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Paradoxes of the Bastard Estate

Long since most people have forgotten – if they ever knew – what the first, second and third estates were, there is general understanding that the Fourth Estate is another name for the news media. By a curious process of hype, self-promotion, definitional flexibility and being a good idea, the Fourth Estate has survived.

Just.

The ideal of the news media successfully fulfilling a political role that transcends its commercial obligations has been seriously battered. Its power, commercial ambitions and ethical weakness have undermined its institutional standing. There is now a widespread, and reasonable, doubt that the contemporary news media can any longer adequately fulfil the historic role the press created for itself several hundred years ago. Then it created itself as an institution of political life designed to act on behalf of the people and report on and give voice to those in positions of political, corporate, economic and social power. In the intervening decades the news media has itself become a source of real and significant power and influence, an industry prepared to exercise and pursue self-interested commercial, political and cultural agendas.

The press was the bastard estate of the eighteenth century. At a time of limited suffrage, but growing literacy, the press became a crucial political institution, intimately connected to the concerns and preoccupations of its readers. By pursuing an institutional ambition the press created itself as more than another business. It created the wont which it supplied. Innovation and willingness to pursue technological developments later enabled the press to grow and diversify to the point where newspapers are now a small part of the news media. This business has flourished to become, at the end of the millennium, the most pervasive global industry. The original imperatives of the press – to

retail news and information and provide entertainment – have remained, but the methods and scale of the contemporary news media are vastly different. Its tentacles reach into the lives of almost every man, woman and child on earth: from the rich, media-saturated societies of the west to the shanties of the developing countries, where television cables hang above rooftops and international news crews descend in voracious waves to capture images of famine, flood, war and genocide, before bouncing them back off international satellites, into millions of sitting rooms a world away.

The connections between this global industry, which drip-feeds a diet of pacy news, flashing images, instant analysis and entertainment, and the hand-printed, densely written, black and grey news-sheets of the past seem remote. The magnitude of the global news business is overwhelming, the profits staggering, the values questionable and the power, which can be cynically exercised, immense.

Yet at its core, at the news-focused centre of the media business, remnants of an ideal remain. This ideal is grounded in the notion that among the checks and balances that ensure that the powerful are held accountable, the media has an essential, and highly political, role to play. The process of finding, distilling, and analysing the information that is the media's commodity also ensures its political role, the core of its self-definition as the Fourth Estate.

The Fourth Estate has proven to be a remarkably flexible concept. Its meaning has changed over the centuries that it has been in regular use; ranging from a description of the space where reporters sat while documenting the proceedings of the House of Commons, to more nebulous ideals connected with the task of scrutinising those in positions of power and influence. The process by which the Fourth Estate changed from being a place to an idea, has its genesis in the arguments about the importance of freedom of expression two centuries ago. While these arguments were propounded from soap boxes, in meeting halls and newsletters, the most active advocates of freedom of expression saw a place for the press to become the means of such expression. At the time strict laws and taxes regulated publication in Britain, so that the task of becoming the conduit for political speech first demanded the removal of these restraints. The campaign to abolish censorship and stamp taxes, permit defences against libel and allow journalists to report, not just record, had succeeded in Britain by the mid-1800s, somewhat later than in America and Australia.

Once this freedom was won the press began to exercise a role as an independent institution in the political system. It asserted a right to speak with its own voice, not merely to echo the voice of the parliament or the executive government. By finding its own voice, most famously

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in an editorial published in *The Times* in 1852, the press asserted its autonomy and a unique place in the process of government.

In the years that followed, the meaning of the Fourth Estate varied in response to changing political and economic circumstances. Whereas in its earliest manifestation the press was considered another elite, which could relay the views of other elites to the population to help garner public support, by the end of the nineteenth century the popular press was well established. With it the definition of the Fourth Estate changed. It maintained the core idea of reporting those in positions of power and influence and exercising its own voice in commentary and analysis, but moved to incorporate a more activist role, scrutinising the consequences of actions and decisions on ordinary people and consciously representing the interests of the disadvantaged and down-trodden. As the Fourth Estate became less an agency of other elites, the dictum that the role of the press was to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted emerged. This change demonstrated the semantic flexibility of the term, flexibility which continued throughout the twentieth century. During this century the press evolved into the diversified news media and commercial success became a more fundamental objective than it had been in the days when the arguments about freedom of expression were first articulated in small journals.

