would also submit is totally wrong. When a person is ill they are entitled to a peaceful recovery until they return to public duty.

I would like to use myself here as an example. It was after my suicide attempt, and that is a difficult issue, it is an uncomfortable issue for many people in our society. The media, I have to say, were extremely respectful of myself and my family's privacy. Since that time, of course, when I returned to public duties some in the media have raised the issue with me from time to time. And I regard that as perfectly legitimate. Of course I have the right to make a comment or to respond as I so wish, and I have done that from time to time. But, again, any person who is elected to public office and who makes decisions about our society, it is perfectly valid to make comment and enquire about their health when they return to public office.

But there is one area where I have very great concern about whether or not it is legitimate news and that is in respect of politicians' children. And this will be my area of controversy and it is coincidence, but I understand there is no-one here from the Hobart Mercury. I don't want to single out the Hobart Mercury because I do know this occurs in other areas of the media from time to time. I was reading in the Hobart Mercury yesterday of the coverage given to the court case involving our Premier Jim Bacon's son. And I believe such coverage is totally inappropriate. We have to ask ourselves whether a photo of the Premier's son, and a twenty line story that appeared, would have appeared in

the newspaper if he had not been the son of the Premier. Of course it wouldn't. It wouldn't.

I don't accept in public life that the children of politicians should be subject to any greater media, i.e. being in the news, than any other general member of the public. It is often difficult enough for a child of a politician, for a person in public life, to put up with the particular difficulties that they confront without having their own struggles with life magnified in the media because they are the son or the daughter of a politician. It is the politician that is elected to public position and is open to public scrutiny, not the child of the politician. I think this is an area where the Press Council and the various agencies involved in media regulation do need to have a very thorough look at the principles that are applied.

As I said in my earlier comments I have a very firm respect for the media and the people that are involved in the media, in my everyday dealings. I have had my difficulties with the media, I have had cause to complain on one occasion where I had to, unfortunately, take some legal action - not against I might say any of the newspapers in Tasmania - and that involved a story that was totally false, one which I wasn't even rung by the reporter to verify its accuracy. But that has been the only time when I felt it necessary to take action beyond a call to a reporter or an editor to have something corrected. Even though, as I say, in politics there is often an element of unfairness about your particular role as a politician, but that is politics, that is really part of the game, as difficult as it is for many of us from time to time.

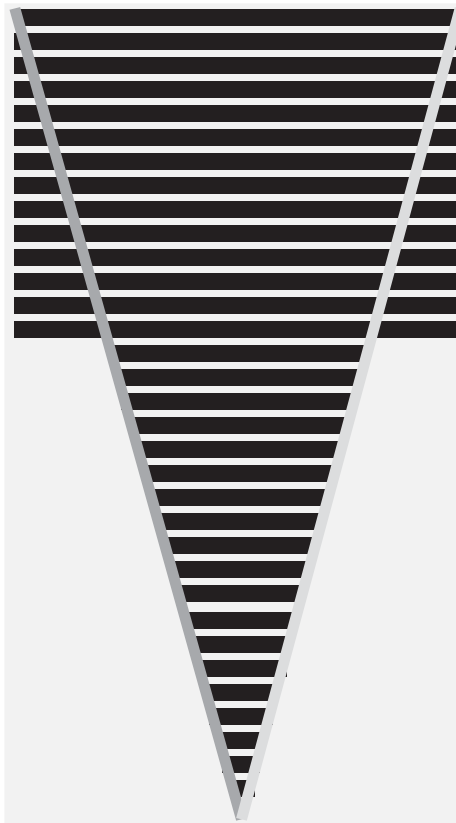
So, on top of my earlier remarks, a free press is very important in our society. I am generally not one who supports codes of conduct. I have had fairly extensive experience and involvement in the area of superannuation and by and large from my observation codes of conduct generally

don't work. I think, however, one area which is a clear exception is the media. I don't see any role for government being involved in the regulation of the media in terms of the content that is either written in the press or contained in the electronic media. I do see a very active role for government in terms of media ownership to ensure that we have significant degree of competition between the media. I think that is a different issue altogether, however.

As I said earlier, I don't think I have been particularly controversial, unlike some of my political colleagues. When I look back at some of the media coverage earlier in the week of elections from time to time obviously proprietors, I think, do get involved, editors get involved in directing reporters, some of that goes on, but I have to honestly say I don't believe that the Labor Party has ever won or lost an election because of the media coverage. I have come to the conclusion that we either deserve to win or lose on our merits regardless of the media coverage and the concerns we might have had about it.

I would submit that the degree of regulatory control in Australia, and obviously some of the issues that were touched on earlier in the introduction from the Press Council, is a sufficient balance in a democratic society to ensure that people who believe that they have been adversely commented on, incorrectly or inaccurately, can resolve it. It is often difficult when your name is in the media and you believe that something is inaccurate and you feel a degree of frustration at that, but I have come to the conclusion that that is part of a democratic process. It is difficult, but I think that overall we have the balance in this country almost spot on.

Thank you.



**Professor Dennis Pearce**

Margaret Bartkevicius was the Regional Superintendent of Education for this area, as many of you would be aware, before her retirement in the mid-1990s. She is now Vice-Chairman of Tas-Dance, Tasmania's state dance company. And Margaret is here in the role of a reader, a representative of the public as to the question of what do the public think ought to be the news.



