

MAPPING THE MEDIA

“Everything has a cause, and the cause of anything is everything”...John Gunther

Most people consume at least some information media in the hope of learning something about the world: to gain some insight into the ways things are, or may turn out. People sometimes look to the media for data, facts, figures and ideas which may help them make better-informed choices. Some may turn to the media when they need help to expand the options available to them in dealing with the present and the future. Others listen to news and current affairs output to somehow authenticate their personal views of the world, or reinforce the beliefs and prejudices they've formed. Some engage in a flight towards understanding, hoping to find some meaning, a singular voice of truth rising out of the perpetual noise they encounter in the electronic media. There are an infinite number of reasons why people seek out the information media, but, generally, it's fair to say that we consume information media in the hope that we'll get to 'know' something. And maybe, that's the first mistake media consumers make.

Information can not be the same as knowledge; is not the same as so-called truth; can not have meaning by itself and most certainly can not contain *all* the facts. Only receivers of information can attribute meaning to what they see, hear and read. People 'make' knowledge out of information. And yet our education systems and much of the thinking that supports them tend to encourage us to blur the distinctions between information and knowledge.

Many people imagine a library as a great repository of knowledge, whereas at best it can be seen as little more than a warehouse for information. Knowledge comes when an individual reads a book, processes its information, imposes intellectual checks and balances on the raw material, asks questions, struggles with ideas and experiences etc., and arrives at some understanding. In other words, automatic conversion of information into knowledge or so-called truth is a highly improbable process.

People may not really get to 'know' something until it's embodied in their world: until they've filtered it through their cultural traditions, their linguistic background, their own personal history, moods, attitudes, values and so forth.

Receivers can, and do, adopt someone else's conclusions as their own without adequate evaluation. But can this in any reasonable way represent a percipient grasp of reality? Or can it simply be presumed to reflect an unawareness, or an unconsciousness, of the folly of accepting someone else's selective, distorted and generalised statements as something to be faithfully integrated into their 'knowing'?

Just as many people assume a library is a storehouse of knowledge so do they project an expectation on to the information media of it being a clearing house for so-called knowledge, truth, or reality. They may forget that journalists and media practitioners in the main are from similar educational and cultural backgrounds as they are. They may overlook the possibility that media practitioners will react to so-called facts and truths in a similar immediate, unthinking, possibly reckless and stereotyped fashion as anyone else. Unless journalists are especially trained to be 'conscious' of the processes of their own thinking, they may treat information in the same 'untrained' way as many of us do.

mirrors, maybe smoke, and society...

There appears to be a substantial mismatch between public expectations and the information media's definition of its own role. In warding off charges of sensationalism, shallowness, hidden agendas, slanted news values, bias and the like, representatives of the media customarily fall back to what is known as the 'reflector' position. When all other arguments fail you'll hear responses like "Our job is simply to reflect society", "We are no more than a mirror of what goes on in society", or "we just report what happens".

Implicit in reflector arguments is that there is some kind of neutral ground from which the information media can set up its mirrors to allow 'society' to see its own reflection. There are inherent weaknesses in the reflector argument:

- 1) The mirror images you see depend entirely on the angle and positioning of the mirror
- 2) Mirrors are notoriously variable in the images they reflect. Most people have a favourite mirror: they're acutely aware that mirrors can make them look thinner, younger, taller, prettier, etc., and anyone who's visited a sideshow hall of mirrors knows that images can be grossly distorted and changed with the degree of convexity or concavity introduced
- 3) The images you see rely to a large extent on the intensity and positioning of the light source: the variations are almost infinite and so are the reflections of the people and things illuminated.

The mirror analogy doesn't hold on those and other grounds, because the eyes, ears and lenses of the information media have similar basic but understandably human failings.

Another weakness in the specious positioning of the media as a mirror of society is the notion that such a thing as a society actually exists. Margaret Thatcher was rightish when she declared that societies are a myth. In short, Thatcher argued that so-called society is amorphous, not homogenous. She pointed to various heinous acts committed on behalf of 'society' and warned it was a dangerous course of action to talk about the needs of society, the rights of society or the responsibilities of society.

Thatcher is not alone in her concern about using what are termed 'collective abstractions'. In science, linguistics and general-semantics for example there is a strong aversion to the use of categories (collections) to describe individual parts. Collections are a kind of verbal pigeonhole we use to organise our thoughts, but it may well be semantically naïve to confuse a collection - in this case society- with the rich diversity of people who are thus categorised.

