

 **2007 Andrew Olle Lecture - John Hartigan**

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Mr Hartigan began his newspaper career as a cadet at John Fairfax and Sons. He joined News Limited in 1970 as a journalist on the *Daily Mirror*, rising to News Editor in 1978. After postings to *The Sun* in London and the *New York Post*, he returned to Australia as Editor on several metropolitan dailies before becoming Editor-in-Chief of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph* in 1989.

In July 1997, Mr Hartigan was elevated to Group Editorial Director, becoming the company's most senior editorial executive. He held that position until his appointment as Chief Executive Officer of News Limited in October 2000. He was appointed Chairman in 2005.

Mr Hartigan is also a director of News Limited, Queensland Press, Advertiser Newspapers, The Herald and Weekly Times Limited and FOXTEL.

John Hartigan follows a long line of distinguished speakers, including Senator Helen Coonan, John Doyle, Chris Anderson, Harold Mitchell, Lachlan Murdoch, Kerry Stokes AO, Eric Beecher, Steve Vizard, John Alexander, Jana Wendt and David Williamson.

The Andrew Olle Media Lecture is held in honour of the respected and much-loved ABC broadcaster Andrew Olle who died of a brain tumour in 1995.

With its key focus on addressing the role and future of the media as well as profiling the work of the Andrew Olle Memorial Trust, the event has grown in stature annually since its inception in 1996. The Trust raises money for neuroscience research, with an emphasis on brain tumours.

You can download an mp3 of the lecture using the links to the right, or read the transcript below.

Transcript

My name is John Kenneth Hartigan. Occupation: journalist. A journalist is what I am, who I am, and what I will always be. When you wanted to be a journalist as fervently as I did, took as long to become one as I did, and love it as much as I do - you are never anything else.

I am honoured to be here tonight to represent our craft. And I'm lucky too. Lucky, because it's remarkable I actually got as far as I did after some early setbacks. On my first day as a copy boy at Fairfax the cadet supervisor Sam Lanyon told me he wanted me to wait on the roof for the mail. He said it was always delivered by helicopter. Of course I believed him.

I stood on the roof of the old Fairfax building for hours. I waved wildly at anything that looked remotely like a chopper - long after the mail had been delivered as usual in a red Ford Transit van. Not surprisingly, it took me two years to get a cadetship.



Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of News Limited

Lesson number one: if someone in charge says something that sounds wrong, it probably is wrong. Question it. Then it took me four years to get graded. I was pitiful at Pitman's shorthand. I was too busy chasing ambulances to get the 120 words a minute I needed to pass. Finally, an epiphany. A bottle of Johnnie Walker for the shorthand teacher Mrs Bailey and I was on my way.

Lesson number two: a journalist needs guile. Early on, I covered the graveyard shift - midnight to dawn. It was the best opportunity a young journo could have. Anything that happened was yours. We used to hit the road and follow the police radio in the car. A lot of our editorial drivers were ex-cops. They knew nothing went better with the night shift than an esky full of DA.

I remember a pre-dawn fire in a block of flats at Bondi. When we arrived people were escaping from windows silent-movie style, down a collection of knotted bed sheets. So many people were injured our driver had to drive the ambulance so the medic could resuscitate a victim on the way to hospital. My editor praised my fearless reporting. We had a splash with great photos. What he didn't know was how we really got the story.

We were already at Bondi. In fact we'd been there a couple of hours, up on the headland where Icebergs now sits astride the breakers, having a couple of quiet ones.

Lesson number three: never tell the newsdesk everything. So, when people talk about the good old days I always agree. I agree not because those days were better but because we were young, fired up and bullet proof. Keen and green we saw the world in black and white.

So, if the times have changed, have we? One of the best journalists of his day was Nicholas Tomalin. In 1969, he wrote that the only qualities needed in a journalist are rat-like cunning, a plausible manner and some literary ability.

A media willing to evaluate its flaws is more likely to do something about them

He said rat-like cunning is needed to ferret out and publish things people don't want known. The plausible manner is useful for surviving while this is going on and is even more helpful in later life if you become a media executive.

