The Medium, Not the Messenger

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Irving Saulwick was the latest in a stream of people to observe that the electorate's cynicism about politics is at an all-time high and that, in particular, people do not 'believe' politicians anymore. For this he blames the media. I agree with him. In my address today I would like to explain why I agree with him and my reasons, perhaps not being Irving Saulwick's, may interest you.

I called my address 'The Medium, not the Messenger' in tribute to Marshall McLure's indecipherable book of the late 1960s. I never understood it. The paperback cover, depicting a fried egg, I understood even less. But twenty-five years later I have finally found that it encapsulates the essential mystery of my own profession. I am eternally grateful to Mr McLure for so cleverly putting those two words together for they have stuck in my mind for a quarter of a century as I have struggled to make something of their pretension—and today I can.

In this lecture I wish to examine that much mourned, lost but not forgotten 'truth in politics', and whether the blame for this should lie with us, the messengers, otherwise known as journalists, or rather the mediums we use to tell the world what we think they need to know.

But first I want to say a word about the importance of truth in politics since it is easily forgotten. Unlike totalitarian governments backed by guns and secret police forces, confidence, as we all feel, is just about all a democratic system of government has going for it. Public confidence in and respect for our police, our courts, our public servants, our law-makers and our politicians are the invisible pillars on which a democracy must be built—confidence and respect. You cannot have confidence in anyone who is not being truthful. So that must mean, therefore, for all of us who value democracy, that there is a special responsibility to maintain that public confidence. As John Bray, the former chief

justice of South Australia once said, 'the freedom of the people depends upon it', and indeed it does.

Some journalists would agree with this and argue that this means they have a special professional responsibility to investigate and report corruption, negligence or carelessness in government; to ensure that standards are not only maintained but also seen to be so; and that hypocrisy, cant and broken promises are there to be exposed. You would recognise those phrases as occasional but passionate *cris de coeur* from journalists, often when we are in tight spots—they are not John Pilger's alone.

Another view of the role of the media is that there is no such responsibility for journalists to support democracy, the upholding of standards or anything else much; that the only obligation of a publication, in which I include television and radio, is to publish stories that people want to read and to inform, to amuse, to challenge, to shock and to get them to keep buying the product. There is also a view that journalistic ethics need only be employed to the extent necessary to maintain the market's confidence in that product. Take the case of the confidentiality of our sources where the potential suppliers of stories to journalists need to be confident that they are not going to be revealed, otherwise they would refuse to supply information. So that is a market-driven ethic if you like.

There is a great deal of attractiveness, strangely, in this argument for responsibility free journalism. Strangely, because it does not appear responsible or sensible, but it is value free. I get very nervous about people making value judgments on behalf of us all—this is the basis of censorship, which begins as a minor restriction on people's rights but can end up as a major one, as we see in totalitarian states.

As a reader, listener or viewer, I do not want some middle-aged male newspaper editor, nor, for that matter, any person as fallible as myself deciding what I **ought** and **should** know or, more importantly, what I **ought not** or **should not** know because they have decided that it might weaken my confidence in our democracy. That is not to say we ought to be amoral or value free as journalists—that is impossible. We should recognise our values, but we should be careful not to let those values influence us too much and not have them codified.

So there are two sides to this argument about the role of the journalist in upholding confidence in a democracy. In the end, in a haphazard and intuitive way, the Australian media, like many other media around the world, appears to try to balance those two approaches by saying that 'anything goes' most of the time, but drawing the line at some obvious and gross point.

Gareth Evans might have wished that the *Sydney Morning Herald* had drawn the line on the Chinese Embassy bugging story. The story had little to do with improving administration or uncovering corruption and it damaged our international standing and our relationships with our neighbours; it was, on the other hand, a great read for lovers of Le Carré and the mysterious, intriguing world of spies. Nevertheless some journalists would have agreed with Gareth Evans. In a sense, that is all just an aside that allows me to conclude that journalists at least think they are promoting truth in politics, confidence in politics and confidence in democracy.

