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Journalism

The Hubris of Four Corners

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Hubris is a canker that will worm its way through an organisation once it ceases to be self-critical and begins to luxuriate in the glow of its legitimate successes. Why would musing about extreme pride and arrogance, a loss of contact with reality and an over-estimation of one's own competence or capabilities, especially when the person exhibiting it is in a position of power lead me, instantly, to think of the

ABC?



Robert Murray

The reason, or excuse, was the release of *The Stories That Changed Australia: Fifty Years of Four Corners*, an immodest little publication by ABC Books to belatedly celebrate the half-century of the program 1961–2011. There is no doubt that *Four Corners* has many times over the years made Australians sit up and take notice. A glance through its archives on the ABC website (but only back to 2000) reminds us how frequently it has told us things we needed to know, and perhaps would not have known without its probing and prodding. In this role, the program represented a worthy continuation of the long-standing tradition of investigative journalism—hitherto entirely the province of newspapers, and strangely almost completely neglected by radio.

But in coming to believe that its stories changed Australia, *Four Corners* failed to recognise or acknowledge its many errors, or how it itself had changed. From its beginnings as a newsreel program that merely adapted stories and interviews from a wireless to a video format, *Four Corners* has morphed into a crusading, sensationalist, politically correct and sometimes irresponsible harridan of the airwaves. The solid reportage of the earlier years, and the important exposés, were too often themselves flawed. They seem to have been succeeded by the shrill voices of the ABC sisterhood.

The book's fourteen chapters, selected to illustrate program themes of Politics, Crime and Corruption, War and Terrorism, and Immigration and the Environment are shared equally between male and female reporters. But to make up the numbers to achieve this balance, the editor Sally Neighbour had to reach back into history. Jenny Brockie last worked on the program in 1990, Mary Delahunty in 1983, and Caroline Jones in 1981. The four women who have dominated the program this century—Neighbour, Liz Jackson, Sarah Ferguson and

Debbie Whitmont—reflect the modern strident face of *Four Corners* and its aggressive social-reformist character. They epitomise the belief that the role of the journalist is not merely to report and expose, but to intervene, to influence and to shape.

The opening chapter of the book, by my old colleague (and look-alike) John Penlington, is titled “Over My Dead Body”. Although John was not there from the beginning (he joined in 1963), his chapter purports to tell the story of the program’s origins, and the struggle of Bob Raymond and Michael Charlton to get managerial support for a public affairs program to be modelled on the BBC’s *Panorama*. The title repeats the supposed statement by the then Controller of News, W.S. Hamilton (although it doesn’t name him) in opposing the establishment of an independent unit not subject to the Commission’s policies on news integrity, objectivity, fairness and accuracy. Penlington repeats the widespread myth that Hamilton’s objection was merely a selfish defence of territorial power. It was in fact the beginning of the decades-long inter-departmental warfare between News and Current Affairs over an important principle. Like the Korean War, it resulted in an armistice rather than a peace treaty. The origins of this friction were accurately summarised in the 1981 Dix Report on the ABC:

The Talks Department, and later Public Affairs, tended to recruit directly from the universities and from other non-journalistic professions people whom they trained in the use of broadcasting techniques and who used their skills to present programmes such as Four Corners in television and AM in radio which were a combination of fact and comment.

The ABC Chairman, Sir Richard Boyer, had been adamant that the Commission’s news and information programs should follow in the Reithian tradition of “due impartiality”. General Manager Charles Moses had therefore taken a big risk in persuading the Commission that an untested program should be removed from the supervision of the Talks Department and given the autonomy which could breach this precept. Agreement was won by promising the personal supervision of Assistant General Manager, Clem Semmler. But Semmler, a cultured and academically-minded administrator, had no interest in television and no intention of interfering.

