

Melbourne Press Club: 11 February, 2010

It is great to be with you at the Melbourne Press Club.

Sydney has no such institution.

In fact, the closest Sydney could come to an institution where journalism could be debated and discussed was the old Journos Club up near Central Station.

I was last there many years ago and my recollection is of a place, replete with poker machines, beer stains from the ages and the smell of half a century's cigarette smoke. The extent of debate on the profession consisted of old downtable subs from the long defunct afternoon *Sun* newspaper reminiscing about how their duties included writing horoscope columns under mystical astrological nom-de-plumes.

The debate about the journalistic future there was simple and perennial – it's stuffed, or more colourful words to that effect. A kind of sophisticated analysis always suggesting that the trouble with these times is that the future isn't what it used to be.

But Melbourne takes the craft seriously. From this club, to the Quills, to the Graham Perkin Award and the A. N. Smith lecture – to the regular debates and discussions about media on Jon Faine and Neil Mitchell, the serious aspirations and great heritages of *The Age* and *The Herald-Sun*, to the continued thoughtful contributions by Eric Beecher and the perennially peripatetic Stephen Mayne.

So it is good to be able to join you, to reflect a little bit on where the ABC is heading during these tumultuous days for the journalistic profession.

Recently, someone pointed out to me that a lot of talk about journalism last year concerned itself with the business model supporting it. And a lot of people spoke about the technology, various gadgets, gizmos and innovations that will impact on how we tell stories.

I should know; I was one of those people.

Fewer people talked about what we should be expecting from quality journalism, or questioned the nature of the content itself – not just its means of delivery.

Yet there were good reasons to focus on technology over content. Anyone looking at the music business or the newspaper business over the past decade – both of which now seem to be in the ambulance, if not intensive care – would see that we cannot separate considerations about content from those of technology.

Technology is always determining the fate of content - *what* we do depends upon *how* we do it. And that means eternally adapting both to technological change, and behavioural change.

But since we're in a new year and a new decade, it seems right to begin 2010 asking some different kinds of questions for the decade ahead.

How do we create and sustain a *culture of journalism*, breaking and reporting news, for the digital era?

The ABC has a formidable culture of news and current affairs in Australia.

What does the public broadcaster have to do to develop this culture in the digital age? What part of our culture from the past do we need to leave behind to be successful in the future? What's the best contribution we can make? What standards, quality, and changes are now required to meet public demand?

The Lateline Breakthrough

The ABC has many decades of rich experience in news and current affairs. Long traditions.

Last year, *PM* was 40. Next year, *Four Corners* turns 50. And this year, in two days time, we will mark 20 years of *Lateline* – a program that is now stronger than ever.

Lateline in fact offers us a textbook case of how the ABC carved out a place for itself in the future. How, in the case of *Lateline*, when tradition met innovation, the audience won.

There were many challenges in creating the program, but two of them are permanent challenges.

How could the ABC take up the opportunities new technologies presented – in this case, satellite technology – and what was in it for the audience?

How could we keep up with behavioural change that was happening at the time, when more and more people were getting home from work - and in front of the TV - later in the night?

How could we offer substantial current affairs programming at a time that suited the audience, and take advantage of that later time?

New satellite technology paved the way. It enabled *Lateline* to pioneer the live international cross. Suddenly, talking to Washington and London – in time zones that worked both for the talent and for Australian audiences – became possible.

Yet live satellite use was expensive. It was crude and subject to failure. It was risky. And using it and setting up with the guests, depended upon not just a new technology, but older sexier technologies such as telex, fax, and that rare beast in the ABC at the time – a telephone with access to International Subscriber Dialling.

So yes, it was risky - yet the risks were worth taking, because they resulted in a new program and better national and international coverage for our audiences.

And in those early years, perhaps two events best proved that the risk with *Lateline* was worth it.

In the early hours of Tuesday, 2nd August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. Hours later Kerry O'Brien was able to cross live to Washington, London and Cairo - not to break the story, but to begin to present analysis on the implications.