He goes on to say that other skills are useful: Enough idealism to inspire indignant prose but not enough to inhibit detached professionalism.

A paranoid temperament. The ability to believe passionately in second rate projects. A willingness to betray, if not friends, then acquaintances. Well-placed relatives. And an implacable hatred of administrators lawyers and politicians. And finally he says you need the strength of character to lead a disrupted personal life and, appropriately given that I have just quoted him at length, the capacity to steal other people's ideas and phrases.

Tomalin's lovingly cynical sketch still resonates today. The best journalists share many of these traits. But our best people need more than this to survive today. We work harder. We do more with less. We have budgets. This doesn't inhibit good journalism. It imposes discipline and planning where we used to rely on the seat of our pants and the petty cash tin.

We are here tonight to honour the memory of Andrew Olle. Andrew fell in love with words and wanted to tell important stories. He passed with distinction the most basic test of journalism - he was relevant. He connected with people brilliantly.

Annette and Nina Olle, you know better than any of us that he was a man of conviction and of integrity. He cared passionately about the world we live in. This annual event started in 1996. It was born of a wish to commemorate Andrew's life by examining the role and future of the Australian media. Like him, all of us here understand deeply that, along with parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, a healthy media is vital to a fair and civilised society. Many who have stood here before me have lamented Andrew's death as a metaphor for a

wider decline in journalistic standards and values.

They've expressed dismay at the commercialisation of our media. They've warned how the digital age is corrupting quality. They've worried about the independence of the ABC. I agree with some of what has been said. A media willing to evaluate its flaws is more likely to do something about them.

But while journalists pursue the truth about others we also nourish myths about ourselves. Many have assumed the status of fact. One such cherished belief is that there is good journalism and there is commercial journalism and they are mutually exclusive. And in the battle between moral courage on the editorial floor and commercial imperatives on mahogany row money wins every time.

And that in the good old days the best journalism was a public service underwritten by the rude health of public broadcasting and the goodwill of benevolent proprietors. Whereas today, it is alleged that media organisations are almost solely focused on profit. And, it is said, they are far less concerned about ethics, objectivity, accuracy and fairness, or breaking important stories. That the real goal today is to inject the news with cynical prejudice in a race for readership, ratings and return on investment.

As a result, or so the myth goes, we're dumbing down. Investing only in entertainment and lifestyle content, gossip, chit chat and, voyeurism. Often the conclusion is that modern media organisations no longer have the conviction, the values, the freedom from profit targets or shareholder influence to sustain cultures that nurture good journalism.

So the argument goes.

I disagree with it. Passionately.

I think on nights like tonight we are obliged to look in the mirror for what I call the Bob Carr moment. Many years ago our then Premier agreed to address our cadets. During questions there was this delightful exchange:

"Do politicians lie, Mr Carr?"

"No" he said.

"Is that a lie, Mr Carr?"

"Yes," he said.

So tonight I'm going to tell it like it is.

Before I go any further let me deal with the elephant in the room - Rupert Murdoch. I'll be damned by some of you if I do, and damned by the rest of you if I don't. So let me share my perspective from more than 35 years at News - 35 years as a reporter an editor, an editorial director and now as chairman and chief executive.

Is Rupert Murdoch an assiduous reader of our newspapers? Absolutely. Does he tell us what he thinks? He sure does. If he's not happy are we left guessing? No way! Is he passionate about journalism? Yes, and thank God for that. Does he issue blanket instructions on how to cover politics or major business stories or what to write? No, he doesn't.

I read our newspapers every day. I look at the coverage of politics across the group, the tone and treatment of stories, the leaders, the views of our columnists and our contributors. There is no evidence of a blanket order from the top. Because there simply isn't one. What you will see is our people completely at odds with each other. Piers Akerman giving *The Australian* a spray and getting one back.