For much of the twentieth century the idealised Fourth Estate was regarded with some disdain, as a form of misplaced knight errantry at odds with the commercial priorities of the news media. If it were just another business, the media not only jeopardised its political influence, but also risked regulatory intervention. In the latter decades of the century, then, the commercial and political advantages to be gained from advocating public service helped revive the ideal. News organisations were pleased to claim the political immunity that institutional status offered and to exercise the power that it provided. Social responsibility became a buzz word in journalism and after the 1970s pursuing the Fourth Estate's watchdog role became central to the mission of many news organisations. This ideal was enthusiastically adopted by journalists who saw in it the possibility of more challenging work, greater professional self-esteem and enhanced status in public life.

Of all the checks and balances built into representative democracies – elections, parliaments, independent judiciary – the press was the only one whose success was measured commercially. This gave the press a unique standing – it could appeal directly to its audiences who paid for it and underwrote its independence from government. But it also depended on commercial viability, and newspaper owners, who wished to maximise profits and pursue personal gain, could easily

dispose of expensive Fourth Estate responsibilities. The commercial nature of the press made it a curious, hybrid political institution – a bastard estate.

Even when the news media succeeds in its most idealised form to expose corruption, malpractice and dishonesty, it is generally operating in a random fashion. As such it is a flawed watchdog, one that has now been supplemented by a network of statutory organisations with an explicit brief to scrutinise those in positions of power, by legislation granting access to official information and a raft of international covenants and conventions. Commissions against corruption, answerable only to parliaments, have sprung up in many countries. These commissions, many created after revelations in the news media disclosed corrupt practice, have formally assumed the role that was once the informal province of the Fourth Estate. The media is now more likely to augment this function, by reporting competing views or amplifying the concerns of aggrieved individuals, interest groups and lobbies who feel that their perspective and concerns have been inadequately addressed. Its role as the principal ‘feedback mechanism of democratic system management’ (Kunczik, 1989) has been supplemented.

The need for checks and balances, and scrutiny of those in power is greater than ever, but the task is beyond the scope of the media industry which is itself constrained by competing imperatives. The media is now a vast international business increasingly suspected of exercising self-interested political and economic power rather than acting as a disinterested check on the abuse of such power by others.

The news media is increasingly driven by the expectations of entertainment. Even news is now often judged on its entertainment value. Television audience meters measure the responses to individual news items and increase pressure to deliver more of those that rate high and fewer of the unpopular ones. Newspapers, radio and television have always considered entertainment an important part of their function, but now entertainment values help shape news decisions. It is not just a matter of getting the mix right between news and entertainment, personalities and issues, but inserting the values of entertainment into the news. This leads to saturation coverage of public figures, revealing intimate details of their lives with the moral certainty of an afternoon soap. The saturation coverage is rationalised by the argument that understanding the character of a public figure will aid understanding of his political decisions. This argument may be comforting, but it is often misplaced, masking another way in which entertainment values have swamped public life.

The commercial nature of the news media is a source of both strength and weakness. The strength comes from the independence that profits alone can buy. A news media that is profitable has much

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greater autonomy, its managers can say no to those who would seek to buy its patronage. Financial success can insulate a news organisation from the demands of politicians, lobbyists, advertisers and merchants. Greed can, however, corrode this autonomy. In the desire for that next dollar, deals may be made and the independent soul of the news organisation sold to the highest – or most opportunistic – bidder. The lure of profit may obscure sight of less tangible Fourth Estate roles if pursuit of the next dollar overwhelms. So the commercial success of much of the media produces an ambiguous burden. The *New York Times* captured this reality well in its advertising slogan: ‘From Fourth Estate to Real Estate’. It covered the lot and profits accrued.