Later, in 1991, the August Coup attempt against Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev took place. It was a coup that *Lateline* had, incidentally, predicted some months before.

Since *Lateline* had been following developments in the Soviet Union the team had built up a series of key contacts in Moscow, through whom Australians were able to get an immediate sense of what was happening, live. Along with a perspective on what had led to these events.

The *Lateline* experiment proved that if we build it, the people will come. Just as we've seen most recently with *ABC News Breakfast*, which has seen its audience reach double in the space of a year.

Now it has at about the same reach as Sky News in that timeslot. And of course, I expect *News Breakfast's* audience will grow as digital rollout makes it available in more homes across the country.

As I have said in all my time at the ABC – and before that - I admire the achievements of Sky. *ABC News Breakfast* was created not to drive Sky News out – if that happens, nobody wins. But we have added to audience choices if they have pay TV and have added something distinctive for everyone on television, whether they fork out directly for pay TV or not. There's no doubt Australian news lovers appreciate the fresh approach, the diversity the ABC has brought to breakfast news.

Our shareholders, the Australian people, also appreciate that while they already had a good return on their investment, *ABC News Breakfast* has enlarged that return.

These are models of innovation that changed the game for ABC journalism, gave us a glimpse of the future. And we can draw upon our experience with them as we now examine how we're going to boost the ABC's journalism in the coming decade.

The Technology Dividend

When considering the future of ABC journalism, our thinking is that any technological progress comes with a cultural objective attached: we will do more journalism, yes, but we will do it well.

I want to put paid to the view and fear – not just of some of our competitors, but of people who happen to have the greatest regard for ABC journalism - that the ABC will only be able to offer more journalism in future by diluting what we already offer now.

That we'll spread ourselves too thin, and in doing so, damage the ABC's reputation.

On the contrary, we see making this technological shift as an opportunity to enrich and reinvigorate our journalism at the same time. These are not mutually exclusive aims.

As you know, the ABC will this year launch a free-to-air news channel. The new channel will leverage off our existing investment in local, regional, national and international journalists. And the savings we have made both through changing our production processes and using new technologies will be reinvested directly into journalism and program-making.

Technology changes audience expectations. And digital television allows us to create a news service for those members of our television audience who want continuous access to news and coverage of breaking news as it happens.

If ABC News is not there, particularly when the story is big, constantly changing and of real consequence, we cannot be the news leader we should be. We have already developed a respected and credible continuous news service through NewsRadio, and now we can do so on television as well.

ABC News Breakfast has been a deliberate development exercise for us: drawing on that vast range of ABC's news resources, including our radio teams across the country, to deliver live, intelligent and engaging breakfast television news.

We have developed the technological and journalistic capabilities for going live on television - for extended periods of time - that we would once have struggled with.

Along with the expansion of our online news sites, we have been forced to develop new newsroom protocols to deliver news stories to more pressing deadlines than the top of the hour, or 7pm.

Clearly in this new media landscape, the news is not waiting for us. Our challenge, with this immediacy, is to be fast - but to be accurate, certain. To deliver in a new way to the best of our long established standards.

Under our Charter, we are to be an innovative broadcaster and we are to inform the Australian people – and by launching the new channel later this year we will continue to deliver on both those Charter goals.

Of course, we will not be the only channel offering a 24 hour news service. Pay-TV has channels from Australia and around the world. But since more than two-thirds of Australian homes do not have pay television, the vast majority of homes don't get to see them.

A free-to-air channel offers access to the nation. For the majority, it will represent their only 24 hour news channel. For everyone, it will offer distinctive content.

When radio and television were being established in Australia and the nation itself was still in the making, our policy makers looked to existing examples around the world to work out what might be best for Australia.

They did not emulate the British model, with the public broadcaster BBC established as a monopoly, nor the American, where broadcasting was dominated by commercial interests.

They went for the mixed model, in the belief that it delivers the greatest possible public benefit.

For 50 years now we have offered an ABC television news service, alongside offerings from commercial networks – the mixed media market at work.