# The Reader

## Ms Margaret **Bartkevicius**

Good evening. I would like to add my welcome to those of you who are back in Launceston for the first time, I hear, over a ten year period.

I am very honoured, but more than just a little intimidated in speaking to you today, as I know that I am speaking to a group of highly organised, professional and by your very essence, powerful and influential people.

I am not a journalist, and I don't claim to know very much about the workings or the politics of your profession. I believe that my role today is to speak to you as one of your millions of customers - your readers. And as I wrote "millions of readers" I felt momentary surge of confidence knowing that as with any product or public procedure, if the customers don't like what is for sale or on offer of being implemented, then the transactions between us finish. Now *that is* power! I believe that it is my role today to let you know what my expectations are of newspapers. I guess that I am your representative Mrs. Average.

I live in a regional city and am unashamedly parochial as my community and its events interest me and influence my life. I therefore will centre my view of newspapers on my regional paper, as it is a constant and regular part of my daily life. I confess to being a news junkie and will buy other newspapers when I am intrigued by headlines or events, and use the Internet as well as other media for further information. While it must be a source of frustration to you as print media when radio and television can immediately issue news as it happens, it is the newspapers which give me a detailed reporting and the opportunity to re-read and reflect on issues, and I value that.

So what are the expectations of newspapers from Mr. & Mrs. Average? My life is a busy one, filled with work, interrupting telephones, people, children, and all of the trivia of life that you all know so well. One small strategy, which

has become part of remaining sane in the milieu of living, is to begin my day a little after 6am with my delivered local newspaper. A moment of reflection and peace before the madding crowd intrudes into my day, a routine which is highly valued by my husband and me, and which gives us time to quietly discuss the world around us - the local world of our community and of the larger world and its joys and sorrows. Mind you, not all of our early morning reflections and discussion are quiet! We can become highly excited about some news reports or interpretations of news in our paper, but the point is that I am a regular reader of my local newspaper and as interests and time permit, of other Australian papers, and surely that is what you aim for - to have readers involved, informed, made curious, entertained and *to feel* something about what they have read. You have made me cry, laugh, feel angry, despairing and sometimes to fall in a pool of admiration at a beautiful piece of writing or a wonderful photograph.

If you give me information, if I am to be educated by your writings, opinions and reporting, then I must trust you. In my role as Mrs. Average, I asked many people as I moved around my daily life what did they expect from their newspapers? And I was astonished by the congruency of their responses. Without exception, they all used words like honour, truth, integrity, ethics and responsibility. They stressed concerns about independence of thought and action, and non-alignment with corporations or powerful groups so that there was no hint of collusion or corruption. They clearly expect a lot of you, and so do I. Your most capable executive secretary, Mr. Jack Herman, forwarded to me a book of *Aims, Principles and Complaints Procedure*, which I read with great interest. They are highly professional aims and principles, which made a statement of the freedom of the press, a democratic principle to which we

all subscribe with great passion, as it is and remains one of the corner stones of our democracy, and I have great admiration for the men and women who forged your professional ethos. In every way, I believe, you are the gatekeepers to our democracy.

In our history of storytelling, which passed on news, information and entertainment of the various cultures, we have never had such immediacy in reporting with so many different views and angles about events. We've never had such strong responsiveness to our concerns as media recipients with all of the watchdog committees, complaints committees, ethics committees and so forth, so that we know that the media are mindful of their responsibilities and are brought into line if they deviate onto pathways that are not acceptable. We have also come to accept the role of the media as a means of 'keeping the bastards honest'.

I expect that my newspaper, as reporters of protests and as critics of governments themselves, will play a crucial role. In our large multicultural society the media is the only way in which we can learn about the protests and proposals of our fellow citizens. If the media narrow the range of what they will report of what they will investigate, they rob citizens of knowledge and with that, the capacity to act or to exert influence. One way to ensure that the media outlets remain open to a range of views is to ensure competition and diversity of ownership. In our democracy we accept that the government itself own a broadcaster, which will not concern itself for profit and will be bipartisan in the political or the corporate battles and not a barracker for any particular point of view. An independent government-financed media is one of the miracles of a liberal democracy which can be likened to an officially recognised leader of the opposition and judges who may defy the government that appoints them. And I

must ask, because I don't know, why must this miracle be limited to the radio and television media only?

With all of those responsibilities and ideals I have to note, though, that the journalists too are human, with all of our shared human failings and personal needs for power, recognition and ambitions. So there is flip side to the media, which can beat up stories, can be intrusive I understand, and sometimes create the news rather than reporting it. It has been said that good news doesn't sell newspapers, but I wonder. By dwelling on the negative shape of our world view the reader can believe that the world is full of evil happenings when in fact good news abounds but is often not reported. Thus our view can be shaped towards a negative rather than a positive outlook of events local and global. This can desensitise us and have us believe that these global tragedies, the starving people, the flooded, the war torn are part of our lives without us having the ability to respond or manage, and it becomes part of our lives, lives which it seems we must live without personal power. But I have come to expect that my local newspaper will report the good news, and patently they still sell newspapers. In fact, my newspaper has an intentional and influential feature, *Believe it!* that has its focus good news, featuring items such a young person who has whose got a job, to new business, educational and commercial ventures. This feature has become a strong supporting and enabling force in my community and it helps us to believe that we can do it!