So-called Society is made up of individuals, groups, communities, etc., who have individual aspirations, wants, material and spiritual needs, and to talk about the rights of society as an all-embracing term is to deny the individuality of the people who make up that society. Basically, it can be seen as nonsense.

Take the frequently made claim that "society has a right to be protected from crime" for instance. Individuals may have a 'right' to walk the streets without fear of rape, murder or violence; individual property owners may have a 'right' to be protected from theft and vandalism, but you can't really impute rights to a fictional entity like a society.

The assumption that collective abstractions can have needs, rights, feelings, etc. is a poignant illustration of what is described as a category error. The sentence "Australian society is basically apathetic" may well be syntactically legitimate, but under close analysis you'll

discover it's about as semantically well-formed as the statement "Purple trees yawn nonchalantly".

Let's bear with the 'society' part of the claim a little further, because you may come to see what follows as an extremely useful distinction to make. When you think of society in the context of social and political discourse it probably means something like Australia as an organised culture or the sum total of all the individuals and institutions within our national boundaries. So when you hear a politician say "We are doing this for the good of our society" or "We are acting in the best interests of Australia" you're likely to assume s/he means everybody who lives in this country.

When people hear words like society, or words that mean society like the community, the state, the nation, the country, Australia, etc., it's normal to imagine the speaker is referring to everybody is it not? But if we accept that, society then becomes a kind of organisational entity with needs, rights and things that are good for it. Is that any less a nonsense?

In our democracy it's also normal to make the assumption that 'society' has entered into a social contract with the government of the day and has delegated responsibility to uphold the rights and to service the needs of Australian society. We know, however, that governments are given their so-called mandates by sections of so-called society and often not even a majority of society. We know it can't really act of behalf of society, because collections of other individuals have not entered the social contract and may have opted for a contract with another party. We also know that governments will attack specific elements of so-called society, favour others and are quite likely to impose the ideologies of one section of this thing called society on another.

The delegation by 'society' tacitly establishes another dimension to the notion of society and it is this: the government becomes the representative, administrator and enforcer of the social contract. This is where the category error mentioned above gets fuzzier, more nonsensical and dangerous because another collective abstraction enters the scene, that of government as a homogenous entity.

Now we have 'governments' making decisions when no government as a collective abstraction can. People in government can make decisions, groups of individuals can and groups of individuals making up particular institutions of government can, but governments logically can't make decisions. However, governments as agents and enforcers of the social contract are constantly reported to have made decisions thus obscuring completely the individuals acting behind the cloak of government. They make these decisions on behalf of so-called society, or at least that is the claim. So, by extension, we have one piece of 'nonsense' engaging in a contract with another piece of 'nonsense' and doing things on the basis of that nonsense. But where can that lead us? Into potentially lethal territory, as you'll discover.

Many individuals, institutions and governments claim to do things for the good of society. The danger comes when individuals, institutions and governments transpose *responsibility* for their acts on to the mythical 'society'. From the police officer who beats up a suspect to obtain a confession on the basis of it "being good for society" to the tyrant who plans and executes genocide for the very same reason, these are the results of a seemingly 'innocent' error in the use of collective abstractions.

The question is: do bent law enforcers, tyrants and everyone in between commit their crimes unknowingly? Or do they with malice aforethought project the narrow vested interests of their particular section (collection of individuals) of 'society' on to other individuals who comprise the so-called society? There is much historical evidence to suggest that they do the latter.

A crucial point to remember is that collective abstractions like 'society' and 'government' are false-to-fact and can be deliberately used by people to manipulate, distort and deceive. If we let slogans containing words like society or government through to the net without critical evaluation because we think the speaker is applying the same meaning as we do, then we become no less than hoop-jumpers, reacting to words and turns of phrase with little more sentience than trained circus animals.

If mirrors are notoriously variable and society doesn't exist except as a verbal pigeonhole, where does that leave the argument that the media merely reflects or mirrors society? And what of the issues raised in the forgoing paragraphs? Can the media in insisting on its reflector role join the ranks of bent police and tyrants? Does the media use the society argument to obscure, intentionally or unintentionally, the possibility that it 'mirrors' particular sections of society and 'reflects' those sections as being representative of the whole? A means of answering those questions is to sample critically content for common or recurring flaws in its methods of gathering and disseminating information.

news cultures...