The ABC's new news channel follows this precedent.

We think it's a news service that will be different in ways beyond access. And it will be all the better because we are not the only ones providing a 24 hour news service in an Australian context. Competition makes us all sharper.

At the ABC we don't aspire to be a monopoly provider of anything. Our Charter obliges us to be innovative and comprehensive while mindful of what is being offered by other broadcasters.

I think we can demonstrate we are focusing our resources and activity around those areas where we feel we are in a great position - given our history, our culture, our reputation and our current investment – to provide an excellent service.

We are doing that in children's television with ABC3 – and working hard to do it with 24 hour news.

The ABC has more reporters locally, nationally and internationally. It has newsrooms in 60 locations around the country. It has both extensive broadcast experience and a record for innovation and embracing new technology.

You add all this up and the question is not why *would* the ABC provide a 24/7 news channel, but why *wouldn't* it?

There is and will rightly continue to be, debate around the role of public broadcasters in this new media landscape.

My view was summarised elegantly by Alan Rusbridger, the Editor of *The Guardian* in his Cudlipp lecture last month. Rusbridger stated that it would be utterly wrong to hobble the one model that is able to successfully produce distinguished and serious journalism – publicly funded broadcasters – in order to sustain a failed business model.

And he points out that with no public service broadcaster to speak of in the United States, newspapers are still in desperate trouble.

But assuming continued public and political support, there will be a legitimate expectation that the ABC deliver what it is in a privileged position to deliver – journalism that challenges and confronts, and engages audiences in a compelling way.

That the ABC will cut through the noise and clutter, bringing news of substance and moment, giving important stories the attention they deserve.

Requirements for the Future – Editorial and Cultural

We will be successful in the long term not just by vigorously embracing new platforms or experimentation with new technology – though we must continue to do both. What will really make us different and valued and sustain our journalistic future is a working *culture* that drives the breaking of news and the telling of stories.

Let me talk a little bit about what we are doing in our newsrooms – and what we have planned to enable that culture to flourish.

Let me start with standards.

I wonder sometimes if the instant metrics generated in the online world are increasing the temptation to be tabloid in choosing news, pictures and headlines – to draw the eyeballs and the click-through – just as a tabloid designs page one to drive response from the newsstand.

There is nothing wrong with tabloids, I hasten to add, nodding in the direction of journalistic colleagues from the *Herald Sun*. But in great newspaper markets – like New York and London, Melbourne and Sydney – the tabs and the broadsheets have operated side by side, offering different content to different segments of the market. They expressed themselves differently in many ways.

In the online space, however, that distinction blurs - tabloids and broadsheets tend to behave the same way, as if the online audience's primary need is to be entertained. The result is the

kind of editorial thinking that means we get far more coverage - as has been noted - of Paris Hilton than Paris, France. More Angelina and Brad than Angola and Chad.

But clearly, even in an era of unprecedented media plenty there will be a prized place for news organisations – *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, the BBC for example - who can be trusted and believed. Who think in terms of *news* values.

Who don't trade that trust to juice the ratings or the traffic numbers through simple sugar hits of sensationalism. Whose online brand mirrors that of their impressive legacy brands in print or broadcasting.

That's the position the ABC must be in.

Our news operation may be on different platforms, but the same editorial values will apply wherever we are in the new media space.

We are going into places once deemed unimaginable – there's a *Four Corners* Facebook page! But in using new technology or reaching new audiences, we must do nothing that undermines the trust Australians have in the ABC. Nothing that erodes the integrity and independence of, or public respect for, our news services.

We take our standards seriously today, and are thinking through how we hold them high, delivering to new audiences, using new tools of journalism and storytelling.

We are independently auditing for adherence to our editorial standards; consulting with major international organisations around our methodology; making the methodology available to others to use if they wish.

We have the country's most comprehensive system for mapping and reviewing audience feedback on programming.

Our programs are subject to continual rigorous internal reviews.