It appears to me that your code of ethics is sometimes overlooked perhaps in the excitement of reporting the horrible and the unusual. It is probably an old chestnut to pull out at this moment, but you would remember the reporting of two cases when children and a parent were involved in murder-suicide in cars, using asphyxiation by carbon monoxide poisoning. The method of murder-suicide



complete with photographs was widely reported in many media. The copycat effect is the danger, and the tragedy is that in my small community within days of the reporting, a young talented high school student chose this way to take his own life. He was a much respected and loved member of the high school that my two grand daughters attend, and the resultant shock and grief was very personal and very tragic. We can argue that this lad may well have used some other method to lose his life, and the results would have been the same. But we dare not overlook the powerful effect of these recipes for death so ably illustrated by the media as in this case, that can make it seem so simple a solution for the despairing in their time of need. I plead my expectations that your professional code of ethics *is* adhered to, no matter how enticing an event may be for a personal 'first' or an exclusive story.

I expect that your organisations would claim to be equal opportunity employers. I have no information on this. However, I do wonder why women invariably compile cooking sections, while the food and wine critics are invariably men. Science columns feature male writers, and fashion sections feature women writers and so the stereotypes continue. In my limited experience, and you will tell me if I am wrong about this, most editors are men, whilst it seems to me that editorial positions for women are reserved usually in magazines for women. Now as men and women are both most capable journalists and I'm sure leaders in their chosen field, I wonder why this is so? Perhaps I am wrong. As media you are by nature very public organisations, and as such you are open to scrutiny for evidence that you too are keeping abreast of expectations of fairness, merit and equality.

It appears to me that some newspapers are making a concerted effort to engage young people as readers. Wonderful. I applaud the fact that children and

teenagers are making contributions to their newspaper with imaginative endeavours such as *Newspapers in Education Week* and work experience students having their journalist writings printed. Once you have been successful in gaining these youthful readers, it brings some new problems to be solved, I should think, given young people's stages of cognitive development, their moral development and their ability to make reasoned judgements. So then where then do you place your X-Adult Services advertisements? Must you tone down some of your headlines, pictures of wars and other disasters? And remembering my concern of despairing youth, will you take care of them and their future by carefully printing facts but not recipes for death? You face a lot of challenges.

Like Alice who questioned, "*What's the use of a book without pictures?*" Mr. & Mrs. Average love the pictures and cartoons in their papers. The cartoonists are mostly brilliant and sometimes the photographers grace the papers with photographs of great beauty and skill. They enhance your papers and I have no doubt, your distribution. But do these creative and talented individuals ever become editors or administrators in your organisations? Again, I don't know. I ask this question remembering the uninformed times when within schools the teachers who rose through the ranks to become administrators and principals of schools were only those teachers who were the 'regular' classroom teachers. I remember arguing fiercely with my department that physical education teachers, music and art teachers, teachers of the various technologies and librarians were also highly trained and competent teachers and worthy of consideration to be able to take the next step within the hierarchy of promotable positions. What was happening was that the 'academic', so-called, teachers were the most valued and the creative and practical arts were relegated to the perceived non-essential

“frills” in education. What a limited and crude view of people and life to assume that the arts and physical education, or shall I say, cartoons and photography for example, are non-essential to our lives! It was a battle, in my case, but time has proved that they are as capable administrators and principals of schools as their colleagues. For I would ask, does this particular glass ceiling exist in your organisations or are you in tune with the beautiful twins of equity and merit?

I also expect my newspaper to be responsible to its readers, even if that means to pass over what could make a good news story from their point of view. To illustrate, some time ago a secondary school in Launceston was receiving phone calls claiming that a bomb had been planted in the school. The principal went through the procedures of informing the Education office, and of evacuating the students out on to the school oval for sports. As the calls were nearly a daily event, it was believed that they were hoax calls. And my boss, the Regional Director, contacted the newspaper requesting that no publicity was given to this nuisance event for obvious reasons of reinforcement of obnoxious behaviour, or of the worry of copycat behaviour. The newspaper responded with discretion and the behaviour ceased.

These are some of the things that I expect from my newspaper. But we don't always know what we expect until we have had the necessary life experience to demonstrate that need, so I have a personal story to tell you that I hope will illustrate this point.

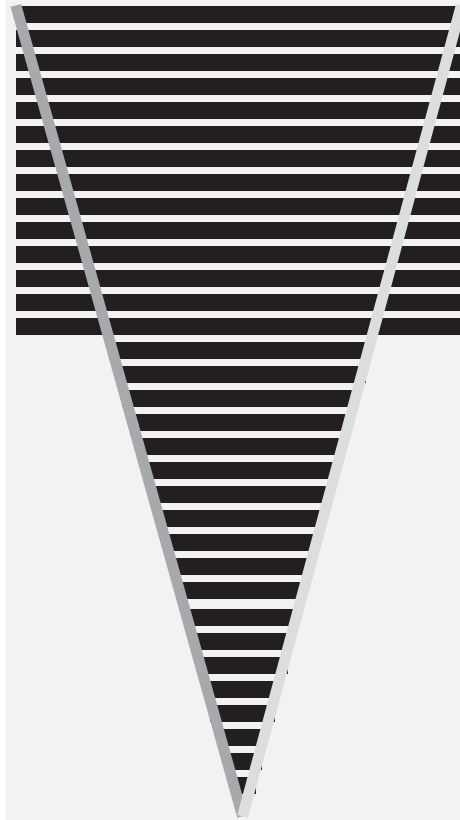
My son Mark and his beautiful wife Karen were working in Kuwait when Saddam Hussein invaded that small nation. I was able to contact Mark and Karen by phone on that day of the invasion and spoke to them about their entrapment, and then as the plug was pulled on communications with Kuwait, silence. For one long interminable month, silence. During this time my local