Penlington is undoubtedly correct in writing that the initiative for the program came from Raymond and Charlton. I believe that Ken Inglis’s version in his history, *This Is the ABC*, crediting the idea to Moses, is wrong. Inglis relied too much on official records. What saved the day for *Four Corners* was that Boyer died before it made the first of its many mistakes and the excesses of its producers mired the ABC in public controversy. It is one of the great tragedies of the organisation that Boyer’s successors did not grasp the nettle before everyone (including the public) could be badly stung.

Raymond was thirty-nine and had a sound background in newspaper journalism in the UK but no experience of broadcasting, let alone television. Michael Charlton was five years younger, the son of Con Charlton, the ABC’s Victorian Manager. A staff announcer, he affected a plummy English accent, exaggerated even then by BBC standards, and was known for his sporting commentaries, especially in cricket. Their plan for *Four Corners* was hardly original, although novel in Australian television. Inspired by *Panorama*, it was to be a magazine consisting of forty-five minutes of news clips drawn as widely as possible from around the world, and a feature interview. At first, the interview was the only thing which distinguished it from programs of the News Division—*Newsreel* and *Weekend Magazine*.

Today, offensive, interrupting questioning passed off as probing interviewing on current affairs programs rarely raises a complaint. It is difficult to comprehend that fifty years ago the ABC had a commission and senior management absolutely terrified of the insidious potential of the new medium television to damage society. They had seen John Freeman in his BBC *Face to Face* program reduce his subject to tears with his excoriating questioning, and decided they wanted

none of it. They banned the “big head” close-up that filled the screen as the camera searched every crows-foot for an emotional crumbling. They apprehended that news film was liable to distort news values by elevating pictorial impact above importance, so they mandated that no more than three minutes of film could be used in the fifteen-minute nightly 7 p.m. news bulletin. And they protected the integrity and authority of News as the linchpin of the ABC’s reputation by refusing to allow the News Division to enter the current affairs field. For example, as late as 1970, when as London Editor I suggested making a *Weekend Magazine* story on the emerging British debate on abortion, which had yet to reach Australia, it was firmly vetoed.

This then was the climate in which Raymond and Charlton set out to launch a copycat *Panorama*—with a meagre budget, no staff and no independent source of news film. Those of us working in Television News at Gore Hill soon discovered their solution to at least part of the problem. I was then Assistant Line-up Sub-editor and Director of the 7 p.m. bulletin. Bob or Michael would drop into the newsroom for a chat. On their way out, via the film editing room, they would help themselves to one or more of the reels of film on the rack put aside for scripting the nightly *Newsreel* program that followed the news. The mystery of the disappearing film would be solved by the re-appearance of the item on *Four Corners* at the weekend.

So it could be said that *Four Corners* was born out of larceny. The Controller of News hit the roof, and the General Manager had to ban the enterprising duo from News premises. The escapade did nothing to improve relations between news journalists and the growing band of broadcasters calling themselves journalists in television and soon, radio public affairs programs who operated under none of the professional and managerial constraints in the News Division. In its insistence on maintaining the purity of an artificial distinction between “fact” and “analysis”, general management and the Commission restrictively quarantined News, preventing the division from broadcasting what was then termed “public affairs”. They also failed utterly to grasp the necessity of defining a code of conduct for programs that invited opinions and could stray irresponsibly into comment.

Several people have claimed credit for the *Four Corners* title. Whoever and however, it does seem to have been a misquote from the last lines of Shakespeare’s *King John*:

*Come the three corners of the world in arms,
And we shall shock them: nought shall make us rue
If England to itself do rest but true.*

The shocks came soon enough, when Marxist broadcaster Allan Ashbolt, the first person to be appointed North American correspondent, returned and was appointed Federal Talks Supervisor (Topical) with editorial responsibility for *Four Corners*. He could not restrain himself, and stepped away from his desk to present a critical program on the RSL. It was an editorialising attack, with a sneer at Anzac Day, the clubs and drinking, their opposition to communism and non-European migration, ending in an allegation of undue political influence. The fierce response was clumsily handled by the ABC, but after initial denials, Ashbolt was removed. It was the first in a long string of controversies, many resulting from self-indulgent and irresponsible banner-waving. They came to be worn as a badge of pride by a constantly changing group of young turks, increasingly contemptuous of sections of the public that they offended, increasingly impervious to management restraint.