Or Malcolm Farr, Denis Shanahan and Christopher Pearson separately taking a different stand from Paul Kelly, Janet Albrechtsen and Andrew Bolt. If we are following a script we are doing a very bad job. Happily, debate sells newspapers and readers are adult enough to read both sides of an argument and to decide for themselves. Still,

in searching my conscience for examples of interference, I can recall one. A while back one of our editors sat opposite Rupert as he went through his newspaper. There were some big juicy political yarns up the front. Rupert didn't say much. But he unleashed his influence when he got to the Travel Section.

"Mmm. Luxembourg. Why did you put that on the cover?," he moaned to the editor.

"Let me tell you, no one wants to go to Luxembourg".

When he gets involved it's not as a proprietor, it's as a newspaperman. He will challenge our editors on why they put one story on page one over another story. Or why they wasted a great pic by running it too small. Rupert doesn't vet the copy and nor do I. But I do answer to him and I appoint the editors. What we both look for in editors are many qualities.

These include audacity - the willingness to take risks and to challenge the status quo. They also include enterprise and creativity that's not just about making money. Suspicion, often contempt, of authority - and that includes our own. We don't like yes men. Or yes women.

We like people with the hunger to get after the establishment. People who can inspire others and let them use their talents. People who can make good decisions when they don't have all the facts. Loyalty and a belief in the fair go.

And, most important of all: passion.

I acknowledge that crap is crap, no matter how many ways there are to get it.

The eulogies for our craft aren't new. Are things really as bad now as some would have us believe? I think it is time for another perspective.

And it's this: journalism is in very good shape. In many ways, better than ever. There has never been a better time to be a journalist. And the value of good journalism has never been greater.

When I look back at our newspapers of 10, 20 or 30 years ago the best work would still stand up today. But in general our newspapers wouldn't. The same goes for television. Coverage used to be shallow, one-dimensional and shaped by a white Anglo Saxon male bully. Now they've got some competition. We used to have just a handful of newspapers, television and radio stations here in Sydney. Public affairs television pretty much meant Four Corners. There wasn't much news after 8pm almost nothing on weekends. If you wanted to read *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* you had to wait a week and pay \$10. Pay TV might not be for everyone but it does provide more than a dozen live news feeds. Google and Yahoo are aggregating news from more sources than you can count.

I acknowledge that crap is crap, no matter how many ways there are to get it. That bad journalism on an old HMV doesn't become good journalism when it's broadcast on a plasma. But digital technology is delivering a more diverse range than ever of wonderful journalism. Our audiences are capable of telling the difference. The one thing they don't have is enough time to consume what's available. This is why demand for high quality news from credible sources will grow, not decline.

So what do the new forms of media really mean for the quality of journalism? I think it comes down to this: more reach and greater relevance. If I return to my Bondi fire story, my audience then was a few hundred thousand commuters in Sydney. Now, my video footage could reach millions. Back then it was hours before my report hit the streets. Soon it will be a couple of minutes via an SMS news alert.

Readers can go to websites to follow the news as it breaks, comment on the story and send it to friends. Our driver's first-hand account of taking the injured to hospital got no further than his mates in the pub. He would now make a powerful podcast. Back then we only had room for a couple of the Bondi pictures in grainy black and white. Now, there'd be a web gallery full of the best shots in colour - some of them taken by survivors on mobile phones. Television news would show me more that night. The next day my newspaper would give the story

context and meaning.

Today, coverage of suburban fires, war in the Middle East, the Grand Final - you name it - is deeper and richer than it ever was. Last year at a Newscorp conference in California there was a session featuring a panel of 20 students from Berkley and Stanford. We asked them: "what's your preferred source of news?" They answered: "BBC Online". Why? They decided for themselves that the BBC offered a high quality alternative view of the world - especially of their own country. They have a choice their parents didn't have. In the good old days, the benchmark of our performance was the free and frank feedback of an editor. Or a glance at our rival across town to see if we'd been scooped.