Let's go back to the opening paragraphs of this essay and revisit how people get to 'know' things. Say you've come to realise that perception really is projection. Say you acknowledge that people will perceive things through a set of mental filters that are influenced by the cultural traditions and environment in which they're grounded. Imagine as you will a dominant culture in journalism (there are others) with its own language register, history, cultural traditions and with a set of fairly common values, attitudes, sensibilities, beliefs, etc. What would happen if you were to enter and work in that environment?

If your principal motive was to survive or even flourish, you would have to get to 'know' certain things about that culture. You would have to understand its language and you may have to take on its behaviours. You may have to put things through a similar set of mental filters as it does. The Law of Social Proofing suggests that you would be more likely to take on the attributes of that culture than it take on yours, particularly if you wanted to prosper. Chances are you will begin to professionally 'know' things as others in the culture know them: you would yield to the authority and customs of that culture and begin to 'believe' the implicit values of such a culture.

An example of yielding to cultural norms within a given professional environment is what are called news values. The cultural sentinels of journalism (editors, sub-editors, producers, owners, etc.) apply rigid criteria to what news is important and what news is not so important, what stories are soft and what stories are hard. This we can term the news media's 'view of the world'. You see and hear 'reflections' of this world-view every day in your newspapers, on radio, television and on the net.

If you read through the first half dozen pages of your newspaper or tune in to the top end of a television or radio news bulletin you'll probably notice a dominance of politicking, economics and social debate (vested interests slugging it out on a variety of social issues). There are exceptions to this rule: disasters, major events, sporting coups, serious crime and so on. But, consistently, the message delivered by the information media is that politicking, economics and social engineering are what's important; are what 'real' news is. Not only that, but if you sample a range of media outlets on the same day you will discover an uncanny similarity between both the stories being aired and printed and the order in which they appear.

Recent research into what Australians find important and interesting shows a curious chasm between the media's view of the world and the majority of respondents in the surveys. Respondents from the top nine population centres in the country registered little interest in politicking, were less interested in abstract reports and discussions about economics and were not all that enamoured of talking heads offering simplistic solutions to social dilemmas.

Over 50 percent of respondents nominated issues such as fear for our planet, protecting local environments and air pollution, how to stay healthy, the cost of health, medical research, stopping child abuse, housing for old people, the burden of tax, money management, choosing education options, the quality of drinking water, etc, as having a far greater priority than the consistent hierarchy of stories the mass media projects as important. Recently, of course, global warming has become a headline issue, however once again the mainstream news media has seemingly transformed the reporting of this critical topic into a war of words, using simplistic cause-effect premises and exploiting our fear for all its worth.

Only 23 percent of those in the national survey expressed a strong interest in hearing, watching, or reading what politicians and other members of the political and social elite had to say. Put another way, 77 percent of Australians have no, or little, interest in political and sociopolitical rhetoric. The surveys show that large percentages of individuals are much more interested in concrete issues. They want to know more about the multiple effects of change, how things work and don't work, and to work out what things 'mean' to them.

The accepted definition of what is supposed to be hard and soft news by media practitioners needs at least an overhaul if it's to sympathetically respond to what news consumers consider hard (important) and soft (novel or unimportant). There's a strong argument for the sentinels of journalism to get 'real' and to get out from behind their desks to discover for themselves that the news values of today are not what they were thirty years ago.

Journalists defend the purported media view of the world by claiming that politicians, economists and social engineers are at the forefront of the decision-making processes. No-one would deny these three groups their place in decision making, however it would seem the mechanisms which lead to decision-making begin at a much earlier point.

Studies by Morris Janowitz on content analysis and sociopolitical change (how issues actually emerge) indicate that most trends begin at the grass roots level in communities of people who are involved in, or affected by, certain conditions or events. Politicians and others at the far end of the process are more than likely to be the last to hear and know what's happening. Often, politicians and members of the social and political elite simply respond to movements of opinion and then weigh in and make their so-called decisions.

Not to put too fine a point on it, while the information media devotes an inordinate amount of airtime and column inches to rowdy political posturing, economic gobbledygook and the jostling and hee-hawing of social engineers, many information consumers want to know what all the brouhaha is about: what it will mean to them and their futures. If the mass media is even half serious about harvesting the news while it's fresh, it will focus more of its attention towards the earlier phases of decision making and less towards the latter.

The above is but one fairly pertinent example of how the profession advertently, or inadvertently, imposes its cultural values on the broader community of people who watch, listen and read news and current affairs.

foa's...

A common complaint voiced by many who claim to have been “burned” by the media is that they were “misinterpreted” or the reporter “misconstrued” the facts. Complainants frequently point to the published or broadcast end-product and bemoan the fact that it didn’t reflect the essence or the so-called truth of the matter.