Over the years there has been significant focus on the ABCs editorial standards and policies. The guidebook of Ed Poles is lengthy and detailed. I launched the most recent edition shortly after I started at the ABC in 2006.

We are now reworking those policies. I now believe that it is very difficult, in this era, to codify and develop rules for every situation and circumstance a broadcaster or journalist may face.

I think less may be more.

Less about having a rule book and more about having a genuine, shared belief across the organisation – a commitment to journalism of integrity and respect, for honesty and transparency. An adherence based on achieving journalism of the highest quality, a commitment to the highest values.

We're always asking how can we do things better? And it's clear that particularly in the age of continuous news, when relevant changing information turns up, we need to respond quickly and to also very promptly correct errors.

Our editorial policies will be briefer, but they will be underpinned by guidance notes. To give genuine support for our program makers and editorial leaders, the notes will reflect how these policies have operated in practice.

We want a culture that is not simply about staying within the rules – but doing the best broadcasting, the highest quality practice of journalism. This is less about limits than it is about aspirations.

And we're about creating the support and environment that will enable such a culture to flourish.

Investment in training and development is a feature of high performing organisations. A lot of our training has been focused on new cadets or on implementation of new technology.

I suspect we need to have a greater focus on the crafts and skills our journalists and broadcasters need. To be constantly providing feedback, examples of best practice, an honest, on-going conversation around standards and performance. And all of this applied more consistently around the country.

We're going to more systematically use the expertise we have inside the ABC – that huge, incredible asset of journalistic experience and talent - to mentor and develop our people.

It will involve everyone, be a priority in the years ahead and be part of the ABC culture. And it will help ABC journalism stand out and be distinctive in this era of media plenty.

The New Immediacy

I am delighted that the ABC has won recognition for its innovation as a broadcaster in recent years.

We were national leaders through services like *iView*. International leaders in podcasting. Innovations like our *Gallipoli* website are pioneering the use of broadband to deliver quality educational services.

In news, we continue to wrestle with and work out the impact of new technology on our journalism and our standards.

We are embracing social networking and finding it a great way to stay connected with our audiences through the day. Through *Twitter*, we are delivering fast breaking news around everything from bushfires and leadership spills to traffic incidents and sports results.

We have new guidelines on the use of social networking that are simple and straightforward – encouraging ABC people to use the new tools but not in a cavalier or reckless way.

When ABC News sends a message on *Twitter* that message travels with the brand and reputation of the ABC behind it. It's the same when a senior journalist – with followers drawn to them due to a reputation built on the ABC - sends a message.

We saw what a special role *Twitter* could play during the Liberal Party leadership eruption late last year. Through *Twitter*, those following the compelling drama gained insights into what was happening in the press gallery corridors – sweeping rumours, conflicting claims, disputed versions of fact.

What it meant for *us* was that while we had to use *Twitter* to explain what was happening, we had to avoid the trap of allowing its inherent pressure – that frenzied immediacy, where a minute late inside *Twitter* is like an hour late outside it - to run unconfirmed stories as though they were verified, or to somehow lower our reporting standards.

There is a place for reporting what the corridor chatter and speculation is – but it always needs to be appropriately labelled as nothing more than that.

By being rigorous, by checking and re-checking, by getting the story right – on all our platforms – we preserve our position of trust and value.

Others may be louder, flashier. At times they may be first. But we must get it right to the very best of our ability if ours is a voice that is both heard and trusted .

This new era calls for flexibility from many of our journalists – flexibility our newsroom has already embraced.

Many of our reporters now, during their working day, will file for online or radio and perhaps talk to a local radio announcer, as well as deliver a version of the story for television.

Journalists at newspapers are facing similar demands to be multi-skilled and versatile.

And though many of our reporters and producers were trained to deliver tight well-written stories for a 7pm bulletin, they have needed to develop new skills such as the ability to go live.

ABC News Breakfast has been an important step in developing those live skills, summarising the news and following moving stories, tapping into the breadth of ABC resources and talent, and upholding our editorial standards.

