



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Mediating Democracy's Demise: Journalism in the Post Truth Age

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I too would like to acknowledge that this event is being held on aboriginal land and recognize the strength, resilience and capacity of the Ngunnawal people.

I am honoured to be the first speaker in the series being hosted by Christians for an Ethical Society with the theme “Democracy in Decline: Democracy Transformed, or more succinctly: “Wither Democracy?” with a question mark is it withering or being transformed.

The fact is Australia in this federal election year has all the machinery of a true democracy in place. We are one of the oldest democracies in the world and we have one of the best regulated and fairest voting systems. The United States has a lot to learn from us with its multiple local gerrymanders, voting day that counts against the workers and an electoral college still skewed by post civil war sensibilities. Our nationwide one vote one value system with its 10 per cent tolerance and the Australian Electoral Commission that while not perfect is transparently independent.

The issue therefore is not about the integrity of how we discern the majority of the people’s will but rather despite the constitutional architecture, the separation of powers, the rule of law and an independent judiciary and a free media, trust in government according to the ANU’s Professor Ian McAllister, who is co-director of the Australian Election Study, trust in government is at its lowest since the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975.

The latest Lowy Institute Poll finds that only 62 per cent of Australians say democracy is preferable to any other form of government. A result consistent over the past ten years coinciding with the churn of elected prime ministers being dispatched by their own parties between elections.

But even more worrying, in the 18 to 44 year old group, a majority for democracy was not found. Only 47 per cent agree with the proposition that it is preferable to any other form of government. They can’t bring themselves to Winston Churchill’s view expressed in 1947 that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others.

I have called this talk “Mediating Democracy’s Demise” because I believe the media in Australia has certainly contributed to the disillusionment felt by so many of our country men and women particularly the younger generations.

It has done this by commodifying truth. It is not simply choosing sides between the left and the right, or Liberal and Labor, it is playing to identified demographics with attitudes and prejudices it judges will reap the most lucrative return. It is the echo chamber business model. We see it in our print, electronic and on line media. Its inspiration is the success of Murdoch’s pay TV channel in America. Fox News with its strident, indeed militant reactionary views pandering to an ageing white demographic, is the media mogul’s biggest money earner.

Attempts to replicate it here with what its critics dub, Sky News After Dark have not been quite so successful, but so far this hasn't deterred the Australian branch office from trying.

But Murdoch's News Corporation is not alone. Macquarie Radio now owned by Nine Entertainment after its Fairfax takeover, has had radio ratings success with its shock jocks giving raucous encouragement to climate change denialism, refugee deterrence through cruelty, anti-Muslim bigotry, racist xenophobia, homo and transgender phobia. Radio 2GB in Sydney networked throughout much of eastern Australia is the most egregious example with 4BC in Brisbane and 3AW in Melbourne not far behind.

In overviewing the state of the media, it is wise to remember it is 2019. The media today is multi-platform. All the major players have reach through their on-line sites which can be accessed via smart phones, smart TV's, tablets and personal computers.

Leading the way in multi platforming is Australia's biggest news organization the ABC. In many ways it is a bulwark against the worst excesses of the commercial media. But it is the victim of relentless bullying from government and we had spectacular evidence of that in the fracas after the sacking of managing director Michelle Guthrie and the resignation of Justin Milne as chairman.

Milne, a personal friend and business associate of Malcolm Turnbull was caught in emails advising Guthrie the ABC's funding might be better assured if political editor Andrew Probyn was sacked. This after communications minister Mitch Fifield, associated with the Institute of Public Affairs which believes the ABC should be sold off, took exception to Probyn's description of Tony Abbott as "already the most destructive politician of his generation and that he now intends waging war on what he calls environmental theology."

Sources within the ABC say the incessant attacks from the government, News Corporation and other cheer leaders of the right have spooked management. It is second guessing itself and we are seeing in news and other programs many instances of false equivalence. People who do not accept scientific evidence, whether it be of climate change or water management or fish stocks or bio diversity vulnerability, are given equal billing.