Six years after the debut of *Four Corners*, *This Day Tonight* was launched as an irreverent comment-and-interview program nightly after the news, at 7.30 p.m. Immediately, it had senior management on the edge of their chairs, holding their breaths for the next outrage. *TDT* produced the highest state of tension between the Commission and Canberra that either side had known. What was perhaps not realised at the time, in the ensuing swirl of political interference, disciplinary action, resignations, petitions and strike threats, was that the program

makers on both *TDT* and *Four Corners*, which frequently interchanged staff, had won unprecedented freedom from both management control and standard journalistic ethical constraints. Basic principles of fairness, balance and objectivity went out the window, along with “due impartiality”.

In its first ten years, *Four Corners*' exuberance in this climate led it into one public row after another. The plan (subsequently denied) to run an investigation into capital punishment the same weekend as the hanging of Eric Cooke in Perth; buffalo shooting in the Northern Territory without a licence; an exposé of Bougainville copper mining described in parliament as a “calculated distortion”; a dispute over ministerial appearances and the balance of studio audiences; “bastardisation” at Duntroon military college—all small crises which outweighed and gained far more newspaper headlines than the good reporting done, for instance on South-East Asia. The overall impression the program was creating was that it was crusading against government policy. Ken Inglis believed that in retribution Dr James Darling was not re-appointed Chairman.

As the ABC moved into the 1970s, the stunts and poorly researched attacks of *TDT* irritated authority figures such as the New South Wales Premier, Sir Robert Askin. The programmers, he told parliament, “behind their bland and smirky exteriors” exhibited “bias and subversive aims”. In 1973, *Four Corners* had its Wellesian moment when it caused a scare by announcing that Russia and China were at war. It had to apologise that a skimpy introduction had been an inadequate warning of the deceit. A year later, humiliation came with the cancellation of an interview with Vladimir Petrov's wife after it was revealed the reporter had written to her, threatening not to leave her alone until she agreed to the interview. On that occasion, a Labor Minister, Senator Doug McClelland, intervened, and Attorney-General Lionel Murphy described the letter as an outrageous invasion of privacy. By that stage the staff had an executive producer, eight reporters and a considerable budget.

Then the ABC and *Four Corners* moved into the big league of big trouble with its investigative journalism. “The Big League”, presented by newly recruited Chris Masters, set out to expose magisterial corruption in New South Wales. In 1977 the then Chief Magistrate, Murray Farquhar, had instructed the assigned magistrate to acquit Kevin Humphreys, Chairman of the New South Wales and Australian rugby leagues of a charge of defrauding the Balmain Leagues Club of \$50,000. The program included a reconstruction in which Farquhar said: “The premier has phoned. He says that what Humphreys has done is a minor offence. They all do it. Kevin Humphreys is not to be committed.”

When the Premier, Neville Wran, was advised that the program was going to air with this implication, he denounced it as “highly defamatory, totally indefensible and false”. Nevertheless, management and the Commission endorsed the program, and it was broadcast unchanged. Wran sued the ABC for defamation, and after a week's public uproar, appointed the Chief Justice, Sir Laurence Street, to conduct a Royal Commission into the Farquhar–Humphreys affair. Street exonerated the Premier. He also found that Farquhar did influence the committal proceedings against Humphreys. Farquhar was later jailed for four years for attempting to pervert the course of justice; Humphreys was convicted and fined for the original fraud. In early 1985, in an out-of-court settlement the ABC apologised to Wran and paid his legal costs of \$118,545. Because of the narrow terms of reference imposed on the Royal Commission, many unanswered questions remained—chiefly, who, if anyone had put the ABC up to smearing the Premier, and for what motive.

