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**Persuasion in the press**

Read all about it

Jack Waterford

Do you remember what was once common in Monday papers — a news report based on four or five of the sermons around town? I remember the very sober ones of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. These reports disappeared when there was a change in the tone of journalism. I thought one day to revive it. I discovered that it was impossible; the main reason being that there is so little good preaching in Australia.

In the spirit of ecumenicalism, for the past quarter century I have often written the editorial on Christmas Day or Easter Friday, or on semi-liturgical occasions such as Anzac Day. I've tried very hard to avoid repeating last year's, but after 25 years there's a dearth of the fresh or original, particularly when if you're discussing the meaning of Good Friday or Christmas you're addressing not just Catholics and Protestants (who have quite different ideas about it), but also an audience of the scornful, the cynical, other religions, people who are quite capable of being offended by one thing written or another. I don't think that is ever a reason to hesitate to say things, but one must be very careful on that account, about what is said. Priests and parsons must share these same problems in reaching out to an audience.

Know your audience

That said, I don't think there's a better place than Canberra to be faced with that sort of problem. If there's one thing that I think has been fairly focal to all the discussions about techniques of persuasion, it's 'know your audience' and I don't think one can find a better audience than in this community.

Let me explain. The classic demographic that's used is the AB, the C, the D, the E and the FG as segments of the population. Broadly speaking, in the AB segment of the

population, which Australia-wide is about 20 per cent, are the professional and managerial classes. In Sydney, the AB classes amount to about 21 per cent of population, in Melbourne about 20 per cent, but in Canberra it's about 43 per cent.

Likewise, the C part of the population, which is the white-collar clerical and administrative classes, is overall around Australia about 20 per cent. In Canberra it's 27 per cent. So, just the two top groups, or about 40 per cent of the population elsewhere, amount to about 70 per cent of the population here. We have well-educated, outgoing people who are interested in information, and interested in using it.

People come from everywhere to govern the rest of Australia from here. Hence the Canberra population has an incredibly rich network stretching out into other parts of Australia that isn't matched if you live elsewhere. Most of your relatives, if you live in Sydney, come from probably 50 to 100 kilometres, even these days with a more mobile population. But in Canberra it's common to find people whose real roots and links are in Perth, Darwin, Burnie or Cairns and who retain strong interest in that home.

Long before we had a national AFL, one of the cardinal sins in the *Canberra Times* was to fail to publish on Monday mornings the Western Australian football results. We'd get hundreds of phone calls about it. But the other part of the same phenomenon is that because people are called upon to govern Australia they have a lively interest in what is happening in the rest of the world, in the rest of the nation.

Why newspapers survive

Of the readers of the *Canberra Times* 40 per cent are buying three newspapers a day, and they're not

buying the second and third because the *Canberra Times* is inadequate, though they might think so in certain respects. They're buying papers because they're hungry for information, they're hungry for different perspectives and viewpoints. The very same people who are buying these papers are getting up in the morning and switching on *Sky Television*, and then they go out and get their papers, and then they're reading them over the breakfast table and *AM* is playing in the background.

When they get to work they switch on the internet for news-centred material about three times a day. They're also listening to radio programs like the *ABC Midday Report* and to *PM*. People who are interested in news and in information are very fey about the news and the information that is available. They know perfectly well that the advantages of radio are immediacy and the capacity to get news instantly. They know about the image advantages of television. They know about the capacity of the internet to home in and give extra information, and that ever more important aspect of the internet, *Google*, where one can randomly and fuzzily search around a particular issue. They know something about the advantages of the print media, that for all that print is the oldest it's in some ways the most modern and convenient. We can put more detail in it than in a radio report. The reader can start anywhere, and you can fold it and read it on the loo.

The internet is a winner in some respects. For example, if you want to buy a house, then the convenience of a screen walk through the house, to see the plans, to see the price movements in that suburb, to immediately calculate what it would cost your mortgage and so forth — that's all very fine. I don't think we can compete with that in print, but it's not quite so good at persuading a person that they're in the housing market.

In Canberra in the next month, half the people who are going to buy a house do not, right at this moment, know they are in that market. They're

not people who are transferred here and who suddenly have to pick up the *Canberra Times* or the internet and find themselves a three-bedroom house within a mile of the ANU. No, they're *pervs*. They browse the paper and they look at the prices and they see something that's interesting and they do the unexpected.

Likewise, the revenue market for jobs advertising these days is not for jobs for 17-year olds, for waiters, waitresses, or whatever. The market is to shake comfortable 35–45 year olds out of their professional jobs. These people *are* comfortable. They're not looking for a new job. The only way you're going to even attract their attention, or let them know that there's a job there, is by having an interesting ad on page 5 of the paper, which they might see as they're browsing. The internet is not very good at delivering that sort of market.