The success of *News Breakfast* has given us real confidence as we move to the 24 hour News Channel later this year.

A Future for Investigative Reporting

Yet, while we need to be fast and versatile to meet modern audience demands for immediate, cross-platform news, it is imperative we continue to invest significant news resources in serious long-form news and current affairs. To take investigative journalism into the next decade.

Not everyone is an investigative reporter. But we need to be able to undertake major investigations, break stories and help set the nation's news agenda.

I read recently a suggestion that the ABC does not break stories.

In fact we do, around the country, every day, every week.

Much of our investigative work happens through our current affairs programs, where our reporters have the skills and opportunity to really dig. And where the deadline allows enough time for substantial investigation.

Now I'm not going to stand here reciting some comprehensive list of stories the ABC broke. But if I were to make one quickly it might include:

- Sarah Ferguson's *Four Corners* report on the scandalous culture of Rugby League
- And the program's revelations about the level of climate scepticism on the Liberal frontbench
- When the Godwin Grech saga was unfolding, ABC News revealed Grech's home was being raided by the AFP
- *Australian Story* constantly brings us stories you can't find elsewhere – like the behind the scenes report on the kidnapping of Nigel Brennan in Somalia
- Gregg Borschmann from *Radio National* broke a number of stories about Australia's position and tactics in Copenhagen
- Here in Victoria, *Stateline* first raised the issue of the rising number of attacks on people from the Indian community and corruption in Brimbank council
- The Bendigo newsroom broke the story of potential job losses in Maryborough if the Productivity Commission's recommendations on book importing were accepted.
- The Asia Pacific News Centre last month revealed the extent of tensions between Cambodia and Thailand and Cambodia's military buildup along the border.
- And last April, *Australia Network's* Pacific correspondent Sean Dorney reported from Fiji on the introduction of the military regime's new emergency regulations for which he was very hastily rewarded - with deportation.

And every day, programs like *AM*, *PM* and *The World Today* are breaking stories, as are our local radio stations around the country.

Of course, we are not the only media organisation breaking stories. And I accept that the ABC has, in common with other media organisations, shown poor form in not acknowledging and crediting stories broken elsewhere.

At times the Australian media is too small-minded and lacks generosity of spirit. We can do better, all of us. We should, wherever possible, credit the genuine scoop, acknowledge whoever it was, and whatever organisation they worked for, who broke the story.

Good investigative journalism takes time. It takes resources. And it demands courage.

At the ABC we have all three – and a responsibility therefore to deliver investigative journalism, along with a commitment to it. A belief in how utterly important it is to the democratic process.

We have a bias to get the story right and to broadcast it. Our legal team work closely with our journalists to get the stories to air, whilst keeping within the law.

We all know that often the biggest stories unfold over multiple iterations. That the truth only slowly becomes clear over time.

To get to that truth, you need not only the initial reporting, with the detailed preparation to ensure you have it right, but then the follow up of all the angles and new information that emerges.

In the newspapers I worked at, the journalists who broke the story in the news pages would drive the follow up themselves. A scoop often generated real momentum.

But sometimes at the ABC, due to our structures, territorialities and history, our *news* rooms have not followed up stories broken by our *current affairs* programs as assiduously as they should have. Our news reporters have often had neither the understanding, contacts nor the brief to do so.

And there have been times when those putting an ABC news bulletin together only became aware of a major story broken on an ABC current affairs program after it had gone to air – putting the ABC newsroom in the same position as any non-ABC newsroom.

Now none is this is best practice, nor is it wise. Which is why we are already at work to correct it.

And we have been addressing this in a dedicated manner, drawing the various strands of ABC journalism together, through a new ABC News Online Investigation Unit, led by Suzanne Smith, who did such great work for *Lateline* exposing problems in remote indigenous communities.

The unit will provide support for our journalists, no matter where they are working, in pulling together investigative stories. That support might take the form of research, data analysis or simply in acting as a sounding board on the right approach.