newspaper, *The Examiner*, reported the news of the war as it proceeded but sensitively left me alone in my agony for a time, until a young woman reporter, Sharon Webb, rang my husband to let him know that she must report on the two Launcestonians who were trapped in Kuwait. Remember, she rang my husband. As I knew and admired the young journalist, I said that I would see her and I told her my story through my tears and hers. She retold my story accurately, precisely and with dignity. I lived somehow through the next weeks, ringing each day the embassies in London, Riyadh and Canberra pleading for news of the expatriates who were hostages in the war zone and in particular, of the young people whom I loved. I learned to hate the fanfare that preceded the A.B.C. newscast that I watched helplessly many times a day. And I still do; I wish they would change it. At dawn on August 14th a phone call came from the Canberra embassy from a wonderful excited man who said he had a surprise for me - a young man wished to speak to me, he said, from Riyadh and he would connect me. Mark and Karen exploded over the phone. They had courageously escaped from Kuwait in a borrowed 4WD, driving across the desert in 45 degrees heat, helped along the way by Bedouins, getting themselves captured once again by the Iraqi army and escaping again, finally reaching Riyadh, safety and the embassy. Oh the joy! The first story Mark told me was that he won the first battle against the Iraqi army by beating them at table tennis. Truly! And that as the army officers escorted them in convoy across the desert towards Bagdad, a sandstorm arose and as the increasingly poor visibility curtailed them, they veered off in their car towards Saudi Arabia Riyadh. And got there, together with their parrot, whom they had taught to sing Waltzing Matilda. They celebrated by drinking hot Coca Cola and rang home. What a story of courage!

I phoned Sharon immediately and we laughed and wept with happiness together and then she did what she had to do. *And this is the point of my story.* Sharon knew what I didn't - that I would be catapulted into instant fame, and I had no knowledge of what that meant. Sharon phoned me again and told me clearly what to expect - that I would get phone calls from the media of every kind, and told me how I may handle that. It happened exactly as she has forewarned. That sensitive and ethical young journalist taught me that I could expect from my local newspaper nurture, support, and protection in the form of advice and knowledge in my hour of need, as I had very few resources left at that time with which to manage the public world, let alone myself. Have you any idea how frightening and confronting it is to *be* the news?

So I have a lot of expectations of my newspaper, and I feel confident that they are realised. When I feel a tetch let down or wish to express outrage, pleasure or comment, they offer me a venue for those expressions through letters to the editor. I feel that I am an interactive part of my newspaper and I believe that as I ask a lot of it, and if I do then I must also assume my responsibility to contribute. If I have rights then I also have responsibilities. I am well pleased with the institution of my newspaper, which most ably represents all of you in my community.

(l to r) Dick James, Margaret Bartkevicius and former Press Council member Patricia Ratcliff



**Professor Dennis Pearce**

Our last speaker is Rod Scott the editor of the *Examiner* newspaper. Rod was appointed editor in 1993. Apart from that onerous task, and I don't say that lightly, he is also Chairman of the Tasmanian Electronics Commerce Centre, and a member of Australians for Reconciliation Committee. So, Rod will speak third, and then over to you people if there are any questions that you want to put to the speakers.



## Mr Rod Scott

Senator Sherry and Margaret have really touched on the point of just out personal news can be. Senator Sherry talked about how one person's news can be another person's private despair. And tonight I want to look, from a newspaper's point of view, at just how subjective news selection is.

Three weeks ago I set sail for Melbourne on a 50-year-old ketch that, not far into the journey, I realised wasn't really big enough for the journey. The aim was we were going to sail to Melbourne, tie up at Pier 35, go to the Melbourne Cup, pick the winner and have a generally good time.

You can see that that was a fair mixture of fact and fantasy. We sailed out of the Tamar, turned left for about eight hours, then we turned right for about six hours and then we ran into a Bass Strait storm. Six hours later as I lay on my bunk, debilitated and green, I desperately wanted to know the news.

I wasn't interested in the referendum; I didn't care what was happening in Chechnya, I hadn't the slightest interest in what Jim Bacon was doing. The news that I wanted was that we had reached Victoria and that the storm had stopped. The world could have ended, in fact there were times when I wished it had, but the only news I wanted was that the rolling had stopped.

And tonight as we look at news and what makes it, it's worth considering the very personal aspects of news. What's news to one person is of little or no interest to somebody else.

At *The Examiner* we unashamedly regard ourselves as a local newspaper. That is our bread and butter. It is what repeated market research shows that our readers want and I think Margaret touched on that a bit tonight. However for the overwhelming majority of our readers we are the only newspaper that they get. The sale of the national dailies in our region is very small. And that means we have to be more than just a local newspaper.

We have to meet other needs.

The great British journalism educator Bob James of Westminster Press argues that local news is what people are talking about. It doesn't have to be defined geographically. For a newspaper like *The Examiner* there is also the important issue of perceptions. Our readers have a view about what makes a "proper" newspaper.