Did Neville Wran get a fair go? At the time Chris Masters was defensive. He conceded that the program perhaps should have acknowledged that Farquhar might have used the Premier's name without his knowledge. Twenty-seven years later, in an interview on the ABC's “50 Years Four Corners” app, Masters has reflected more soberly: “I would say he did not get a fair go and I am sorry that is the case. There's no doubt the program did a lot of damage to Neville Wran.”

In the annals of the ABC however, “The Big League” was a triumphal turning point for *Four Corners* investigations. *Whose ABC?* the second volume of Ken Inglis’s history of the national broadcaster—a history which is skewed favourably to Current Affairs exploits—describes the program as “a pace-setter, a demonstration of what serious public-spirited television could achieve”.

Was it one of the programs that changed Australia? It certainly changed the ABC. Prime Minister Bob Hawke was so furious that the government swept out the entire Commission and replaced it with new members. And an event that was essentially a shamefully irresponsible slander, a politically-motivated sideswipe in a legitimate story of judicial corruption, has become mythologised as another brave resistance to government interference.

Masters obviously learned much from his experience in “The Big League” crisis. In May 1987 he demonstrated what *Four Corners* could do and how it could get it right when he delivered “The Moonlight State”, which exposed Queensland’s vice industry and the corruption in the Police Licensing Branch which protected it. A judicial inquiry appointed the next day eventually led to the jailing of the Police Commissioner and the collapse of the Bjelke-Petersen government. This time Masters was careful to include the important disclaimers: “Mr Lewis has clearly come a long way [from junior Inspector in Charleville]. This program is not drawing any conclusions Mr Lewis is involved in this corruption.” And, “There’s no suggestion the Premier is involved in Queensland’s police corruption.” It was a masterful example of forensic reporting.

Eight years later, in April 1995, *Four Corners* broadcast “The Prophet of Oz”, claiming to expose a cult and accusing world-famous Australian mountaineer Tim Macartney-Snape, in effect, of corrupting youth by promoting the cult. The broadcast immediately destroyed the lecturing career Macartney-Snape had built up since his conquest of Everest, without oxygen, and for the first time, from the north side. It was thirteen years before Supreme Court Judge David Kirby held that the flagship current affairs program had defamed him, rejecting all the ABC’s defences of truth, qualified privilege and fair comment. The settlement amounted to around a million dollars including costs and interest, but could not undo the damage to Macartney-Snape’s reputation.

The error had been in turning the program over to the Rev. David Millikan, not a *Four Corners* reporter but a minister of the Uniting Church, then the ABC’s Head of Religious Broadcasting, and an expert on new religious movements. Rev. Millikan set out to expose, as a cult, the theories of Jeremy Griffith, who claimed to have discovered a scientific answer to “the human condition”, the capacity of human beings for both good and evil. Macartney-Snape subscribed to these views and had mentioned them in some of his speeches to schools. Judge Kirby found “The Prophet of Oz” gave great prominence to serious allegations against him, based on hearsay, and without “the rudimentary step” of right of reply. The imputations “reflect upon Macartney-Snape’s honesty and integrity. He was described as a person who had deceived schools, and a person who had abused his position of influence for his own ends,” Judge Kirby concluded. (The judgment can be found at: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/nsw/NSWSC/2008/764.html>.)

In a subsequent case in the New South Wales Court of Appeal, Jeremy Griffith failed to recover damages from his claim that the program had defamed him.

While the three judges agreed that the program had not been justified in claiming Griffith’s book was of such poor scientific standard that it had no support at all from the scientific community, *Four Corners* avoided liability when the Court upheld a defence of comment. As a reading of the decision at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/nsw/NSWCA/2010/257.html> will confirm, that was an unusual outcome. What was interesting was the difficulty the judges created for such future cases with their comments on the imperatives of Rev. Millikan and the

producers. The judgment found that Rev. Millikan considered Griffith's activities highly undesirable in their impact on his followers and their families, and by inference, the purpose of the broadcast was to set back these activities. Rev. Millikan had also engaged in misrepresentation to obtain Griffith's co-operation in making the broadcast. But the purpose of the broadcast, it said, was to inform the audience; setting back the activities was not the dominant purpose; the misrepresentation was engaged in to enable the giving of information, not for any other purpose. Therefore, the publication was not actuated by malice. Evidently the appeal judges failed to understand the motivations of some investigative journalism projects, which from time to time clearly attempt both to inform audiences and to exert social and political influence.

