

Fixing The News

Helen Wilson

(A review of Fixing the News, edited by Keith Windschuttle and Elizabeth Windschuttle, Cassell, Australia, 1981.)

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Fixing the News is a collection of articles associated with the New Journalist dating between 1971 and 1980 about the Australian media. The New Journalist was begun in 1972 by journalists influenced by the radical politics of the 1960's. It claimed to be a 'paper for all those working or interested in the mass media', with the basic aim being 'to act as a critic of the major institutions of the Australian mass media'. It is a relatively successful radical paper, still appearing sporadically but with changing personnel and emphasis. The Windschuttles played a major part in the production of the New Journalist for several years.

The paper is unique in Australia and performs a valuable function in being one of the few outlets for radical journalists to speak out on their conservative and aloof but changing profession and their monopolistic and repressive employers. Contributors also include academics, unionists and activists. This should be a productive mix of critical perspectives, and the journal does provide a rare forum for topical commentary of various sorts. In view of the difficulties in bringing out such a publication, or experience and not others is understandable. The production of a collection of articles from the journal promises well and might be expected to remedy such shortcomings of a topical journal as well as correcting shortsightedness, filling in gaps, re-interpreting events and removing jargon. If this had been done, Fixing the News might have been a multi-faceted but coherent statement of what is wrong with the Australian media. To do this would have been a huge editorial job and would have required the input of more people and more analysis than evidently went into the production of this book.

Publishing companies are also subject to changes of personnel, gambles and hastiness, and Fixing the News does not enhance Cassell's reputation for quality production. The book is, however, successful in market terms. It was intended as a general book not especially for a scholarly audience, but it is being used as a reference in a number of tertiary courses in journalism and media studies. One wonders how much coherence or depth of understanding is conveyed in such courses, or whether this merely indicates the dearth of good up-to-date material on the Australian media. It is to be hoped that in the tight tertiary publishing

market, the success of such a book does not foreclose the field.

The collection is extremely wide ranging and is divided into five sections:

1. Who controls the media?
2. The manufacturers' message.
3. Journalists at work.
4. Audiences.
5. Is reform possible?

Part 1 might be expected to provide a coherent analysis of a particular articulation of power in Australia, since it includes contributions on proprietors, editors, journalists, government, news agencies and secret police, but the editors fail to do this. Several of the articles are about the Whitlam years and Murdoch's role in the 1975 election. These were crucial events in many people's careers and political awareness but why reproduce topical pieces from the time without providing any real attempt at historical analysis? Michael Symons' articles on the rulers of the media were first published in 1976, before the appearance of McQueen's Australia's Media Monopolies in 1977, and take the same form as McQueen's lists of shareholder and director villains. The lists have been updated, but no account is taken of the many criticisms made of McQueen's crude and conspiratorial analysis of ruling class control over cultural production.

Part 2 features contributions from Keith Windschuttle on press coverage of the working class, strikes and drugs. His work is heavily influenced by the British sociology of deviance school, also a product of the 1960's, but is more superficial and less convincing than the best British work. His articles have value in popularising an academic field for a general audience, but hopefully they will not be taken as representative of the most recent work in media studies. Other articles in this section point to the extremely selective and ideological coverage of political issues such as uranium mining, racism, sexism, crime and the Middle East. Deborah Hope's 'Rape is Good News' is a nice piece of new journalism about some particularly nasty practices of male tabloid editors. Most of these articles are, however, flimsy, and, though they all make important points in any critical analysis of the Australian media, one wishes for some follow-up and more solid work. 'War. Be in It', Dimity Torbet and Alan Kershaw's documentation of the Murdoch Press's warmongering over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, is commendable for its thoroughness as far as it goes, though no broad implications are drawn about this kind of ideological work.

Part 3 focuses on the labour process in the media and is the most valuable part of the book. Most of the articles are by journalists about their conditions of work. John Edwards' account of the Canberra press gallery during the Whitlam years is excellent: insightful, detached and eminently worthy of being reproduced seven years after it first appeared. Brian Hart's cold sociological work on journalists and Alan Kershaw's energetic piece on the introduction of VDT's are both potentially valuable but are unfortunately

largely couched in an inaccessible framework. Hart's is that of the sociology of organisations while Kershaw's is ridden with the jargon of working journalists; both needed editing for a common audience. Women's prospects in media work is an important issue, as evidenced in Liz Fell's graphic complaints about the ABC. Unfortunately there is no update on the success of such women's campaigns.



Parts 4 and 5 are fairly unorganised grab bags. Work on media audiences is contentious and difficult, and little is contributed by Goot and Beed's articles in this context. The question of media reform is rightly perceived by the editors as only possible 'coming from the efforts of those who work in the industry'. The New Journalist was born in a commitment to workers' control; the original pamphlet, 'Towards a democratic press', is reprinted here, but after ten years it now sounds hollow and idealistic. There is a distinct lack of strategy proposed here for reform from within, and this is the book's greatest disappointment. Because the control of the media is seen to be so entrenched and monolithic, no contradictions or concrete opportunities are perceived. The Fairfax press has quite viciously exposed Murdoch's methods in gaining an ever-larger media empire, yet such circumstances or, indeed, the differences between the media groups as employers are not systematically explored. The future of specialist journalism as the press declines as a mass medium is not examined, nor are union strategies. The long-standing mistrust between journalists and printers ought to have been confronted in such a journal; there is a rather disturbing tendency for journalists to see themselves as the only real workers in media production.

Peter Manning has a fine record for integrity as an investigative journalist prepared to lose jobs, and his article 'Left right out', stands as perhaps the clearest statement of the strengths and weaknesses of the New Journalist over the years.

Ten years ago there was no dearth of journalists willing and able to use their abilities to carry on the great traditions of Wright Mills, George Orwell and I.F. Stone in pursuit of the corrupt, the hypocritical, the absurd and the plain antiquated in Australian society. Today they are almost all ensconced in the value systems of the four major families who dictate what notions will and will not be communicated to Australian society.

Manning laments the decline of alternative journalism and proposes a tired platform for reform, including a hopeless 'call for an end to the control of television in Australia by newspaper companies'. The ideals of the 1960's sit uneasily with the apparent current preoccupations of the New Journalist group, who are younger and by no accident mostly associated with the Fairfax group in Sydney.

It is to be hoped that the New Journalist will continue to be a thorn in the media barons' sides by pursuing their activities like seeking approved party status to give evidence at various judicial hearings concerned with Murdoch's application to take over ATV 10, developing links with the AJA and other media unions and perhaps broadening their contacts with sympathetic activists and academics. A better collection of readings may some day result.

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