The tension between commercial and quasi-institutional obligations is not confined to advertisers, or marketing departments which may seek to tailor content to enhance their message. It takes a more insidious form within news organisations that are themselves part of vast diversified empires. Only in the most conscientiously managed organisations will it be possible to ensure that the cross-promotion of the company’s diverse interests does not distort news judgements. Journalists are very conscious of this pressure and many find it hard to make a distinction between news and commerce – so if the organisation makes movies, they are likely to be promoted; if the organisation owns a football team, that is likely to be promoted. The zip of self-censorship will similarly close debate to ensure that issues not favoured by the corporation are ignored.

The publicly funded media faces a different challenge when asserting a role as independent scrutineer of power. When governments provide funds, governments will attempt to shape content, beyond the predictable way the media gives succour to those in power. Where direct intervention over content in the public sector media was once accepted as the norm, it is now trenchantly resisted. Journalists and producers in the public sector media, free of commercial constraints, have become sufficiently emboldened to critically analyse prevailing established viewpoints even of the government of the day. The public sector media in Australia has asserted and won increasing autonomy over content since the 1970s, despite the opposition of Labor and Coalition politicians and repeated cuts to levels of funding. An uneasy truce developed and was maintained during the 1980s and early 1990s especially after the ABC won three-year funding commitments in 1989. This was challenged after the change of government in 1996 and Prime Minister John Howard’s government cut the ABC’s budget for the following year. A review of the corporation in 1996 seemed to have its genesis in political antipathy towards the public broadcaster. The cuts, which had not been foreshadowed during the election campaign earlier that year, were widely interpreted as a form of political pay-back

because of a perception by senior Coalition ministers of a pro-Labor bias by ABC journalists and producers. By taking seriously many of the issues that the Prime Minister questioned as ‘politically correct’ – multiculturalism, reconciliation, anti-discrimination, environmental issues – the ABC was considered biased. Labor government ministers had also considered the ABC was biased against them, and reduced funding but had not sought to punish the corporation so blatantly. Critical scrutiny of those in power frequently leads those under the microscope to complain of bias, and the clearest explanation of the Howard government’s rationale for the \$55 million cut came in a comment from a senior adviser; ‘They’re our enemies talking to our friends.’

The process of asserting editorial independence has taken various routes in the public and private media and in different countries over the past two centuries. Since the mid-1970s this movement has gained momentum as journalists have pursued their work as a vocation. Paradoxically at a time when media companies are bigger, global in reach and more diversified than they have ever been, journalists and editors have become more aware and assertive about their role. The jostle for power requires journalists and editors to grasp any power ceded by owners and managers. It is a David and Goliath struggle, but one that is being quietly waged in many newsrooms around the world.

Journalists and editors remain the most insistent advocates of the news media as the Fourth Estate: watching, questioning, analysing and informing, often despite the opposition of their managers who would prefer a more compliant, more entertaining and less critical approach. The movement is incremental. The pendulum swung towards editorial autonomy and critical journalism especially during the 1980s. Evidence of this could be seen in the interest in investigative journalism, in the attempts by journalists to win charters of editorial independence and to stretch the boundaries of autonomy. At the end of the 1990s, the pendulum has swung back, but journalists remain the most insistent advocates of the media’s Fourth Estate role and many of the gains they made in the 1980s will not be easily revoked.

There is urgency in rethinking the power of the media and the role of journalists. The public is becoming increasingly sceptical of the methods and standing of the news media. This was remarkably clear following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The rush to blame the paparazzi for pursuing the glamorous young princess to her death took many in the industry by surprise. Many journalists and editors felt little responsibility, convinced instead that Diana had been a willing participant in a game that delivered her fame and influence, them sales and audiences, and the public glamour and vicarious pleasure and pain. In the rush of blame, many media executives cautioned that those in glasshouses should beware of throwing stones. Nonetheless,

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criticism of media intrusion, even as people watch and read in record numbers, is a serious issue which may rebound on the industry's public standing and profitability. It may inhibit the capacity of journalists to make any claims to custodianship of the Fourth Estate.