Then, when a story is broken, the unit may have a role in helping ensure there is the right follow-through, to maintain momentum around the story in our radio and television bulletins, online and through our current affairs programs.

How does this work in practice? An example.

Last October the unit, having been leaked a confidential scientific report, broke the story revealing the collapse of Southern Blue Fin Tuna stock. First on ABC Online, then with follow up reports by Stephen McDonnell on radio and television, along with major reports to Online from the field.

That story appeared not just on every ABC outlet, but many media outlets and related websites across Australia and the world.

It provoked a huge audience reaction.

ABC Online also ran stories about the inner workings of the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Blue Fin Tuna, the deals and negotiations, something that had never been done before.

To complete the circle, the unit's first multi-media special in collaboration with *Lateline*, the result of many months work, will be aired in coming weeks.

Of course the amount of information available online - public records, documents, personal information – has been a boon to a researching journalist. And there are many new tools

now available which make the investigative work easier and faster. We need to invest to ensure that more and more ABC journalists know how to do this kind of research – and that’s going to take a sustained training investment.

It struck me, when I worked in newsrooms, that our audience was so often our greatest asset. How often we were trying to find out what some of them *already knew* - to capture that, organise it and tell it to a larger audience who *didn’t* know it.

As that X Files investigator and News Corporation money-maker Agent Fox Mulder would say: the truth is out there. Part of our journalistic challenge is to find those who know – who have seen the documents, who were party to the conversation, who understand the implications – and get them to tell us what they know.

New, innovative crowd-sourcing techniques will see audiences playing a major role in the news gathering. We will solicit their insights on stories we are investigating.

It will mean some trade-offs – but any loss of secrecy about what we’re working on will be made up for by what we gain: a genuine investigative partnership with experts in our audience.

For some stories, this kind of partnership will deliver the better outcome. Get us closer to the truth *sooner*.

How might this greater audience involvement work?

Again, the ABC News Online Investigation Unit has a story to tell. Just before Christmas the Unit developed a story in conjunction with the members of the NSW Parents and Citizens Federation.

The information gathering involved surveying all the regional representatives of P&C’s across New South Wales, looking into the extent of P&C funding of educational costs at public schools.

After ABC News Online broke the story, more stories developed as audiences told us of their experiences with P&Cs funding various school costs around the country. Radio News bulletins followed, as did Radio Current Affairs. When the story ran on the 7PM News on ABC Television it included a call out to the audience to contribute via ABC News Online.

And those stories from parents, teachers and key people in the education system are now being written up. It’s a good example of how to make use of audience involvement, the wisdom of the crowd. How audiences can not just be part of the conversation, but part of the news.

Clearly, our way of working is going to change. What *won’t* change, however, are our journalistic responsibilities.

We’ll still be obliged to check and double check, verify, confirm, to ask the extra questions. Activities that are at the heart of quality journalism – integral to keeping an audience coming to the ABC. We can’t assume their respect - we must continue to *deserve* it.

The Gathering and the Telling

Today I've given you some idea about the foundations we're laying for journalism at the ABC in the decade ahead - in both culture and practice.

During a time when news organisations are under such stress, the ABC needs to fulfil the obligation that comes with the liberty of not having to produce a profit.

So we're going to meet the expectations of Australians in new ways by providing more immediacy in their news, and by meeting - also in new ways - the nation's perennial need for investigative journalism that takes more time.

In journalism, what we do has two main parts, the gathering and the telling.

Technologies mostly affect the telling, the way our stories reach people. True, technologies also affect newsgathering, as my account of *Lateline's* origins showed. And nowadays technology of social media multiplies the ways the people can react, making journalism more 'two-way' - to everyone's benefit.

But in the heart of the gathering - in the thinking through of story ideas, angles, patterns, leads; in the cultivation of sources; the sorting towards an essentially accurate draft of truth - in all that, journalism is people not technology.

And the ABC's confidence in its people is the ABC's enduring strength.

It is that confidence, in ourselves and in each other, which enables the ABC to make its enduring contribution to Australian journalism. That contribution is about to grow.