During the East Timor crisis, like most other newspapers in Australia, we ran the East Timor coverage on the front page most days. It was an important story by any measure. And our readers would have expected us to recognise this importance.

Our readership has a strong sense of ownership of *The Examiner*, and again Margaret touched on that. It doesn't hesitate to tell us what it thinks of what we are doing. And the most commonly asked question of newspaper people is, how do you decide what you are going to put on the front page? And the most common criticism from people is, why have we chosen to highlight that and not something else.

Now there is a lot of talk in the media about journalists being objective. Well, my view is that there is no such thing as an objective journalist. The best we can be is fair.

The historian E. H. Carr argued that all history is subjective. There can be no objective recounting of history. The very fact that an historian chooses to record one fact rather than another, or use some incident to illustrate a point rather than others, makes it a subjective process. And so it is with journalism. We make choices.

We may be the storytellers entrusted with a person's version of events and expected to relay it to thousands, but in the telling we make choices. We make choices about which facts and quotes we use, and we make choices about the order in which we use them. We make choices of emphasis. We make choices in the layout about which stories get prominence and which stories get length. Those choices are based on our training

and our experience and our individual views of the world. How else, for example, can we justify the weightings we give to some stories? The on-going agony of the people of Angola with almost unmatched human misery rates a few pars occasionally, even in our national daily. Yet, if a gunman kills half a dozen people in a school in the US it warrants a substantial coverage. And the seemingly inevitable bus crashes and ferry disasters of the third world countries struggle to make more than a few pars, or the briefs. But crash a train in London, or have a golfer die because the pressurisation on his private jet fails, and it's front page news. I am not moralising about that. I am merely making the point that news selection is a subjective matter. It is not a science.

Journalists think we are good at telling stories, and good at choosing what stories to tell and we tend to get a bit defensive when readers disagree. I think all editors deep down would like sometimes to whinge back at readers who ring up and complain to us. And in my fantasies I might say: "If you people knew how hard we worked, and how we slaved over this you would be grateful for what you get."

Kelvin Mackenzie, the editor of the London Sun in its heyday of bad taste headlines and stories and its booming circulation is reported to have picked up a ringing phone in the Sun one day to be confronted by a complaining reader. He listened for a few seconds and then replied along the lines: "You clearly don't like what we do Madam, so you are banned from buying the Sun." Later that day, the story goes, he picked up the phone to be greeted by the uncertain voice of a man. "Err, is that Mr Mackenzie? This morning you banned my wife from buying the Sun. Would it be o.k. if she read my copy?" Now, we would all like leaders like that.

In the real world of newspapers we tend to judge the success of our story-telling by measuring sales. But if that is the

case we are failing. The readership of mainstream newspapers is ageing and we are not recruiting new readers fast enough. Perhaps it's the way we tell stories or perhaps it's the way we choose them. And maybe we need to change.

About five years ago at The Examiner, we embarked on an experiment where we had a group of young people come in to The Examiner and produce four pages of the paper each week. We ran it on a Thursday. We called for people who might be interested and we ended up with about 20 regulars. They had a weekly meeting at The Examiner chaired by one of our reporters, and we fed them pizzas and coke for their trouble. They did cd reviews, film reviews and wrote about things that interested young people. It was aimed at getting the youth market into the newspaper. But it failed.

Ironically it became a clique rather than a dynamic voice for young people. After about 18 months the dominant people squeezed out our attempts to give it new life by introducing new faces. The news they produced was for their in-group only. They produced it for themselves. And on a broader scale I guess that is the danger with mainstream journalism. Unless we have lives outside newspapers we can become insular and out of touch.

And we see it with some of our political journalists. They mix in the heady world of parliament and MPs and it becomes the centre of the universe. We know people don't want to read about political brawls. They want to know what parliament is doing but skip the posturing and skip the arguing. But try telling that to a political journalist who is trying to sell a "great story".

Earlier this month there was a car accident in Northern Tasmania where a car load of young men from a small country town, lost control and crashed head-on into a car. Two of the young men were killed and the occupants of the other car badly hurt. We covered the accident on the front page the next day.



We followed up with another front page a day later highlighting the deep affection the people in that town felt for the dead young men. It was an emotive story of a small community in grief. That morning the mother of the people in the other car was in tears in our office accusing us of painting those young men as heroes, when they had caused so much grief to her family. Her husband went further, he telephoned the reporter and threatened him with violence.

On the other side of the same story we received a call from the father of one of the dead boys. He was so moved with our coverage, (he later passed on his deep gratitude), that he helped us with the coverage of the funeral. He advised where the best place to get the photos would be, and where we could get details of the eulogies. And we used that on the front page. It shows again how news can be very much in the eye of the beholder.

People might say, well why did we do that to that accident, and why didn't we treat other accidents in the same way? Well there probably isn't an answer, except they were judgments we made on that day. I think they were the right judgments and I think with hindsight I'd say we'd make the same judgments again.

Although there can be no objectivity in a pure sense, our decision making has to have an ethical base. Our readers have to believe that we are acting responsibly. We have to be able to defend our decisions on the basis that we behaved ethically. A major reason for the low regard in which journalists are held is the perception that too often we distort, exaggerate and wallow in other people's misery to titillate and sell newspapers.

One of the lessons I drive home to young reporters is to get details into stories. Forget adjectives, use detail to paint word pictures. How far do we go in reporting sexual attacks or court cases? Is it sufficient just to report that someone was raped and sexually assaulted, or do we have an obligation to give more detail?