The answer to those complainants is YES:

- **yes**, there are some reporters who have agendas to push
- **yes**, there are reporters who will “frame” their reports in complete accord with pre-conceived notions
- **yes**, there are other reporters who deliberately manipulate a story to their own ends
- and **yes**, there are some reporters who will out of pure malice seek to place you in an unfavourable light.

Fortunately, many reporters have some vested interest in “getting it straight”. Their status as professionals is based on maintaining *a reasonable measure of objectivity* in what they write and report. Their standing with employers and amongst peers generally depends on it.....except when it doesn’t!

But are notions of objectivity, getting it right and reporting just the facts achievable goals? The answer is probably **NO!** And one reason for this is **FOA’s**. If you include FOA’s in the equation, a logical conclusion you can arrive at is:

- It is impossible for any report in the news media to contain the ‘facts’ of the matter or subject.
- It is impossible for any media report to contain ‘all the facts’ or even all ‘the most important facts’ of the matter or subject.

FOA means **F**ormulation **o**f an **A**bstractio**n** Let’s look at an hypothetical situation that describes how FOA’s occur:

A reporter goes out on a story. She sees, hears, reads things. She attempts to make sense of them. She takes notes. She talks to people. She comes to a conclusion. She sets about to record her conclusion either by writing about it or constructing an audio or camera piece.

- What happens when the reporter ‘does’ a conclusion? Let’s explore how the information is gathered, ‘goes in’ and is processed. To put it simply, the reporter will ‘*abstract*’ on numerous levels:
- More data will be left out than most probably will be included. This is called *Deletion* and without it our brains would be literally swamped with mega-bits of data and we’d go insane.
- Some data will be “sieved” through the reporters own values, beliefs, experiences, memories, etc. This is called *Distortion*. In other words, the reporter will “see” the event, data, situation through her own filters.
- There will be pieces of information that seem similar to other things the reporter already thinks she knows. Linkages will be made, aptly or erroneously, depending on her (and your) unique view of the world. This process is termed *Generalisation*.

- Numerous mental filters relating to personal preferences, personality type, prior learning, logic systems and so on operate as the reporter ‘gathers and processes’ the story in her own head.

How does this work in reality?

The reporter “abstracts” what she sees, hears, feels etc. She will then proceed to abstract further on what features of her initial “abstraction” belong in the report. She will then run those features through another set of abstractions to “organise” the so-called facts in some order. She will find words to describe the “experience”: words which may be interpreted differently by others.

By the time the report goes to air or appears in print it has gone through at least one to two more hierarchies of abstraction: sub editors, producers, style guides, media agendas and other “filters” applied to the collection and dissemination of so-called news. What you get in the end are Foa’s of Foa’s of Foa’s - never the ‘real’ facts. The crucial point to remember is that *everyone sieves data through their own unique set of filters*. Sure there’s shared reality, but a lot less of it than you think.

What other cultural idiosyncrasies should consumers and practitioners be on the alert for in contemporary news and information gathering methods? Another question you may like to dwell on is: are the foibles revealed in the following map exclusive to the media or are they representative of a malaise in parts of the broader community? As you begin to negotiate the terrain outlined in the following map, make a mental note each time the map describes familiar territory, either in the media or in the wider realm of your experience.

a mini-map of the media...

What follows is a critical map of the media territory - a deliberately provocative exploration of the flaws of the mass media as a system. Like all maps it’s a generalisation and necessarily leaves out many things so as to make it simple and readable. What will not be covered here are the many instances where the same and other constituents of the map produce informative, relevant content that benefits the community and helps contribute to our understanding of the world and its ways.

all portions and no cake

A contemporary news or current affairs story is at best like a small portion of a reality cake: a piece of something that has happened. It is the result of a set of reporting values that tends to produce information in so-called bite-sized chunks. But, often the chunks are so small there’s little prospect of media consumers being able to form an idea of the shape, weight or size of the cake. In other words, stories tend to be disconnected from the whole, the bigger picture and the larger system.

There are numerous reasons for the obsession with pieces rather than wholes. For example, many reporters, sub-editors and producers don’t know how to think on higher logical levels: they don’t exercise the skill of placing content into context or linking incidents to a bigger moving picture of events.