That brings me to my second aside. I would like to address the more common criticisms made of reporters. You may even have made some of them yourself. We may feel that journalists are too young, as are policemen and, as I am discovering, even politicians. You may even feel that they are not well informed, but you might be interested to know that they are better educated than they have ever been. It is very competitive to get into journalism at a university, and university entrance scores for journalism are not far behind those required for law. We may also believe that today's journalists lack respect, that they are too likely to express their own opinions and too interested in trivia. I think that is the full list of complaints, and these criticisms especially apply to journalists in the electronic media.

It is true that such journalists are young. That is because, for the most part, people do not make old bones as radio or television reporters. It is not just because our looks fade and our figures blossom, but because of the enormous stress on ego. There is quite a lot of battering of self-confidence that takes place in a job that asks you to put yourself on the line as well as your thoughts. There are also performance demands and shift demands in a lot of electronic journalism. The work can also become repetitive and formula like, and journalists often seem to me, by personality, to be people who like to move around and move on.

It is also true that you do hear journalists interrupting, repeating questions, confronting people and occasionally even being rude. I do not think that has changed much in twenty years and it is more part of living in a critical culture and also the consequence of employing smart young people. As we get older, we begin to think that it might be unpleasant if the shoe were on the other foot.

I now want to turn to the trivialisation of issues. The selection of issues owes as much as anything to the nature of radio and television as communication mediums, which is the central question in this address, and I will return to this in just a moment. Another criticism is that you may not like the grammar or the pronunciation. The problem with reporters these days is that they cannot express themselves properly. If you do not like it, go and sit on a bus and you will hear it all around you. In a society where English grammar is no longer taught at primary level, and where correctness is not insisted upon lest it interfere with people's creativity, you can expect little else, and you cannot really expect journalists to be much different until the education system changes.

The biggest change in electronic journalism which makes us more conscious of the behaviour of journalists is that there is a lot more of it. There is a plethora of current affairs and news programs on radio and television where there obviously was not fifty years ago and we depend on it a lot more, so we notice what journalists in these mediums are doing a lot more. Perhaps in the 1950s there was an absence of a culture of criticism and the facilities and the availability of resources were not there to support such programs. It should also go without saying—and it is a very basic assumption in this address—that I do not think politicians have changed very much. They are no more truthful or dishonest than they have ever been.

So if journalists are there to keep politicians honest, and politicians are only as truthful as they have ever been, how can the media or journalists be held responsible for this decline in public confidence in politics? What is the missing link? How have we moved from the halcyon sunshine of the 1950s where we believed everything to the cynical twilight of today where we believe nothing?

My hypothesis is that the missing link went in 1956. It was not the Olympic Games in Melbourne; it was the beginning of television. With every technological advance that television, and with it radio, has made, the march has continued at a faster pace. It is the nature of television as a communication link which is important here, not the influx of violent programs from the United States or those sordid Ealing studio comedies.

Television is the ultimate mass medium of the senses. There are only four senses: sight, hearing, smell and touch. Television employs the two that the human being relies upon most in these mass circumstances—sight and hearing. Television distorts them, of course. Very often the face on your average television screen is much bigger than it is in real life and it rarely has anything much around it more than a neck and the suggestion of shoulders. Voices may be louder on speakers than otherwise. But still it is the senses of sight and hearing that television is employing.

These senses are very old, much older than man. These are the senses of the animal world—the senses our ape ancestors relied on for gathering information. These are the same senses that their ancestors, the birds, relied upon before them. So old are these information collectors that they are built into the human brain as they are in an animal's brain. We are born able to see and hear; we do not need to learn to do either. That must make television a seductively easy medium to take information from, far easier, for example, than reading a newspaper. We are not born able to read, and some of us never can. We do not even have to watch television exclusively because we are so good at taking information from these two senses. We can torment our brothers and sisters, adjust the furniture and we can even knit and cook a meal while we say we are watching 'the box'.

It is little wonder that 80 per cent of Australians now say that their primary source of news and information is from television. In a world where people are so busy, we consider non-exclusive, non-intellectually demanding activities like watching television an efficient use of time for information collecting. You can be six or one hundred and six, illiterate or of low IQ and still watch television.

