

Public Interest Journalism Committee

CANBERRA

I understand that anybody who reads this needs to know a little about who wrote it. If you actually get to the end I have included my personal webpage link for more information,

I am a very ordinary Australian old bloke. In October I am scheduled to reach my 8th decade and have no formal education. I started work when I was 15. I spent six years in the RAAF and am one of those returned serviceman who did not see a bullet fired in anger or occupy a foxhole. Both sides of my family have been in Australia for a long time. My mother's father served in WW1. One of my father's uncles was killed at the Eureka Stockade. He was a soldier.

I am a regular consumer of news. I have a deep respect for the fourth estate because they are fundamental to our democracy. Without journalists our democracy will crumble for it is they who stand between the population and the dictator. They are the spotlight that shines into the dark corners, the very guarantee of a free and democratic society.

I have a few concerns about the concentration of media ownership and the extent to which it can muddy the democratic waters.

With the greatest respect for those involved in this inquiry, I have to say that holding a senate inquiry into the future of the business of media/journalism in Australia in isolation makes as much sense to me as worrying about the colour of the walls in your home when you have just discovered that there are white ants in the framework behind them. The very future of work in Australia is an unknown but nobody is attempting to actually define what that means.

The future for journalism is not clear to me.

The impact of the changes in the economics of the gathering and promulgation of news and the social issues that flow from it in Australia is uncertain as many of the old certainties are called into question. This problem is not unique to journalism.

Economists told us that we can't afford to build fridges, TVs and washing machines any more, our refineries are not economically viable, that it makes sense to pay three times as much for our own gas for domestic purposes as overseas customers and we can no longer afford a car industry. We just import what we need and get our workforce to concentrate on the clever stuff. Sounds good. Trouble is that for a significant number of ordinary Australians, making stuff is how they used to get an income. They don't do maths or science very well or have the capacity for higher education. This is as it should be because our society needs a mixture of skills and abilities and not everybody will need a university education to make a contribution.

At a recent speech to the National Press Club the PM talked glowingly about the creation of 100 thousand manufacturing jobs in the last year. The truth is that in 1974/5 manufacturing represented 15 percent of our GDP it is now less than 7 percent and falling each year as our National GDP shrinks. Hardly the time to be shutting down the car industry. We have progressively denuded our nation of the ability to make the things we need, replacing those capabilities with holes in the ground and a barren manufacturing landscape resembling the aftermath of a bushfire. In the process we have

become consumer hostages of the China and the resource to be exploited by giant foreign corporations.

Ranked by GDP, Australia is the 12th largest economy in the world. Every country ranked above Australia has a motor vehicle industry. The four immediately below us, Spain, Mexico, Indonesia and the Netherlands also have motor vehicle manufacturing industries. In all of these countries motor vehicle construction is seen as an important part of their manufacturing industry because it is a cradle of skills and potential manufacturing innovation. Only Australia is to be exempted – a decision taken by non-Australian corporations.

Who decides?

Unfortunately workers in these industries do not have the skills to argue against the way the decline and changing nature of their industries are handled. They quietly join the swelling ranks of unemployed or underemployed. Their bosses pocket their bonuses and move on.

In much the same way the nature of journalism has changed and will continue to change. Despite their obscenely high remuneration packages managers at Fairfax have been unable to construct creative solutions to the developing crisis. Instead they opted for the tried and true sledgehammer of putting some more Australians out of work.

The strike.

When a group of journalists place themselves at personal risk by deciding to take industrial action and forfeit a week's pay in protest against the decision by company management to terminate 125 of their colleagues, it is quintessentially Australian. It is scary to go on strike.

On the other hand when the executives of a company, supported by shareholders, decides that terminating the employment of 125 staff members will add to their bottom line while increasing their own incomes that is quintessentially un-Australian.

Two sorts of Australia.

It is generally accepted that the main reason that the Australians military has been so successful in a time of war is/was that they look out for each other on the battlefield and in prison camps. They share the pain.

This is not the culture of Australian business. It is dog eat dog. In recent years we have seen a slow decline in the egalitarian philosophy which was once a fundamental part of being Australian because too many of the decisions that affect the welfare of Australians are not made in Australia. For too long we have been selling the farm and now we are reaping the whirlwind.

We need a debate and it should be led by journalists.

What is cheaper, subsidizing an industry and encouraging Australians to buy home grown products, or paying unemployment benefits and attendant health and medical costs? And to what extent do policies that destroy livelihoods create health issues and other social evils like domestic violence, depression and even suicide?

It is time for journalists to devote much more time to writing about the future nature of work in this country. They should also be exploring the long term social impact of Facebook Google and Amazon because at this moment we are sleepwalking towards the edge of an unemployment cliff.

A couple examples of the shallowness of the debate about work.

Recently on the Drum a couple of the talking heads argued that rather than building our own submarines it would be cheaper to build them somewhere else. Nobody challenged their view. They appear to have forgotten the old adage of giving somebody a loaf of bread rather than teaching them how to grow their own grain.

Our two most recent warships are said to have design problems. This leaves us exposed, particularly if we have to go to war with the country that designed them because they will know more about our ships than we do.

How do I know about this issue? It is because journalists wrote about it. They are two simple examples of the way journalists perform a vital public educational service.

Consider this.

We are constantly told that our society is to change dramatically, that large swathes of the work currently being done will be digitized. Human workers will be replaced by robots. Where? When? What can we do to prepare?

I am sure that there are scientists that can answer some of these questions but they are trained as scientists not as communicators. So who will define the problem we are facing because until it is defined we cannot develop a solution?

Journalists are trained to do this but we are starting to sack them. Anecdotal evidence suggests that journalism may not be a profession with a future. This is stupid. We need journalists like we need teachers because that is what they are. They teach, they inform, they expose and our democracy requires a well-informed public.

What we have is special, we need to preserve and enhance it.

Democracy is a fragile flower and it will always be under attack from those who seek to control the agenda. Many of these attack are subtle. Many are not. History is replete with examples of what happens when totalitarian governments get control. The first thing they do is to close down the media.

It is long past time for government's state and federal to begin to look more holistically at the real costs of policies that destroy jobs and journalists must be deeply involved in the process. Their role is to inform the community so it can begin to understand the problem we are facing and better prepare for an uncertain future.

Robert Webb

<https://timewithcharacter.org/>