Often, reporters are required to tell their stories within ridiculously prescribed time limits, finding themselves entrapped in news-room cultures predicated on the arrogant assumption that news consumers have the attention spans of wombats. On other occasions, the pre-occupation

with pictures, action, activity, conflict and people impedes the telling of the larger, more complete story.

In both the commercial and non-commercial media, reporters and producers are increasingly neglecting to even bother serving up a slice of the reality cake. Instead, media consumers are presented with the raw ingredients and encouraged to shape the ingredients into a cake of their own making.

Generally, a story will centre on an event, a location, a time and the 'players' involved. Rarely will reporters have the inclination or the time available to frame their stories into a unfolding, historical or broader context, even if they do know how to. This is left to a dwindling group of columnists and commentators and is probably why there are so many complaints about distortion by the media.

Guide:

- ✓ If you want an audience to understand the Whole (or the context) then *you* must introduce it. Practice crafting context statements or linking your event to the "Whole". Make sure you can do this in 20 and 30 second grabs.

and now is the news...

News is about the Now. The sausage-factory nature of news-gathering is largely dictated by deadlines: bulletins have to be filled, programs have to be lined-up, printing presses have to roll and web pages have to be published.

News and current affairs stories are like the leading edge of fashion industry: no-one likes to be seen wearing yesterday's clothes. John Naisbitt author of *Megatrends* described the news reporting process as "forced choice in a closed system". What he meant by that was new preoccupations force out the old ones. This happens irrespective of whether the old ones have been resolved appropriately. Often, issues get talked-out to the point of exhaustion: the public tires of the overwhelming volume and intensity of talk, the media withdraws and the power elite then get on with the job of resolving the issue to the advantage of the vested interests it represents.

A story has a life or 'legs' (to use the in-house vernacular). The life of a story depends on how many 'spins' reporters can place on it: how many *angles* can be developed and how many *people* and dramatic themes can be brought into the process to keep it alive. The life of a story is also determined by other stories circulating or breaking. If other stories are bigger, brighter and sexier, or more dramatic, colourful and visually appealing, an existing story could deflate quicker than a soufflé put in a refrigerator, no matter how inherently important it is.

The obsession with "nowness" leaves little room for placing stories in the context of unfolding histories or revisiting previous controversies to publicly examine how they were resolved. Few stories link current events to flows of time or seek to explain the life cycles of issues: how they came to be important, how the past has given rise to the present or how the present may give rise to events in the future. If you want to know the multiple causes of contemporary problems or even how we came to do some things so well, you won't find the answers in the mass media of today.

Note that the media feeds on itself. A story placed in a prominent breakfast radio bulletin or appearing in the first few pages of a morning newspaper could well be picked by talk radio and

television news or be the subject of interminable discussion on blogs and web-based news sources.

Guide:

- ✓ In order to combat the short attention spans of media outlets, you would be well-advised to develop a series of ‘episodes’ or angles to drip feed so as to keep your story alive.
- ✓ Deadlines can work for or against you. Never imagine you are the only point of contact in a story. If you don’t talk, someone else may.
- ✓ On the other hand, if you need time to assess your position you can tactically allow the story to run, formulate your tactics and run “big” with a more developed and considered response or rebuttal that renders the original story impotent.
- ✓ When under attack, it is imperative you know the precise *purpose* behind your responses. Do nothing without purpose: decide the outcome you desire and work backwards to determine what you need to do to give your position or side of the story, “legs”.
- ✓ Know, or ensure you have a media adviser who knows, the levels of story competition and volume requirements in different media. For example, on a weekday television news bulletin (when most reporters are on duty) competition for a berth on television news will be strong. Whereas, in radio or on-line news, the sheer volume of stories that are needed to full up hourly bulletins or web updates means that much more grist is needed for the mill.

star plucking...

When something happens, the media usually goes and plucks the most important “name” it can get out of the hat and seeks comment. There are exceptions to this rule, particularly in natural disasters, accidents and other ‘human interest’ stories. But generally, the media buzzes around the socially and politically prominent like bush flies to dung. An illuminating question may be to ask yourself who is more likely to favour the way things are? After all, if you’re a beneficiary of the status quo why try to make things different?

The media rarely seeks to expand its pool of ‘usual suspects’ or canvass the views of so-called ordinary people, except when it needs vox pops, when it needs callers as fodder for the radio talkback machine or when it’s looking to add the “human” perspective to a story.