Of course, you would be wrong if you thought you were actually getting much information from television. Television is a very poor carrier of intellectual information, conceptual information especially, and it is this sort of information that we need if we are to make those sophisticated judgments about the world around us and about politics in particular.

How many of you can remember the items you saw on last night's television news, and how many of you can describe them in any detail? Most of us could not recall in any detail more than one item on last night's television news and most would be hard pressed to remember more than three or four. Weather forecasts do not count.

Television's intellectual conceptual limitations occur for a number of reasons—none of which reflect upon journalists. For a start, you cannot re-read television. You see the pictures and you hear the sounds only once in a live broadcast. Very few of us tape the news and then watch it over and over until we have got it all. That is because we think we are taking it all in, because it is so easy to do so and because we think we have enough. This is starkly different from reading, where the eye may go back and forth over a page, unconsciously checking facts

several times. We choose to do nothing else but read when we read, because we can do nothing else, because this is not an easy exercise for us.

So this once-only watch factor or the once-only hear factor—I think it applies to radio as well—means the information that works best on television and radio has to be simple. The moment you start trying to work out what something means, you stop following what is being said, and before long you have lost track of the story. You cannot go back and check it; you cannot go back and work out what he or she meant a couple of seconds earlier.

That means that statistics and scientific concepts—any concepts for that matter—have to be kept simple. If they can be explained in words that evoke picture images in the brain, which you could call inside sight, then they are the ones that will go in—they are the bits that will stick. That is why story telling is the best vehicle for transferring information on television or on an oral basis. If those story telling words are accompanied by story telling evocative pictures, then the story is much more likely to be remembered. That, of course, is why any good salesman on television or a good politician conjures up images when talking. They avoid conceptual words, report writing words and unfamiliar words at all costs. You cannot think and take it in at the same time.

Something has to be lost, a great deal has to be lost, when politics is kept that simple. Policies, ideas and the defence of difficult situations often need time to explain—time for the listener to think about them, take them in, come back and chew them over. That is not possible when you are watching television.

Television is also expensive. It needs very big audiences to support its costs. Because of the need for big audiences, its content must be populist; it must be accessible by most people. Therefore, it also has to assume either a low level of average interest or only choose items that it knows are of very high popular interest. This need to keep operating on a low level of interest means that no topic can have much time devoted to it, particularly in news programs but also in current affairs programs. People have to be kept moving along before they get bored with it, because they might not be very interested in it at all. When the sports programs come on, that is when I can go and make a cup of tea.

Very unusually, a grab—that is, an electronic quote—in news is no more than a few seconds. Only a few years ago, it was thirty seconds. That was considered a great breakthrough—Neville Wran, the former premier of New South Wales, was the master of the thirty-second grab. Now it is down to five or six seconds. The limit when I was working on current affairs television was thirty seconds. You had to change from interview to pictures every thirty seconds, unless somebody was saying something absolutely extraordinary and, hopefully, crying as they did so.

The exception to this is the studio interview and the modern techniques for making a studio interview, which is only just boring old talking heads, where they have to have very high performance values. They are usually incorporated. The best technique for incorporating performance into a studio interview is to use theatre techniques to inject personality into it. Boring people, however interesting their subject matter, just do not find their way onto prime time television. And remember, it is only prime time television that we need talk about,

because this is the section of the day which has the overwhelming influence on people's views of the world.

The other thing about television and the need for it to be kept simple is that the issues become very literal. They have to be reduced to black and white, and they often circle around one quote. Take, for example, a prime minister's promise that no child shall live in poverty by the year 2000. There are pictures and sounds of the prime minister saying it. You cannot let him say more than seven seconds, so that is all he says. Literally, that is what he is meant to say.

If the poverty promise is not met, then his gesture has become a lie. Technically, of course, he has lied. He said that no child would live in poverty by the year 2000, and by the year 2000 there are children still living in poverty. But it is an absolute nonsense, isn't it? It was really only ever a wish, a gesture, a commitment to a course of policy action. It could never have been a 100 per cent controllable situation for a government. It could never have been something he could absolutely have been able to deliver literally.