My suspicion is that many of our readers see us as being lascivious when we step over the line in giving detail of rape and other sexual assaults.

Last month a young woman was abducted, raped and murdered in Launceston. We ran the story aggressively on the front page on several consecutive days to drive up the emotional pressure on the killer and perhaps someone who knew him. The hope was that it might lead to a breakthrough in the investigation. We did that with the full backing of the community and the victim's family. And it worked.

As a result of material we published the police got a breakthrough, an arrest and a confession. Then the community attitude changed. I had calls and personal contacts, particularly from women, asking us to back off in our coverage of the subsequent trial. In the community's mind the story had moved on. It was the same story to us, but in different circumstances the community's perception of what was news had changed. Inside the newsroom at The Examiner we still saw it as a big story. The community view of what was news had changed and we were slow to respond. The ethical issue was whether we were running the graphic detail because of our belief that there was some community right to know, or were we journalists carried away with a big story?

Kelvin Mackenzie, who I mentioned earlier, he had no such problem with ethics. When asked what he thought about ethics, he responded that he thought it was a county near London where people wore white socks.

People also ask us, "why did you fill the paper up with bad news?" The truth is we don't, but the perception is that we do. In part we are victims of being lumped in with the rest of the media. Watch a television bulletin most nights and the lead stories in a 15 story bulletin will inevitably be death and destruction. Or maybe that's just my jaundiced view of

what passes for television news. That aside, when we put crash stories and tragedies on page one we do see an increase in sales.

Our CEO Lloyd Whish-Wilson believes that this is part of the long-term problem facing newspapers. His view is that each time we do that we get a sales jump, but we do it at the expense of our customers' long-term commitment to our brand and our credibility. It is a bit like selling on price. The subliminal message of that approach is that the product is down on quality.

We actively work to shore up our brand as this community's newspaper. We strongly support local events and our Believe It! campaign aims to build community confidence through positive news stories.

Our job as newspaper people is to juggle news selection so that it meets the needs of our loyal readers yet increases our relevance to occasional and non-readers. Whether that is through the publication of the little athletics results or something of international moment or a mixture of both is the daily judgement we make.

I can't answer really the question of

what is news, but if you read tomorrow's Examiner you'll see what our news team thought was news today. In hindsight, we'll probably have different view but unfortunately we have to live with that decision, at least a day and then we get another chance.

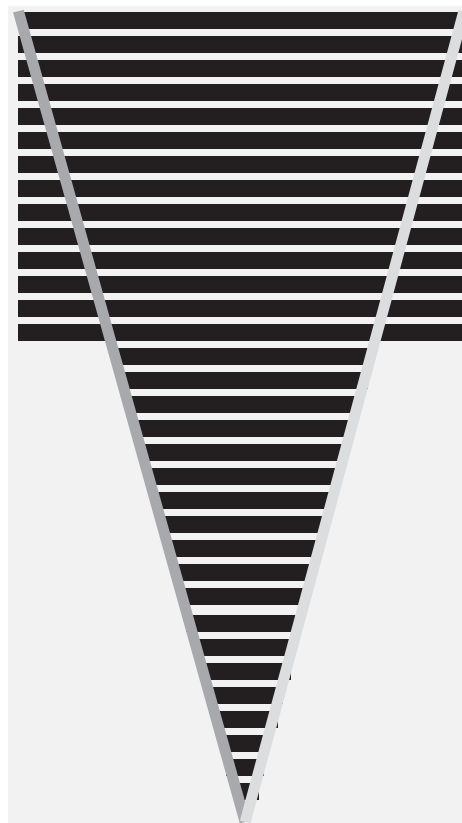
I'd like to leave you with my favourite story about The Examiner. It has nothing to do with news, but it is about communication and how a fact can mean different things to different people.

About a year or so ago I got a phone call at home one Saturday morning, and it began with the dread words, "Is that the Mr Scott who is the editor of The Examiner?". Of course you always get just a little bit sensitive when people start off a telephone call like that. I said, "Yes". And the woman said, "I want to complain because my ad isn't in the paper". And I thought, well that's the advertising department. But we are a customer focussed business, so I said, "How can I help you madam". She said, "My ads not in the paper." And I said, "What sort of ad is it?". She said, "Well, I don't normally do this sort of work, but every now and again when I really need the money I do

this sort of work, and it is in the adult services section.” I said, “Alright madam, I will check it out for you.”