Today, with the click of a button, we can compare ourselves with the world's best every day - not just every now and then. And so can our audiences. When we don't stack up, there's nowhere to hide. We should rise and celebrate this. I don't see it as heralding the death of great journalism. If you really care about journalism you have to be passionate about reinventing it in the digital age. Breaking news coverage might take people online but it won't hold them there. We need more compelling content to complement what we do in other mediums.

Newspapers draw our attention to things we didn't know we were interested in. The internet hasn't induced passive browsing in the same way but I think the content that achieves this will attract a huge audience. As journalists we've never had more inducements to open our minds, stretch our imaginations or reach more people. We can write, blog, broadcast audio and video, all from the one workstation. For much of my career, most journalists were generalists, sweeping over any subject with a light dusting of curiosity and a nice turn of phrase. Their days are numbered.

We need more specialists, more experts, more people who can provide compelling insights to what's going on. I see this happening already in our newsrooms. Quality is taking on greater meaning, not less. The demands on journalists to get it first, get it right and get it out have never been more urgent. Competition for talent is intensifying. We will need to pay more and offer better opportunities to attract - and retain - the best people. This will enrich our craft and deliver a better return for audiences, for journalists, and for proprietors.

I grew up in the shelter of the bush. Later, we moved to the suburbs. I attended Asquith Boys High School - the same school that produced John Alexander and John Westacott. That's three John's that I know a lot of people wish had been given different advice by the vocational guidance counsellor. Journalism took me out of the suburbs and into the big smoke: Sydney in all its raffish elegance, and later, London and New York. I worked with some incredibly bright people. And some neurotic and crazy ones. And I met the famous and notorious ones outside the newsroom. I discovered how engaging for the soul journalism could be. That it was a rare privilege to be at the centre of important events.

In covering courts I learnt about life in the margins. People whose lives were fascinating, complex and tragic. I couldn't believe a room with four walls and a judge could produce so much drama. I learnt that journalism was an opportunity to make a difference. To be given the chance to represent people in a very significant way, especially those people who felt they had lost control of their lives. In the UK I experienced a wonderful array of newspapers. Every one of them so precisely targeted to their audience you could almost tell which streets took which papers. Then I went to the US where the papers were pretty sleepy but some of the writing truly incredible. There were also turbulent times in our newsrooms. I saw action on both sides of the industrial barricades.

In 1975 I seconded the motion to take out on strike all the journos at News. We were protesting about The Australian's coverage in the wake of the Whitlam dismissal. I felt strongly about this, as did many others. Just five years later I was expelled from the union over claims I worked during a bitter dispute about computers. Thankfully that decision was overturned. If you believe the folklore that surrounds News, my stand in 1975 would have marked me as a carping socialist, unfit for promotion. My stand in 1980 would have consigned me to the scrapheap of scabs and lackeys that could never be trusted by my comrades again. The truth is, neither happened. Life is more complex than that and so is journalism.

In my 43 years in this game I've never seen more vibrant editorial cultures than I do today

So where are we now? We are attracting just as many, if not more, bright young people as we ever did. When I look at young journalists coming through - from that talented, demanding group we call Generation Y - I don't despair at how hard they are to manage. I admire them.

I admire their expectations. Their ambition to be put in charge five minutes after they get a job. Their outlook which says: "Why should I invest my talent in your company?"

I admire the recently-graduated young lawyer, Josh Massoud, who talked his way into one of our newsrooms offering to show what he could do by working for nothing. He was put on my old beat, from midnight to dawn, and he made it his own. At the end of his shift, instead of the usual routine pars about break-ins and assaults, he left behind beautiful copy and hand-drawn recreations of crime scenes as well as ideas about where next to take the story.

If I have a reservation about Gen Y, it's this. Do they have the passion? They might be better educated and more worldly. But as someone in a position to hire the next generation, what I want to see is the passionate curiosity and the instincts needed for our craft. They might love their mobile, email and Googling the world, but what they need is to get out of the office and build bloody good contacts. The best stories are still only available this way.