As the scale of the global media increases, the balance of power between journalists and editors, and owners and managers will also change. The large media companies will undoubtedly get bigger, diversifying into more outlets and a range of new mediums. The primacy of entertainment may prevail and may change forever notions of news and presentation. It remains to be seen how the Internet will alter the information balance and the relative roles of content producers, distributors, managers and owners. Many in the industry predict that the role of the established news media will diminish as people are able to pick and chose from the vast array of information – often unverified – available on the Internet. Others argue that by providing information which has been checked and substantiated according to traditional methods of journalism, the established news media will be able to maintain its primary reputation as a provider of reliable information. Certainly it is possible to see a way in which the Fourth Estate ideal could be reinvigorated via the Internet, although the process of winning the weight of a political institution will be problematic in this more anarchic medium.

In ruminations about the global media industry, the complexity of contemporary political and public life, and the alarming concentration of media ownership, it is easy to lose sight of the reality that the news media is at its most influential when it is local. The global media may swamp us with homogenised stars, heroes, villains, disasters and crises that provide a rapidly changing backdrop for the more prosaic, yet no less urgent, reality of our lives. At the level of the city, state or nation the best of the news media is able to explain us to ourselves, highlight our shortcomings and provide the insights that enable new solutions to emerge.

One of the paradoxes of the global industry is that at a time when the scale of the news media has never been vaster, its reach greater and its timing quicker, control is no longer be held so tightly. Despite teams of managers and executives, control is no longer as direct or certain as when cabals of media owners and politicians could dictate the news. But the new ways may be just as effective: the tools of control have moved from the ink-stained hands of owners interfering on the newsroom floor to the cooler, more dispassionate, methods of spreadsheets, marketing plans and circulation drives.

Another paradox is that despite monopoly newspapers in towns and cities around the world, there is now more diversity of information than would have been considered possible in the mainstream media

even two decades ago. This is partly, but not solely, a result of the plethora of new information and entertainment outlets – print, broadcast, digital. In part monopoly demands greater internal diversity of news and views. The competition over ideas and perspectives has now been brought inside single publications with news, features, columns, photographs, illustrations and op-ed contributions jostling for the attention of readers. Mirroring the increasing openness of society, subjects that were once considered taboo are now routinely reported. The greater openness of society has been an important element in broadening the boundaries of the subjects the news media addresses, but it is not a sufficient explanation.

Journalists and editors in Australia have, somewhat belatedly but nonetheless quite convincingly, got a taste for editorial independence. They have been willing to take industrial action to maintain their small victories, and mobilise public campaigns in support of themselves and the diversity of information they produce, an important counter-balance to the mundane routines and priorities of daily news production.

News organisations remain hierarchical, surprisingly untouched by many of the principles of modern management, but there is more freedom than was once thought possible. This independence is not, however, absolute, nor is it unassailable. So when the ownership or management of a newspaper, television or radio station changes, the limits of editorial independence are again tested, just as they are when a government changes and tries to settle old scores by reducing funding to public broadcasting.

Most importantly, the assertion of independence by journalists and editors must not be an end in itself. This is often overlooked by its most strident advocates who have the commitment of zealots to their vocation. Whatever independence journalists have, it is exercised on behalf of others – in the public interest. As is shown in this book Australian journalists are happy to invoke the public interest, but remain somewhat disdainful of their audiences and therefore ill-equipped to fulfil the public role to which many aspire.

The public has responded to this disdain and seen in it evidence of abuse of power. Despite widespread and increasing use of the media, public opinion polls repeatedly highlight a very critical attitude towards journalists and the media. The popularity of programs such as the satirical *Frontline* and nitpicking *Media Watch*, tap into a deep-seated antipathy about the intrusive and cavalier methods of journalism and the self-serving ambitions of the media companies. Public scepticism about the industry is also readily exploited by politicians who seek to bully and blame journalists and the media to deflect attention

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from their own poor public standing. While the excesses of unethical practice remain commonplace, journalists and the media remain easy targets.