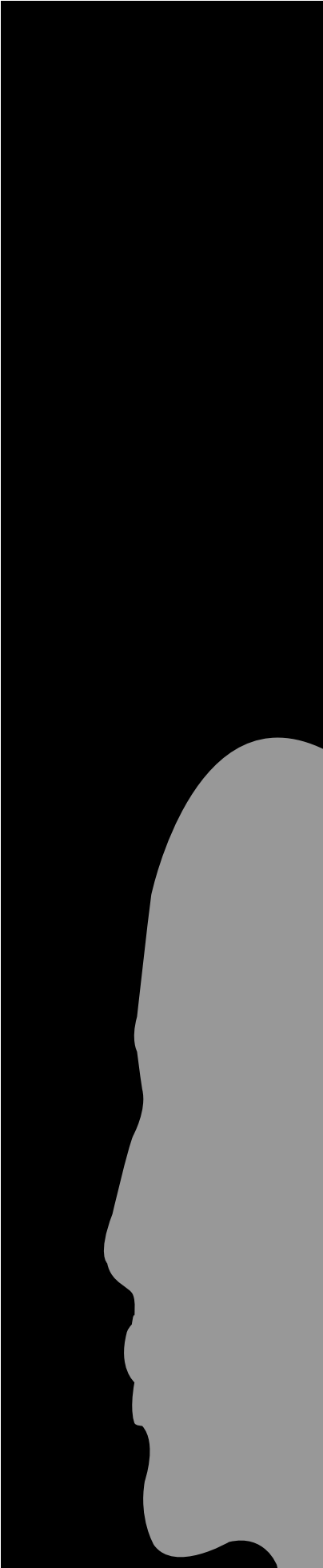
Anyway, I checked it out and in fact the ad was in the paper - it was in the used car section. And you might ask, how did an ad for adult services get in the used car section, well those of you who know about cars will have heard of the Ford Escort. This woman, when she phoned her ad through, had headlined it ‘Red Hot Escort’, and to the person taking the ad down that meant cars, not adult services.

Thank you.



### **Professor Dennis Pearce**

Thank you to our three speakers.  
Questions from the floor - does anybody have anything that they would like to pose to any of the people, following on from what they said?  
The proceedings tonight are being recorded, twice over as it were, they are being recorded for the purposes of the Council itself which is producing a publication.  
Could questioners please come to the microphone here in the middle of the hall and give their name and affiliation.



Q

*Lindsay SIMPSON*

I was just interested in the car accident story. You were talking about the fact that you presented the viewpoint of those young men, and the affection of the town, and that there was criticism from the other parties as you had not investigated that side of it. Had the journalist attempted to speak to or try and found out more details about the other car?

A

Rod SCOTT

Well, the limitations there are that the police don't release the names of people if they are not killed in an accident. They won't give us the names. So, we were denied the names of the people. The other thing that particularly distressed the family in that case was that our report said that the people were "satisfactory". That comes from the hospital. And the hospital has a rating. If you are "critical" that means you might live or die. If you are "stable" that means you are probably going to live. And if you are "satisfactory" it means you will live. But a "satisfactory" person can have all their bones broken, be brain-damaged, the whole range of things. It just means they are going to live. Out of that, we going to the hospital and ask can we have something that has a bit more meaning for people, because in this case it actually added to the distress. The woman came in and said my grandchildren are lying in hospital with tubes in, and bones broken, and you are saying they are in

satisfactory condition. They're not. But we didn't have access to the family because we didn't know who they were and they wouldn't tell us.

The names of the deceased were released in the normal course of events because the young men had been killed.

Q

*Brian MCKENDRICK*

That story did surprise me as a reader, the treatment of it. Do you expect to cover the inquiry which will follow - the coronial inquiry? And how do you feel you will think - hypothetically I know - if it turns out that those young men were very irresponsible drivers?

A

Rod SCOTT

Well I don't think there is any doubt, within this room, that the young men were in the wrong, and the father of one of the dead boys conceded as much to us. But our story was really about a small town losing two young men who were well thought of in the town. From the feedback we got it was a really important part of helping the town come to grips with the fact that it had lost two young men, and I don't think anyone in the town was saying that they weren't at fault in the accident. They were on the wrong side of the road and apparently going too fast. So the town wasn't trying to say how unfair it was, they were just saying we are really very sorry that we have lost these two young men.

*Prof Dennis Pearce*

*I rather wondered if one of the people from the media area would be bold enough to take up Margaret's challenge about stereotyping. Why is it that it is always the women who do the cookery columns, and the fashion columns, and the men who do the motoring? And why aren't there female editors? Come on Warren!*

Q

*Warren BEEBY*

I'm Warren Beeby. I represent News Limited on the Press Council.

Well, I wouldn't assume to say that stereotyping doesn't happen. For Margaret's benefit, the editor of Australia's biggest selling newspaper, *The Sunday Telegraph*, is a woman. The deputy editor of the biggest selling daily newspaper in NSW, *The Daily Telegraph*, is a woman. In respect of why there isn't a cartoonist as an editor, I have to say I've never known a cartoonist who can spell. However, cartoonists have traditionally earned more money than editors. But, you are right. Stereotyping does go on and, unfortunately I can't nominate too many other female editors around Australia. But things are clearly changing because they are there now. So, we will have to see what happens.

*Prof Dennis Pearce*

*Thank you Warren, I knew that I could challenge you.*

Q

*Mark POLONSKI*

I will resist the temptation of raising the issue of Jim Bacon's son, so I will raise the issue of technology and the effects that technology is having on our newspapers and media now and what effect this will have in the coming 20 years or so. To Rod Scott who touched on the decline in circulation which has been happening for some time, which has partly to do with people getting their news from the TV, but I am interested in how you can see the new technology and the Internet will affect the newspaper and how it will develop. And also just an issue for Senator Sherry in terms of government control of media, I think you said you were generally opposed to that notion, but in terms of control of Internet content, as you know the sorts of information that can be published on that, how do you see that area being controlled?