But it was held up constantly to the prime minister, by the community as much as by the media, as a failure of policy, as evidence that politicians lie. If he had said, 'I will halve the public service', that is much more in his control, and I think he would be much more correctly taken to task for not doing so. But there is a literalism about the simple unfinished quotes that we take when we take seven seconds that is one of the major sources of dissatisfaction with politicians, because so often they reflect on their promises and their commitments. I think it is unfair and rather childish, but it is an easy outcome of television and radio.

Most significantly of all, the drama on television which is easiest to sell, easiest to arouse a viewer's interest in and to keep that interest, is the drama of conflict. It is people shouting at each other, personally attacking each other. Thus, I think you can see from the evening coverage of parliament—which, as people often observe when they sit through question time, may not have anything to do with what the substantive issues might have been—that that is not always true, but there is certainly an emphasis on personal attack and on emotional interchange, because television portrays that very well.

Television also distorts the issues that are covered. Those issues which are not amenable to television techniques may not be covered at all; because the talent—that is, the protagonists in the debate—are boring; because there are no pictures to go with it; or because the concepts are too difficult to explain and the necessary background too much to impart in a 1.37 minute news story. Other stories which do suit television are covered extensively and perhaps with no real recognition of their news value. The Governor-General's expenses story, fire-engine stories and traffic accidents do very well in television news. We might ask what their value is and what their contribution is to our understanding of the world in which we live.

Of course, people's images on television, just like issues, are reduced to black and white also. Characters are caricatured. They become goodies and baddies. This is because you have a seven second grab. They are not seen often enough in complex or subtle enough ways on television and often on radio for it to be otherwise. I am talking prime time.

There are now politicians who thrive today because they suit television, but they might not have thrived in a pre-television world where soapbox qualities and personal contact qualities

might have been more important. Others would have done better before the world of television. Politicians with the knack for the quick, snappy, evocative comments—that is, image creating comments; comments like the great lines in a play—are the ones that everybody remembers and the ones that a television audience repeats, and that is the politician who does well out of television. Whatever their depth, their policy grasp or their ability to work with their own party, they are given a distinct advantage in the rise of politics and the game of politics.

Television has also led to the rise and rise of the interest group and interest group politics. This, of course, is a topic for another address, but it is a very interesting and, in some ways, alarming development in modern interest group politics. I think this is because television is very hungry for characters, for a variety of characters, a choice, as well as for a greater number of permutations and combinations on any story that occurs. You will find that an interest group, even ten interest groups, may not read well in print, but a good television performer representing the interests of a particular interest group can become a national figure. Therefore, they can have enormous impact and influence on policy development.

I will never forget when I worked on 'This Day Tonight' and 'Nationwide' in Adelaide. There was a woman we often used to talk to about women's issues—this was in the 1970s when this was very hot stuff—and her name was Joan Russell. If there was ever a women's issue that needed to be talked about we would ring Joan up. She always looked amazing: she had black hair out to here, wore huge dresses, was six-foot tall and had big flashing eyes. She was a fantastic talent and she represented the Women's Electoral Lobby. One day, after I must have interviewed her twenty times, I said what an effective lobby group the Women's Electoral Lobby had become. She said, 'Yes, television has a lot to do with that.' I said, 'Oh, do you think so?' She said, 'Yes, do you know how many members we have in the Women's Electoral Lobby in South Australia?' When I said no, she said, 'Twenty.'

I sometimes think journalists invent interest groups. We are always on the lookout for new ones. They certainly add variety to our little dramas. If people are effective performers, they can go a very long way. Of course, the other aspect to those interest groups is that they are critical of government policy; they are very demanding of governments, which is fine. A government can sometimes become captive to these very effective interest groups and can be undone by them. I think that makes the development of an issue and a policy debate less predictable and, on average, a government is less likely to come through unscathed. So it certainly contributes to this culture of criticism.

I think there are some fairly obvious, if you are within the industry, aspects of television and radio and the way it is used that can very much change and sometimes distort the way political debate is conducted and our impressions of the people in it. I also want to look at the effect that television has on the image of the politician, the person, and, therefore, the images of politics.