From the string of controversies resulting from self-indulgent and irresponsible reporting in the past, *Four Corners* has today moved firmly into an era of advocacy journalism. The program is now a platform for celebrity reporters with highly developed levels of social reformism. It is instructive to reflect on some of the programs made by the women mentioned above who carry so much clout in what *Four Corners* says.

Debbie Whitmont: Her story "The Newman Case" (2008) urged a re-opening of the case against Phuong Ngo, convicted of the murder of New South Wales MP John Newman. It was based on supposed new evidence by two academics. A judicial inquiry rejected these claims as spurious and endorsed the guilty finding.

Sally Neighbour: Former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett described her 1997 story "Kennett's Culture", as "an hour of slime". Since "The Network" (2002) on the Bali bombing, Neighbour has specialised in writing on terrorism.

Sarah Ferguson: Her story "A Bloody Business" (2011) was advocacy journalism at its worst—selective, emotive, misleading, unbalanced. The camera did not lie, but Lyn White of Animals Australia took care not to ask pertinent questions that would have put the scenes of animal cruelty into context and perspective. Scott Braithwaite, the marketing manager of one of the main exporters of live animals, Wellard Exports, pointed out that the abattoir filmed leased its killing floor to wholesalers, up to six per night. The slaughtermen filmed were, even to an inexperienced eye, incompetent amateurs, yet they were represented as the abattoir's staff. Abattoirs not far away that operated in exemplary conditions, well up to Australian standards, were not filmed. As a result, the combination of a crusading animal rights organisation and a crusading journalist succeeded easily in shocking a public which had never been inside an abattoir. With a sensationalist program and citizenry programmed to a Pavlovian response to animal cruelty, with backbenchers scampering to be seen in the forefront of protest, a tidal wave of confected outrage and hypocrisy swept sensible policy overboard. The export ban and subsequent Indonesian retaliation caused permanent economic damage to the Australian cattle industry.

So, as Shakespeare forewarned, shock them they do, nor do they rue. Instead they pick up prizes. But despite the proud boasts in its publicity blurbs, there may be some apprehension in the ABC that the book's fourteen-story format is a cheap, quirky way of paying tribute to the dozens of reporters and producers who have toiled to put out some 2000 episodes.

What then should be a dispassionate view of a book to honour the ABC's flagship current affairs program? I turned to the Corporation's new chairman, former New South Wales Chief Justice Jim Spigelman, who launched it. "A book for journalists" was his summation. He lamented the focus on the big stories, citing one that had stuck in his memory—a gentle tale on the temple of the Sikhs of Woolgoolga. He also noted wryly that the book had avoided mentioning mistakes, all the breaches of editorial policies. "Well, it is hard, when you are having a fiftieth anniversary, to do anything like that. *There are dangers in a culture of self-congratulation*" (my emphasis).

So where has *Four Corners* come in its smug half-century? Judge for yourself by reflecting on how Dick Boyer believed the ABC should face an uncertain world, in this excerpt from a 1945 speech:

I think we all realise that, in the postwar years, we are entering a period in which grave and far-reaching issues of social and political policy will agitate the nation. It is our hope national broadcasting may stand solid and serene in the middle of our national life, running no campaign, seeking to persuade no opinion, but presenting the issues freely and fearlessly for the calm judgment of our people.

Serving, not changing Australia.

*Geoffrey Luck worked for the ABC for twenty-six years as a senior reporter and news editor. A shorter version of this article appeared last month on **Quadrant Online**.*

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