A

Rod SCOTT

I think I have been misreported here. I didn't exactly say the Examiner's circulation was declining, in fact it is increasing. What I said was that our readership is ageing and we are not recruiting new readers fast enough. As to where technology will go, the Examiner sees itself as a collector and distributor of local news and advertising. At the moment we substantially put that on news print. In 20 years we may deliver it electronically. I don't think it matters. Our real core business is collecting that information

and distributing it. Already we do some of it on the Internet. We update our site on a daily basis, and within about two weeks that will be significantly expanded. We have to work out a way to make people pay for it, that's all. So, I've got no problems about the Examiner as a business, although I can see in 20 years we will probably print some of our news on newsprint so that people like me who are tactile and like to turn pages and like the feel of it, and others who have grown up with electronic age will get it electronically. It will be us providing it.

**A**

Senator Nick SHERRY

I would like to comment on the issue you raised with Rod, too. I had a briefing from Ericson's, who are a major mobile phone company I think they are better known as here in Australia. They talked to us about the convergence of technologies around the world. There is the convergence of the three base technologies: computers; the mobile phones and traditional media, whether it be electronic or hard-copy newspapers. Their prediction - I don't pretend to understand a lot of this technology, I've got to say, my basic utilisation is extraordinarily limited - they were predicting the convergence of all three technologies in the next 10 to 15 years. A total convergence into one unit that is centrally controlled by your mobile phone which becomes your communication centre, if you like, which controls everything,

your banking, your print-outs from your digital screen whether it be hard-copy newspaper or whatever it may be, and to controlling the heating in your house to literally everything. I think that is where we are headed.

Interestingly I was talking to one TV journalist, who I don't like, who was telling me that last year was the first time in Australia when the total media advertising revenue of TV declined. I don't know if that is factual or not. But if it is correct, I think what we are seeing is people simply opting for other forms of information from other media, and I don't know about the Examiner's position but I suspect that the extra advertising dollars are not going into newspapers, at least not consistent with the growth of the economy. So I think there are other competitive sources of information and obviously the Internet is one of them.

And to bring me to that issue of the Internet, I was watching a fascinating program on CNN yesterday afternoon about share trading on the Internet and some of the fraud that has occurred. Yes, my view is that governments will have to regulate the Internet, particularly where it involves issues relating to fraud and financial transactions because there is a significant growth in that area. How we do it I think is going to be extraordinarily difficult because it is very difficult to regulate the

Internet in that area on a national basis. I am sure it will have to be done on a supra-national basis. Now, accomplishing that I think on practical terms will be very difficult.

As to government control of the Internet in terms of censorship, I think it is both impractical and I regard myself as a civil libertarian on those issues. I think, provided there are effective controls for parents to ensure adequate supervision of their children, from both a practical point of view and a philosophical point of view governments should not be involved in regulating the Internet. As I say, one of the important exceptions is where you have financial transactions and fraud occurring, then clearly something has to be done about that. But as I said earlier, my knowledge of technology is extraordinarily limited, so I don't know how it is going to be done.

**Examiner General Manger,  
Lloyd Wish-Wilson, who helped  
organise the Council's Launceston visit**

# Closing Remarks

## Professor Dennis Pearce

Thank you Nick.

It is an issue that has been troubling the Press Council because we have had to confront the question whether we should take complaints in relation to on-line material. We have agreed that we will take complaints where the on-line version of a print version is the same, so that the way in which the material is presented becomes irrelevant. And we are moving steadily down a pathway whereby we will take complaints about newspapers on-line which are there in a changed form, in other words where they've got material that is different from the print version, but where they nonetheless still purport to be a newspaper. We will be discussing among ourselves the question whether we will take complaints in relation to purely on-line publications that have been put there by our member organisations, and that then leaves the absolutely difficult area of complaints about other on-line publications which purport to be the news. In a sense that brings us back to where we started this evening, that we will have to confront the question of what is the news if there is to be a regulatory regime that works on the same basis as the current regulatory regime in relation to print media. Some difficult issues will then have to be asked to try to classify the information under those sorts of headings.

I think we have now reached the point in the evening which is probably wrap-up time, and I would like to very much thank our three speakers, Senator Nick Sherry, Margaret Bartkevicius and Rod Scott for their different perspectives of the question, what is the news, and the way in which newspaper should be contending with that extraordinarily difficult question. And I would also like to thank Ald Lees for opening our seminar this evening, and finally say how pleased the Press Council has been to be able to come back to Launceston and how much we have enjoyed tonight's proceedings, and I hope you have too.

So, many thanks to our speakers for their contribution.

And may I say thank you for coming.

## About the Press Council ...

The Australian Press Council was established in 1976 with the responsibility of preserving the freedom of the press within Australia and ensuring the maintenance of the highest journalistic standards, while at the same time serving as a forum to which anyone may take a complaint concerning the press.

It is funded by the newspaper industry, and its authority rests on the willingness of publishers and editors to respect the Council's views, to adhere voluntarily to ethical standards and to admit mistakes publicly.

The Council consists of 21 members. Apart from the chairman (who must have no association with the press), there are 10 publishers' nominees, ten public members (of whom seven attend each meeting), two journalist members and an editor member. (None of the public members can have had any previous connection with the press.) The newspapers' representatives are drawn from the ranks of metropolitan, suburban and country publishers as well as from AAP. The public is represented by people from all walks of life.

The Press Council is able to amend its constitution with the approval of its constituent bodies. Significantly, great importance is placed on members acting as individuals rather than as the representatives of their appointing organisations. Members with an interest in any matter absent themselves from the meeting and do not participate in the discussion of, or vote on, that issue.

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