I would like to go back to this old brain—that is, the brain I referred to at the beginning; the brain that we had when we were back in the trees; the brain that we had when we were apes and birds before that. It certainly still makes up well over 80 per cent of our total brain. It dominates everything that we do. However large our cerebral cortex might be, it is still not big compared with the rest. As I said, we are born not only able to see, hear, smell and touch, but our brains are actually designed to interpret the information that those receptors can

collect, which gives us such an enormous advantage over other animals. The brain is able to combine information sensory sources in an extraordinary way. If you think about it, reading, for example, is using sight to recognise sounds, but we are not born able to do that. In addition, at birth all the receptors are usually receiving their information okay, but the brain is not necessarily making a lot of sense of it.

A baby hears, but it does not know what it is hearing, so is it hearing? Is hearing only hearing with meaning, or is hearing just hearing? There are, even for humans, one or two necessary exceptions to this hopelessly stupid situation that human beings find themselves born into, where the human baby is no match for a baby goat, and baby chimps seem geniuses by comparison. We are actually born with some pre-wiring. Take, for example, the vagus nerve of a new born baby. That is the nerve running down beside the mouth and down the throat. When you brush the vagus nerve on a baby's face, you stimulate the vagus nerve and the mouth opens. It is a reflex. Since babies must be able to suck milk from the word go, this is quite smart pre-programming—though other animal species, as I said, actually have many more pre-programs or reflexes than we do.

Hunger pains produce cries in a child. That is another reflex. Babies prefer circles to other shapes and respond to circles first. That is obviously quite necessarily a condition of surviving as a baby, unless your mother's nipples are a very odd shape. As we grow older, most of us grow out of these reflexes, because as we mature the information we take in using our four senses makes more sense, not through reflex but through experience—that is, we are learning with our senses.

But I think there is another order of more subtle pre-programs that we are born with. It is the second order pre-programs which actually have such enormous bearing on the judgments we make about people, and which so drastically affect the perception of politicians by the community—that is, the impact their image has on us.

When we were still in the trees we made judgments about other animals, particularly those of our own kind, all the time. They often had to be very quick judgments. Your life depended on it or a mating opportunity depended on it. You decided what they looked, sounded, smelt and felt like. Of course, this, as you might remember, is the basis of Desmond Morris's path-breaking book *The Naked Ape*, which is so path-breaking now that nobody thinks about it anymore. These instant judgments are so necessary to the survival of the human animal that I believe they too have been pre-programmed.

Let us consider a few if you do not think this happens to us. Why do we say, 'He has a strong face; he has an aggressive face, look at his jaw; that man is aggressive, he has an aggressive jaw'? Why do we say, 'She looks honest'? How can a person look honest? You either tell the truth or you do not tell the truth. Why should looking honest be a rational judgment to make about a person? Why do we say, 'He or she looks innocent'? Why is it that we say, 'That person is sensual: that person is sexy'? Sexiness is not what you are looking at but how one behaves.

Why do we say, 'That person is kind, look at their eyes; that person has a kind mouth'? Why do we say, 'You can tell this person is intelligent by their forehead'? Why do we say, 'She is cold, listen to her voice' or 'he is warm, listen to his voice'? Why do we say, 'You can tell

that he is sneaky; you can tell that he is untrustworthy, just look at those eyebrows'? Why do we say, 'That is a weak person', when what we are actually talking about is the breadth of their shoulders? Why do we so often assume that dorks wear glasses? Why do we say that somebody is a dominating male because they look big on television when, in fact, what they have is a large skull? Why do we say, 'Untidy hair means an untidy mind'?

I think we do this because these are all the little pre-programmed things that were so important when we were apes. The prominent jaw is called post-pubescent lower mandible development and, you might notice, only occurs at puberty. The eyes take up at least a half of a child's face, and it is only at puberty that the lower mandible develops. So it is a sexual characteristic in that sense, but it is also an adult and, therefore, a survival characteristic. Why do we say that? Is it because—this is the theory—male apes and animals with large jaws were the most aggressive, more able to defend themselves and more able to tear the other animal to pieces? Why do we associate large eyes with honesty? Why do people widen their eyes when they want to be believed? These are associated with childhood. As I said, in a child there is very little lower mandible development and the eyes are relatively larger in the face. Why do we talk about lips being a sign of a sexy person? I think this is because lip tissue is a tertiary sexual characteristic.