Journalism also needs a backbone of wise people. One of the worst mistakes we made at News was to offer voluntary redundancy when we merged the *Telegraph* with the *Mirror* in Sydney and the *Sun News Pictorial* with the *Herald* in Melbourne. We lost a generation of senior people. Great writers, expert subs and backbenchers. It's taken a long time to claw back that ground. But now I see a renaissance of seasoned journalists and a renewed respect for them. I see senior people embracing new technology with as much enthusiasm as the so-called digital natives. People aren't hitting the scrap heap at 50 any more - and thank God for that.

There's a healthier mix of youth and experience in our newsrooms. More women in senior roles. Much friendlier arrangements to balance career and family ambitions. In my 43 years in this game I've never seen more vibrant editorial cultures than I do today. When I look at the best journalists I don't see any shortage of passion compared to the good old days. In our own stable I can look at Colleen Egan's eight-year quest - yes, eight years - at *The Sunday Times* to help free a man who went to jail for a murder he did not commit. Or at *The Australian* we saw Tony Koch's great work on Palm Island and Caroline Overington overcoming resistance from the highest levels to blow the lid on the Wheat Board scandal.

And, well-chronicled though it is, I look at the courage of Michael Harvey and Gerard McManus from the *Herald Sun*. They faced jail and still have criminal records for a story of government backsliding they got 100% right. Then there's Hedley Thomas on *The Courier Mail*. Hedley exposed the cover-up about what really happened when Dr Death worked at Bundaberg Hospital. This was the same guy who a few years earlier questioned whether to stay in journalism after shots were fired into his family home while he his wife and children slept inside. Something helped him stay. Courage obviously. And the real conviction that we should stand up to intimidation.

In the league of great artists there are few better than Bill Leak. Is there anyone working today - or, I would suggest, ever - with a more acute commentary on social justice or the ability to tell a complex story with a few strokes of a pen. Now is a good time to single out some other outstanding reporters - their courage and guts are now being put to the test in their own lives. *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Cynthia Banham. Her recent comeback piece for the Herald about life in a wheelchair was heartbreakingly poignant.

Matt Price is fighting for his life right now. We all know what a quality bloke he is. At work and away from it. Brother, let me tell you, we are fighting this with you all the way. Paul Toohey is a mongrel in the best journalistic sense of the word. Here is a guy every young journalist should meet. He is tireless, he is warts and all, he is a great story teller. He talks to real people about real people. His recent *Bulletin* yarn on searching for the soul of

Sydney was littered with brilliant ideas and clever, original prose.

What we all depend on is our relevance, the fact that our audiences actually know good journalism when they see it. I think the great managers and editors in our industry share the view that the best way to reach an audience or make a dollar is to invest in great journalism.

To be honest, a lot of journalism in the good old days wouldn't survive the scrutiny we now face

In my own company, two examples are worth citing. *The Australian* would not have survived without the goodwill of management through years of losses. It might be profitable now but it is our least profitable paper by some margin. But that hasn't changed our philosophy. We continue to spend more on its editorial resources than any other paper. And not without generating envy in our own camp.

Why? Because it's an investment in journalism. Without great journalism *The Australian* would be meaningless. The *Herald Sun* is a very different proposition. It hasn't needed the benevolence of management to survive. It's our most successful paper. It reaches a huge audience and makes lots of money.

And why is that? Well, in my opinion it's because it spends a higher than average proportion of its budget on editorial resources. Its most potent marketing weapon is the quality of its journalism. I believe one of the reasons some people think standards have dropped is because scrutiny of what we do is much more intense these days. And there are no more trenchant critics of the media than the media. Frankly, this is a good thing. In the main it's making us better journalists. But I don't think bad journalism is more prevalent than it was. It's just more prominent.

To be honest, a lot of journalism in the good old days wouldn't survive the scrutiny we now face. In the history book of journalism, in the chapter headed "The Golden Era", there's a photo of senior editorial staff quaffing rough red. Just sober enough to write the splash head and just drunk enough to fancy their chances with one of the cadets. Their illusions already lost. These days they would look on with alarm at young journalists drinking green tea and eating sushi, engaged with the world in a contemporary way. Scrutiny of what we do needs to exhibit the same standards it demands of its victims. And increasingly, it doesn't.