Of course, in a free country people are free to peddle their ignorance and to pursue their own vested interests but isn't it the role of the journalist to see through these distortions and report the truth of the matter so that the public can be better informed? Our national broadcaster is given billions of dollars of public money to do just that. Its independence is vital to the functioning of a democracy based on the equality of the individual and the pursuit of the common good.

And the commercial mainstream media if they are to have any credibility beyond being mouthpieces for powerful segments of society should be committed to the same project. The journalists' union the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance certainly thinks so in its code of ethics. The four pillars of this code are honesty, fairness, independence and respect for the rights of others.

Feminist writer Clementine Ford writing in *The Saturday Paper* this week after her sacking from the *Sydney Morning Herald* pointed to the demise of independence since the appointment of former Liberal staffer and friend of former Liberal treasurer, Joe Hockey James Chessell as group executive editor.

She quotes a senior Fairfax journalist saying Chessell's clear political agenda is to "shift the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* sharply to the right., to make us pale versions of Murdoch's *The Australian*. It has been hugely damaging to the independence of our journalism and to the reputation of our mastheads."

I would suggest the declining circulation and ratings of the mainstream media has got a lot to do with the fact the punters are on to its failures at integrity and its agendas motivated by partisan bias.

But there is also another key factor and that is the arrival and penetration of social media and alternative sources of information. Australians are among the highest users in the world of Facebook. Out of a population of 25 million there are fifteen million active followers. In other words, 60 per cent of the population use this medium as a preferred way of communicating.

The political parties are on to it and are constantly using Facebook as a way of reaching voters free of the mediation of journalists and their overlord editors. They are constantly monitoring it for the content that is going viral or changing the argument. We saw in the US presidential election how Russian hackers purloined the platform to peddle fake news like Pope Francis endorses Donald Trump.

Twitter with six million users is more a news site. When I was working full time at Network Ten, I like other journalists was urged to use twitter to point to the stories we were covering for the news bulletins. Trump has made twitter very important, he uses it again because it gives him unmediated access to his 58 million followers at any time of the day or night, usually late night after his third McDonald's cheese burger.

But even now the biggest online news sites are those of the mainstream players. News.com for example, with its click bait, its coverage of sex drugs and rock n roll and incidentally politics has a

million separate users a day. The ABC, Nine and the other Murdoch mastheads are all in the top ten sites. New comers like The New Daily, which I didn't know existed before its editorial director Bruce Guthrie approached me to write a column for it, is five years old and attracts 2.2 million separate devices using it a month. It is a 24/7 news site free on line and buys in content from the ABC and AAP.

All of this provides checks and balances for the discerning citizen. A free media is a pillar of a free society. Indeed, it is the definition of one. Tyrants silence critics, hide the truth and define reality in their own self-interest. The American founding father Thomas Jefferson said that a press that is free to investigate and criticize the government is absolutely essential in a nation that practices self-government. Its role is to mediate the truth to enlighten citizens in the exercise of their vote. Giving contemporary gravity to the role Jefferson sees for the free press is the attitude of senior politicians to the exercise of their office. In January former Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce told the Australian: "There is no umpire in political debate. There's no rule book, what you get away with wins." It is the role of the free media to do what politicians always feel uncomfortable with and that is being held to account.

Jefferson famously said in 1786 "our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press, nor that be limited without danger of losing it." How galling is it that Jefferson's successor as president of the United States, Donald Trump seeks to bully the media into submission, accusing his critics who report his vested interest, his lies and his criminal activity as peddlers of fake news. Trump's first press secretary had the hide to go on national television and talk of alternative facts. No wonder we are in a post truth world. At least Hitler's propagandist guru Goebbels had the honesty to talk of using the "big lie."

Jefferson was a fierce defender of a free press even though he himself was a victim of scurrilous gossip and defamation at its hands. He believed that ultimately truth wins out. Such optimism can be sorely tried but it is the challenge to faith. Truth is of a piece but seeking it is never straight forward and being dedicated to its pursuit must always be motivated by tolerance and respect if we are to realize a harmonious pluralist society.