You can go through all of these and find an animal equivalence. Why do men have larger foreheads and larger eyebrow development than women? It is because men were meant to physically defend and attack. These are signs of strength in a person. Why is it that deeper voices are seen as more authoritative? It is because they are associated with the adult male. The length of a person's nose is another one. Little snubby noses are associated with childishness. Big schnozes are associated with maleness. The male face comes forward, particularly in chimps, at puberty. You could have a bit of fun and think about a few of your own.

Politicians have to look like the right sort of animal on television. Because our brain is so dominated by the 80 per cent which is still back in the trees—this unconscious judgmental tree brain—it would be a very foolish politician who did not care about what he looked like. We do not sit there looking at somebody on television saying, 'I like his lower mandible development. That means he must be strong.' It is more subtle and faster than that. We just decide that bloke looks strong. We like deep voices, which is why we select from them our radio and television journalists—because they are associated with authority. But these things happen at a very unconscious and quick level—instantly.

We do not sit there and say, 'They have little piggy eyes, therefore, they are dishonest.' We just say, 'I do not like the look of that bloke. They look shifty.' I think you will find people do it all the time. They do it because they do not know they are doing it; because they were born able to do it. It was all pre-programmed.

Politicians, of course, can get around it. Over time, and as they become more familiar to the audience, it matters less, which is why if somebody is going to say to me, 'Yes, but Paul Keating has a squeaky voice and a poor lower jaw mandible development, why do we think of him as such a great leader?' I would say, 'It might not have started off like that twenty-five years ago.' But you do get used to people and your cortex starts to take over from the bit that is still in the trees. So they can get around it, and, indeed, we can all get around it.

When I started on television in 1978, women were still appearing, as I was, in the evenings on 'This Day Tonight' for live studio work in scoop necks, pearls and puff sleeves. These days you would not be seen dead wearing anything other than something with padded shoulders. In fact, my husband saw me putting my stick-on shoulder pads in one morning and said, 'That is a sign of the times. It used to be falsies.' But it is also important for women to have a strong shoulder line on television because of the sense of strength that it projects.

It is interesting to see how careful politicians are about wearing glasses on television. They do so only if they absolutely have to. You might notice how many politicians and ministers wear glasses for their work but not when they are walking anywhere near a television camera. I remember Clyde Cameron telling me that he remembered the first time Don Dunstan ever came into the ALP office to collect some pamphlets. He was this funny little skinny bloke in glasses and with a lot of tertiary sexual characteristic around the mouth who came in and got his 'how to vote' cards. The next week he was back and Clyde said, 'Do you want some more?' and he said, 'Yes, I have door-knocked the whole electorate.' After this had happened three times, Clyde was pretty quick in deciding this bloke had a future. He said to him, 'You have a future in politics, son.' Don said, 'Yes, but could I have another round of "how to vote" cards.' Clyde Cameron said to him, 'If you ever want to be Premier, you must get contact lenses and go to the gym.' And he did. A lot of politicians have voice training for exactly the same reason.

Of course, the flip side of this is that we can misjudge politicians because we judge them by these characteristics, and then we are let down by our own misjudgments. But then we say that this is the failure of truth in politics. If you are still not convinced that we are primitive creatures, just let me remind you of a couple of things. It is true that, technically, and in our capacity to operate in the world, we have developed enormously. Evolution as the users of the environment has been quite remarkable. But if you look back through the literature, the personal behaviour of the human being seems to have changed very little.

For example, Homer's *Odyssey* dates back to the sixth century BC, and probably earlier. It tells of people behaving just like us—they were jealous, lusty, angry, unfair, threw temper tantrums and cheated on each other. This could have been 1995, but it just happened to be six centuries before Christ.

When you look at the great thoughts of Plato, you ask, 'Are they any less relevant today then they were four hundred years before Christ?' I just looked at a couple this morning. If you open a page of Plato you get a well-known quote. In *The Republic* he speaks of 'the peace that comes with age and escape from love, a mad and furious master'. I can think of some people who might say that today. I am looking forward to being able to say it myself. He also talks about 'the indifference about money which is a characteristic of those who have inherited their fortunes rather than acquired them'. I think we might also recognise that one. Are we not those people? Our natures, despite the technological changes that we have enjoyed, and despite the amount of time that has elapsed between Plato and us, have changed very little. Evolution does take a long time, but so much of what we are lurks in the mysterious grey cells of this pre-thinking brain.