Pitching at the right level

Another feature of our newspaper audience is that they are very well-informed about nearly everything we're writing about. I keep telling our journalists — never forget that 30 per cent of your readers know more about

write with the understanding that a high proportion of the audience knows a lot about the subject then you're misunderstanding the audience.

Likewise we must write to the comprehension level of our readers. The fog index is a technique to do that. I'll give it to you very roughly: find a sustained passage of your own writing, say of about 300 to 400 words. Go through it and count the number of full stops in it, and count the number of words of three or more syllables, not counting ones that are made three-syllable by the addition of 'ed' or 'ing' or something like that. Then, add those two figures together and divide it by the number of words in it, so that you get a rate per 100 words. Now, if you multiply the figure by 0.4 you will have the *reading index* or the *fog index* that is, roughly speaking, the number of years of education the reader needs to be able to understand what is being written.

The fog index of the *Canberra Times* is about 12, which means that we expect of our average reader that they finished a high school education. The fog index of some tabloids is about eight. They know their market and they meet it. A fog index of about eight

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the subject than you do. Sometimes I joke that there's an expert on everything in the world in Canberra. There's hardly a day goes by when somebody doesn't ring up, usually in a reasonably avuncular rather than a highly critical sense, to point out errors of fact in the paper, based on their own specialist knowledge. And, if you can't

implies that there are very few sentences of more than 10 words.

Quite apart from choice of vocabulary and sentence length the art of writing shorter pieces rather than longer pieces is a high art. I often protest that I don't have the time to write short pieces. Some of the problems can be addressed just by the



liberal addition of full stops, but some cannot be as the processes are too complicated. No doubt one can address the High Court with a very high fog index, but if you don't understand the readers' comprehension levels, and particularly when people are busy, searching for distractions and so forth, then you're wasting your time.

paper, that are fairly light and breezy. They might have some news hook or point about them, but they are not particularly polemical or pointed in any particular direction.

It is still probably true that the least-read thing in the newspaper is the editorial. The Op Ed Pages are only read by about 15 per cent of the audience, and certainly not anything

... the mere process of synthesising things and boiling it down leads to charges of bias and unfairness against us. My attitude to bias and unfairness is that while insistent that professionalism requires the accurate statement of points of view, I have never thought that a particular piece should be fair.

The mix of fact and opinion

There are various techniques which journalists use all the time. Bringing people into the stories is one. There is no story more deadly dull than a story about economics or statistics, but if you have a story, for example, which says that older women are finding it more difficult in the labour market, and that this is part of a problem which has been developing for some time, a chief of staff or boutique news editor will say, 'Let's go and find a few older women, and write about their story, and then fold it into the story of the statistics and the trend material'. Quite often that works well.

How about people's comments, 'Oh, there's too much opinion in newspapers these days; I want newspapers for fact'. Do you say that? People will say, 'Oh God, do you notice how biased the *Tele*' or *The Sun* is with stories about education, or Aborigines?' People make these comments looking only at the Op Ed pages and the editorial pages, rather than at just the news pages. Most stories about education or indigenous affairs are always 'people stories', usually with pictures in them, towards the front of the

like as well-read as short, pithy letters to the editor, which are fairly close to being the most-read thing in a newspaper.

Newspapers are not doing anything like the job they used to do in simplifying things and getting it down pithily. Every year newspaper coverage of budgets increases. These days it's a multi-page budget special and I yearn for the days, back in the early 1970s, when the budget would not only be on the front page — beer up, petrol up, or something like that — but it would be summarised in a page or so. Most people do not want pages of detailed budget analysis, and the sort of people who have a professional need for that will download it anyway. We ought to be doing a much better job of synthesising the complex and lengthy.

A palette of opinions

Of course, the mere process of synthesising things and boiling it down leads to charges of bias and unfairness against us. My attitude to bias and unfairness is that while insistent that professionalism requires the accurate statement of points of view, I have never thought that a particular piece should be fair.

Increasingly in this day and age, when people know the base facts anyway, what they want is analysis, interpretation, comment on it — particularly comment from people with known perspectives (because of disclosure or because of familiarity) — but that overall there should be a balance in the paper. That is to say that if you are running material which is strongly critical of a policy, there should be space in the paper for opposite points of view.

This is especially true of those newspapers such as the *Canberra Times*, which aspire to be the newspaper of the community. It does not necessarily need to be so true of a paper like *The Australian*, which assumes that it is the second newspaper of the community, not the primary newspaper on which people rely for facts. My aspiration for a paper like the *Canberra Times* is that I want it to be the place where people will want to go to conduct any form of public debate, whether they're matters of local government, national government or international government.