This is where the role of the journalist can be fraught especially in the present climate. If one politician says it is raining outside and his opponent says it's not, surely the job of the journo is to put his or her head out the window and report the reality that they needed an umbrella.

The reality of Australia now is that we have a government not led by the man the Liberal Party told us would give us good stable government. It is true we do not directly elect our prime minister but we did elect the Turnbull Liberal government. At the Press Club yesterday Scott Morrison was

reminded of this. He tried to brush off the fact that in five and a half years of Liberal National government we have had three prime ministers. He said they were all good prime ministers. This flies in the face of the reality that good prime ministers do not prematurely get dumped by their parties.

This brings us to another reality and that is the end of trust in the theory of trickle-down economics. It has had a fair run, forty years of massive tax cuts for the top end, privatization or flogging off every publicly owned entity and utility only now to find the gap between the rich and the poor bigger than ever, wages stagnating, under employment and electricity prices almost out of reach thanks to a flawed model of an energy market that transferred public monopolies to private monopolies without constraining regulation.

Then there is climate change. If there is one single issue that goes a long way to explain the disillusionment with our democratically elected parliaments this has to be a major culprit. In the face of near 80 per cent support in Australia for renewable energy and near seventy percent belief that climate change is real and not enough is being done about it, the parliamentary Liberal party's coal lobbyists and climate change deniers at first hamstrung Malcolm Turnbull and then ended his leadership even though he had virtually capitulated to their agenda.

The demonization of renewables after the catastrophic storms that blacked out South Australia did an enormous political damage to Turnbull and the government. We are left now with deniers like energy minister Angus Taylor and environment minister Melissa Price – heard of her? now claiming the government is serious and we will meet our emission reduction targets in a canter and we have more renewables than ever thanks to them. No one believes the targets are anything more than window dressing and that going forward they are doing nothing about renewables.

Today even the Australian's Newspoll found that public spending on services remains a key election issue for voters well ahead of income tax cuts.

The Guardian Essential Poll this afternoon has Labor extending its lead over the coalition 55 per cent to 45 per cent, this with the 53 – 47 percent Newspoll on Monday it is in line with the trend not only since the August coup but going back to just after the last election.

The ABC's Laura Tingle, who did the bus tour of Queensland with Bill Shorten found him to be a credible prime minister in waiting. No show pony to be sure and certainly not popular but she says "no block to a Labor victory."

The ANU's professor of history, Frank Bongiorno, no relative although we both share the ancestral village of Malfa on the island of Salina near Sicily, last year in the John Cain Lecture in Melbourne

said “A Labor victory in Australia, with its economy the size of Russia’s would be more consequential than Ardern’s in New Zealand. It would certainly be a litmus test for whether social democrats can still successfully govern developed western countries.”

If Shorten wins he has the chance to restore faith in our democracy and our parliament. He will face determined and relentless attack especially from the Murdoch media and probably less intense from the Nine (Fairfax) stable. But if he governs according to the principles outlined to the Christian Lobby ahead of the marriage equality survey their assaults will fail.

In his book “For the Common Good” released just before the 2016 election Shorten identified with the Sermon On The Mount and the Gospel exhortation to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. He says “Jesus tells us: Judge not, for the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” He says he has spent his working life trying to measure up to the call he heard from his Jesuit school teachers “to be a man for others.” While he says none of the virtues of compassion and empathy to care for the vulnerable, to speak up for the powerless, to reject hatred and intolerance, to help the poor and to pursue the path of peace, belong to Christianity alone that is where he learned them.

It will be contestable how he applies these values. On refugees he talks about being tough on border security but compassionate on humanity. It is encouraging to hear a political leader have this departure point, it’s where he lands that counts.

Hopefully he will lift the standards, put vindictive self-interested bullying in the past and govern for all of us especially the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized.

If the polls are any indication the electorate does not have high expectations of him. The media, however should hold him to account and to his aspirations.