The simple conclusion that you could draw from all this chatter is not to watch television. But television, of course, is upon us and with us and brings us a great deal of joy and satisfaction and information on its own terms. It is not a plea for a ban. It is, though, a plea for an appreciation of the limits of the electronic media, for a better understanding of the distortions it imposes on all of us. I guess there is also a little plea in there to resist your old brains if you must. I sometimes think they are the source of a great deal of prejudice and ignorance and all of those inadequate primeval responses that we seem to be able to produce for very complex situations that do not deserve it. They often worked well when we were back in the trees, but they are not so good now.

I am glad we have left the trees, but I think it is time we admitted that our brains have not climbed down, and instead of blaming the reporter, who has, after all, simply adapted television, radio and our senses to best suit this situation, we should address ourselves to the more realistic questions. How do we encourage a more informed and sophisticated interest in politics? How do we encourage more complete sources of information about politics which may help balance the effect of television?

Questioner — One of the main points of Marshall McLure in *The Medium, not the Messenger* is that there is a big difference between cold media and hot media. Television is the quintessential cool media. In other words, you just sit there and it flows through your brain and so forth. Do you make the same points about other media, like radio or print media, which are much more demanding on the reader or the participant than the cold media? It seems to me that there is a message in that medium too.

Ms Goward — I certainly would make a distinction between television and print because reading is entirely cognitive. But I do not think that I would make that distinction so much for radio. Radio only requires you to listen and in that sense it can be less easy to take in because you only have to listen; you do not have to watch anything. You could be watching something else or driving. I do wonder how much we actually take in while we are driving a car, for example.

Television is only a cold medium in the sense that it is a passive medium when it is done well by its terms. When it is done well, it does not require you to think. When it is not done well, we actually might think that it is doing better because it requires you to think. It should be going at a pace which allows you to keep up with it and to take in the complexity of the ideas at the same time.

Radio is a funny fish because it does have this aspect. For some reason you can get more complex information across on radio and yet it is only relying on one of the senses. When you have two great big basic senses working, you are even more likely to cloud out any intellectual or higher brain judgments that you might be making because you have got these two things hitting you. When you have only one, it is not going to overpower your ability to think about it quite so much. As I say, a man or a woman on television can be talking about God the father, God the son and God the Holy Ghost, but if they have little piggy eyes, a squeaky voice, a jaw that is sticking out and if they are talking out of the side of their mouths, you just will not like what they are saying. I think that is true. That is why they select people with good television faces, because it knocks all the other messages and cues out.

Questioner — I would be interested in your comment on the relative significance of television as opposed to radio as opposed to print in politics.

Ms Goward — That assumes that we see different audiences. I think that for people who are interested in politics all three media play quite a role. I realise that many people who say that the problem is that you cannot trust politicians anymore are people who are very interested in politics and you cannot just say that this is because you only watch television. A large number of people who say, 'You can't trust politicians; politics is dirt. They are down there with the used car salesmen' are people who do actually rely only on television. What is happening is that they are distorting their own impressions.

Radio does seem to have a very disproportionate role in politically interested households. This is perhaps because we are busy and radio has the double advantage of letting you do one thing while you are listening. Radio is a very efficient medium for people who are very interested in politics. Of course, papers take the most amount of time. You have to have a special sort of a life to be able to read more than one or two papers a day.

Questioner — You mentioned that perhaps it is appropriate that the media not be censored, that it provides for mass marketing and that to do otherwise would be inappropriate. Does that imply that you believe that the current scheme of uncensored provision of mass marketed TV is actually giving people what they want?

Ms Goward — That is a very difficult question. In a sense, the market is already giving people what they want, otherwise they would not watch it, unless you would care to argue that they have no choice and they would watch anything rather than be on their own in their living rooms. I think the financial constraints on television are enormous. You cannot have special interest television of any quality in this country when it attracts only very small audiences without the revenue base of commercial television to do it well.