We always will disappoint people with causes. I sometimes disappoint even myself. I am very passionate about Aboriginal affairs but I worry about ramming material down people's throats when they have a limited appetite for that sort of information, and a higher appetite for other types of information. Some newspapers do focus groups with their readers who say, 'Look, we're bored with stories about Aborigines' — so you can't get a story into that newspaper about indigenous affairs. The *Canberra Times* is not quite like that, but we appreciate that there must be a limit to such material, otherwise we'll just bore our readers

and be counterproductive in our dealing with it.

It's a part of the process of wanting to be *the* forum of debate, that one should be seen to have an open door, one that is open to all classes of people as readers. I yearly judge a competition of newspaper editorials for country newspapers and suburban newspapers. One of my criteria is, 'Who does the editor think he or she is talking to?'

With country town newspapers there's a surfeit of editorials, which deplore the road toll, or graffiti in the town. But do those editorial writers think that the young hoons driving cars around, or making graffiti are their readership? With quite a few it is clear that younger people are not assumed or expected to be readers.

Today's newspaper is a smorgasbord from which people can come and sample as they wish. Sometimes, to the humiliation of journalists, one of the main reasons why people buy papers has nothing to do with the journalism at all. ... Because you want to know what's on at the pictures, where to eat out, or what to pick up at the sales.

Another insight is matters involving migrants and Aborigines. Do the writers think that those groups are part of the readership or part of the community, or are they part of the 'they', the insidious forces which are threatening the 'we' in the community?

Today's newspaper is a smorgasbord from which people can come and sample as they wish. Sometimes, to the humiliation of journalists, one of the main reasons why people buy papers has nothing to do with the journalism at all. You can come from Melbourne, for example, and keep taking *The Age*, or the *Melbourne Sun*, but after you've lived here about three months you'll start taking the *Canberra Times* — we know you will. Why do you

switch? Because you want to know what's on at the pictures, where to eat out, or what to pick up at the sales.

Now, that's advertising, that's not journalism, but of that smorgasbord that we're presenting every day — 100,000 editorial words on a typical day — we know that if over a period of time people haven't stopped and read one piece of substance in it every day — and by a 'piece of substance' I mean something of at least 600 words or so — that sooner or later they'll get bored and they'll give us up. They probably won't switch to another paper in a way that we can capture them back. More likely they will fall into a class of people who aren't very much interested in being engaged with the world, and not very much concerned about it. That's a great loss,

not just for the commercial interests of newspapers, but for the public debate and the whole community. ●

Jack Waterford is Editor-at-Large of The Canberra Times. He has been deputy editor, editor and editor-in-chief. He first joined The Canberra Times as a copyboy in 1972, and has worked in almost all of the areas, which go into the editorial product. He was the Graham Perkin Australian Journalist of the Year for 1985 for his pioneering work on Freedom of Information legislation, and was a Jefferson Fellow in the United States in 1987. This year he received the award of Member of the Order of Australia. He was also named 2007 Canberra Citizen of the Year



ADR Diary

- **ACDC** is offering a one-day course in **Conflict Resolution Dispute Avoidance** in Sydney on 29 November 2007.
- **ACDC** is also holding a 5-day mediation workshop entitled **Mediation: Skills, Techniques and Practice** with an optional sixth accreditation assessment day. The workshop is taking place in **Sydney** on 3–9 December 2007 with optional Accreditation Day held on 11 December. For more information or booking visit www.acdcltd.com.au or call (02) 9267 1000.
- **ACPACS** will conduct a 4-day intensive **Mediation** course in **Brisbane** on 6–9 December 2007. The course will introduce participants to the basic skills to mediate and is aimed at professionals who either want to start a mediation practice or who need mediation skills as part of their professional duties. The mediation model presented can be adapted to suit the needs of a wide range of professionals. For more information visit www.uq.edu.au/acpacs/seminars-and-events.
- The **Bond University Dispute Resolution Centre (BUDRC)** is running a 4-day **Basic Mediation Course** on the **Gold Coast** from 29 November–2 December. The course also has a Foundation Family Mediation stream, run in conjunction with AIFLAM (Australian Institute of Family Law Arbitrators and Mediators).
- **BUDRC** are also running a **Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner Workshop** on 3 December on the Gold Coast. For more information on courses, visit www.bond.edu.au/study-areas/law/centres/drc/drc.html.
- **LEADR** Association of Dispute Resolvers will be holding a 4-day **Conflict Coaching Workshop** in Perth on 20–23 November. Conflict coaching is particularly useful as an early intervention strategy and can be used to prepare people for engage more effectively in negotiation, mediation and relationship conflict. Early Registration is can be done at www.leadr.com.au.

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