There is, however, an ambivalence in public attitudes towards the media, an ambivalence that was graphically demonstrated in the overwhelming public response of more than 10 000 submissions to the Mansfield Review of the ABC in 1996. The majority of these submissions argued for the maintenance of adequate funding and explained the unique and highly valued role of the ABC. Similarly, public campaigns around media ownership have developed momentum because of satisfaction with the tone and approach of particular publications, anxiety about reducing options, and concern about what a more commercially driven media may produce. It is possible to see this as an alliance of elites, and to some extent it is – certainly the disaffected and alienated are as likely to blame the media as any other powerful group. But the social capital provided by a conscientious media percolates through the whole society, ‘turning the level of civilisation up’ not down.

There is a powerful alliance waiting to be built between media consumers and those actively involved in media production. The first tentative steps have been taken, but a two-way relationship between information provider and audience is notoriously difficult to cultivate and nurture. Developments in what is known as public journalism, whereby closer links between a community and its media are established, are one route to building links and reinvigorating social capital. Another is by the more traditional route of investigative, disclosure and advocacy journalism, where the news media confidently takes a place at the vanguard of social change. Both of these approaches may carry costs, the former risks becoming a public relations activity, and the latter of demonstrating a prescriptive arrogance, whereby the media knows best and will brook no interference in pursuit of those it has deemed undesirable. Both of these methods involve challenging existing assumptions about the nature of news and role of the media.

Over the past three decades Australian journalism has changed profoundly. Still far from perfect, it is now more inquisitive, more investigative, bolder, more intrusive, demanding and sceptical than it once was. It has won greater political and operational autonomy. But this has come at the cost of public cynicism, as insufficient attention has been paid to ethical standards and public accountability.

Independence – the key to reviving the ideals of the Fourth Estate – must have a price tag of accountability firmly attached. This can be measured by acceptance of ethical codes; meaningful public accountability; providing more diverse and challenging information; the

methods by which it is obtained, presented and pursued. Without greater accountability, the media is little more than another powerful elite, detached from the public interest which gives it legitimacy.

Journalists and editors who have won a few skirmishes in the battle for greater independence from their owners are unlikely to be enthusiastic about greater accountability. But without it, there is little hope of a meaningful revival of the core good idea of the Fourth Estate.

A revived Fourth Estate must be accountable and responsive to the audience, ethical in its dealings with sources, honourable in its intent. There is no reason for it to be boring, worthy, dull or unprofitable. The Fourth Estate that most Australian journalists say they accept as an ideal is important, but in the end it is not central to the interests of the vast media conglomerates. It is, however, crucial for the professional and personal self-esteem and integrity of journalists. By reclaiming and reviving the Fourth Estate, journalists may be better able to explain us to ourselves, expose cobwebs in dark corners, address process and methods and put a floor of informed understanding beneath an increasingly fractured, complex, sceptical and confused community.

A personal note

The contemporary relevance of the Fourth Estate is an issue that has dogged my career as a journalist and journalism educator for more than 20 years.

As an undergraduate student of journalism and government in the mid-1970s, I was schooled in the traditions of liberal political science, concepts which were then transferred, unproblematically and uncritically, to underpin a university education in journalism. The role of the news media as the Fourth Estate was accepted as a given, and the issues of concentration of ownership, regulation and representation were, to the extent that they were addressed at all, seen as problems caused by the lack of professionalism of journalists, the nervousness of editors and timidity of politicians.

At the same time the journalistic excitement inspired by the willingness of the *New York Times* to publish the Pentagon Papers revelations, the *Washington Post's* Watergate reporting, thalidomide and other investigations by the *Sunday Times*, the Robert Greene led investigations by *Newsday* and the nascent *Age* insight team inspired confidence in the watchdog role of the news media in a representative democracy.

Reform movements were also galvanising newsrooms in many western countries. Journalists were beginning to demand a say in the decision-making, to assert that the views of readers were not narrowly homogeneous. In Australia this movement found its voice and articu-