Instead, what we see are personal attacks, gossip mongering envy and derision. Instead of objective and constructive criticism what we get now is slander and ridicule. It's become a blood sport. There is intolerance of those whose opinions differ - and hypocrisy. The critics are often guilty of the same offences for which they hang others.

Some of the criticism really overlooks the basics. Journalists are required to exercise very careful judgment about complex issues at high speed. We are going to make mistakes. We are expected to find certainty where there is none. To have hindsight before, not after, we are making the tough calls. When journalists don't get it right it's usually not because we are malicious. It's because we are fallible.

This is not a plea for forgiveness. Mistakes in journalism are public. They can harm others. We should always feel devastated when we get it wrong. And redress the wrong. But my advice to the critics is this: make it about something that really matters, not petty and personal.

Often what's missing from our industry's navel gazing is recognition that diversity means giving people a choice. Some people claim to want diversity but they don't always like it when they see it. I won't argue that tabloids are better than broadsheets or that public broadcasting is better than the commercial networks. They are different. And their value lies in that difference. In the broad sweep of media now on offer.

As I said at the start, the value of journalism has never been greater. Because while journalism might be in good shape, information isn't. We live in times when press freedom - the freedom of speech - is more restricted than in living memory. And I don't say this lightly.

Years ago when I was editor of the *Brisbane Sun*, our fearless premier Joh tried to have me thrown in jail. He didn't like our coverage when he sacked every power worker in the State. Somehow it offended his notions of democracy. My liberty may not be threatened today like it was then but in general I think things are worse now.

I've spoken at length this year about the campaign for free speech so I just want to make a couple of points.

This is an expensive, time-consuming campaign. It won't be won easily or quickly. If we are successful it won't sell more newspapers or increase ratings or add a dollar to the bottom line. But it is an investment in journalism. The defence of press freedom is not a self-indulgent game. Freedom of the press, exercised responsibly, is the base line for freedom of speech generally in the community.

In response to the recent lecture on free speech in Sydney by Geoffrey Robertson, Attorney General Philip Ruddock said, and I quote: "Australia's freedom of information laws ensured ALL appropriate material is available to the public" end quote.

I'll be blunt. He is kidding. And his decision to ask the Law Reform Commission to conduct a review on limited terms of reference is a disgrace. The cost of fighting some of the battles is now so crippling that it does, occasionally, silence us when we should be heard. We are now seeing restaurant critics sued for venturing their opinion. Who's next? Will Roy Masters cop it for saying someone was off their game? Or David and Margaret for panning a movie?

When legendary *New York Times* editor Abe Rosenthal was battling with the Nixon administration to publish the Pentagon Papers he said: "When something important is going on, silence is a lie." Rosenthal's legacy is important today. His advice was never to compromise on press freedom. He told his journalists: "Fight like hell every inch of the way."

I still fight like hell every day. Because I believe Australian journalism is still a place for people who care about unearthing the truth, is still for people who care about what sort of place we live in. I believe Australians still care about their freedom and the value of great journalism. And if you do too, fight like hell every inch of the way.

As I approach my 60th birthday, part of me wishes I was that 16-year-old again, staring across the Sydney CBD from the roof of the old Fairfax building, waiting for the chopper. Today I'm as nervous, excited and positive about the future as I was then. Because I think the good old days are far from long gone. In fact, I think the best days are just starting.

The digital age is spawning a new, golden era. With coverage that is deeper, richer, more diverse than ever. I look at the quality of journalism coming out of Australia, in print, on the web, on television and I wonder how many copy kids and cadets with wide eyes and a curious nature will end up here in 40 years' time. They will have wonderful stories to tell - such is the nature of our craft. It reinvents itself constantly but it retains two things above all else, its character and its soul.

Thank you.

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