When I was in the UK recently I watched a fair bit of late night television because I often worked in the evenings and I would watch television out of interest when I got back. I was struck by the high quality of these very obscure programs such as religious and talk programs because they have a market of several more million than we have and they also have a very big revenue base to draw on. That is a huge constraint on television. Everything has to be for mass audiences when you have only eighteen million people.

Questioner — Would you agree that in the case of people like Hitler at Nuremberg, where there is an enormous number of people close together, that in effect he has a different kind of audience altogether from individuals here or there in their own houses, kitchens and so on? The fact that they are together gives them a kind of group mentality which transcends or perhaps goes underneath the individual and the receptivity of the ordinary listener or viewer.

Ms Goward — That is quite so. He would have been great television viewing, wouldn't he? The disadvantage that television would have meant to Hitler is that people would not have gone to see him and you would not have had that mass effect. He would still have been great television, but you would not have had the hysteria because you would not have had people massing in those numbers to see him because there was no other way of seeing him.

When we watch a great figure on television in our homes, we do not sit there with our telephones linked up to one another feeling it together. I think you are right and I am right; that he is great television, but you are quite right he would not have the same effect that he managed in those large squares at those enormous rallies.

Questioner — Why do you think the grabs have changed from thirty seconds to seven seconds?

Ms Goward — Because they found that they could get away with it. The more pace you can get into television, the more stimulus you are offering the eye and the ear. My understanding of the brain is that it works best when it is being stimulated and change is the best stimulus. Our brains really like dynamic equilibrium and if you can get them down to seven second grabs then you can change the input every seven seconds instead of every thirty and you will keep people's attention. It has had quite serious effects I suspect on our ability to concentrate at any other time, as you can see when you go to church with a small child.

Questioner — I would like to focus on your example of Bob Hawke's statement that no child shall live in poverty by the year 2000. It seemed to me that you almost implied that Hawke himself was a victim of the media which demanded that he get this phrase down to seven seconds. And that was what was making it newsworthy; that he could get his message across that no child shall live in poverty. I would suggest that it would only take an extra second for him to say, 'I shall endeavour to ensure that no child shall live in poverty'.

You might have said that we as an audience were somewhat at fault for not employing discretion in interpreting that this was a political statement rather than a statement of fact. Your own argument is that the medium itself is very sensory and seductive and turns us all into couch potatoes. I would say that couch potatoes do not generally use a great deal of discretion and that Bob Hawke had the responsibility to employ discretion when he was giving that statement; not us.

Ms Goward — That is possibly true. I guess, as prime minister he could have taken more of a risk than other people. Unfortunately, neither you nor I have the words. You have to be absolutely meticulous about the way that you say it so that the blade does not go in and that they do not take that seven seconds and miss out those qualifications. But I think it is even simpler than that.
Even if he had say 'no child shall live in poverty' and shut his mouth and said nothing else, it would be impossible that this could literally be what he meant because, as I say, he cannot go into the house of every child in Australia and hand out a bag of lollies and a sleeping bag; that is not humanly possible. It is not a situation sufficiently under his control for that to be literally possible, so why was it treated literally?

Questioner — Because he stated it literally.

Ms Goward — He stated it literally because it is in the context of a wish—an intention. Nobody in her right mind, if you think about it, would have expected that to have been literally possible. The point about human communication is that we assume a great deal about

the listener and we are entitled to assume it. If we go around explaining everything we will never get anything done or said.

We are entitled to assume that listeners understand when they hear that comment that it has a limited meaning, but I do not think that we do. I think that television seems to have produced a greater likelihood that audiences take things literally. I think it is because everything is reduced to these black and white statements and here is just another one. You might be right that he should never have said it because he should not have trusted a community dominated by a medium with this tendency to distort.

It was a pretty good learning experience for everybody. Politicians are changing the way they use the medium all the time. They do not talk about anything anymore. They do not dare have policy debates anymore because of this capacity of the media to present it in such a way that they are stuck with something that is either not achievable or does not mean quite what it sounds as though it should mean. Politics is adapting to this.