Most news and current affairs stories are created, or generated, by:

- the three tiers of government
- non-government organisations (welfare, multicultural, economic, etc.)
- peak groups (like the AMA, Farmers Federation, churches, etc.)
- multi-national and international organisation (Greenpeace, Amnesty, etc.)
- elite groups (entertainment, sporting, business, etc.)
- experts (specialists, academics, etc)
- other news outlets

In other words, most of what you see, hear and read is from (and about) those who are socially or politically visible. More than often, viewers, listeners and readers are encountering the beliefs, values, attitudes, fears and hopes of a relatively small but influential constituent of our society.

An inherent problem caused by the prominence of the socially and politically elite is that media consumers are constantly bombarded with the opinions of this extreme minority. Another concern is that many of the elite are people who have a vested interest in keeping diversity of opinion to a minimum. A battle can't be won if there are too many shades of grey: best to keep the battle lines well drawn and a clearly defined enemy in sight.

The two-value argument system favoured by the media can have a powerful effect in reducing the number of choices available to media consumers. Complex issues are often played out between rival elitist groups who engage in gladiatorial contests to win the dogma war. Little if any attention is directed towards the possibility of there being a third, a fourth or fifth option. Consequently, media consumers may only get two sides of a story: two sides, in which the dogmas of the elite regularly overshadow the needs and interests of ordinary people. This tends to apply equally to those who advocate or resist change.

Implicit in many of the public media struggles of today is that individuals are subservient to the theories of those who think they know better. People can be shunted around to fit populist or contrarian models dreamed up or imported by the socially and politically prominent and promoted by their allies in the mass media.

It suits media outlets and journalists to position themselves as advocates of the people, of guardians of the public's right to know and champions of the victims and the vanquished of this world. However, media consumers would be well advised not to fall for such a mischievous dissimulation. For, however loud are protestations to the opposite, media organisations are part of institutional Australia or whatever country you care to choose.

The major players in the commercial and non-commercial media are very much part of the establishment. They have numerous commercial, social and political vested interests to protect, and it's in their interests to guide and manipulate perceptions in certain directions. A good example of this was media mogul Jamie Packer's appearance on the Australian television infotainment program a Current Affair in the late 90s arguing the case for a relaxation of the cross-media ownership rules with the polish and elan of a professional politician. Often though, attempts by media barons to manipulate public perceptions are less overt and are buried within their overall output as independent stories.

Most national or public broadcasters are in the invidious position of having to rely on the political establishment for part or all of their funding. Politicians of all persuasions have resisted placing the funding issue at arms length, so they too have vested interests to protect, not the least their own survival. In many ways survival of public broadcasting depends on maintaining cooperative relationships with the socially and politically visible and a somewhat bashful and uneasy gambol with the government of the day.

There are numerous publicly available corporate statements by public broadcasters around the world that declare that part of their role is to cultivate and maintain relationships with 'opinion-makers', key figures and important institutions and organisations: statements of intent which clearly bind those organisations to the establishment, and, by extension, to maintenance of the status quo.

There has been some confusion in the ranks of many public broadcasters over the definition of independence and cases can be documented of them taking on a role of political advocate and opponent of conservative and other forces in this and other countries.. This is not to detract from the many examples of fine investigative journalism public broadcasting continues to produce, but it does illustrate the risks of becoming actively involved in the processes of debate, rather than sticking to their avowed role of independent observers, recorders, interpreters and explainers.

Guide:

- ✓ If you are presented with counter-views which you know represent the views of one elitist group or another, point it out. Align yourself with stake-holders or the mass polity where appropriate.
- ✓ Make sure **you** know the views and opinions of your stake-holders (the public, customers, users, shareholders, etc).
- ✓ An extremely useful exercise is to sample stake-holder “opinion”. This need not be an expensive process. With the right methodology you can initiate cheap telephone surveys which measure opinion with a reasonable degree of accuracy.
- ✓ Utilise your knowledge of your stake-holders. Review the following statement and notice how it attacks elitist models, connects with an audience/readership and links the speaker to a bigger picture.

“Look, we’re not pro-development, anti-development or any of those other things. WE don’t have a barrow to push. And we don’t want to force our opinions down people’s throats like others in this debate are trying to do. What we’re about is listening to the people who are affected by decisions about HOW this land is used. We’ve talked to people and not only those who are close by this development. We asked them questions that weren’t loaded. We asked them to tell us how they thought this land could be best used. And they told us”

emotional geography...

There's an old news cliché that states that in terms of news value twenty thousand dead from flooding in Bangladesh equals six dead in a traffic accident in another state equals one dead dummy who used a hair-dryer in the bath in one's catchment area.

The presumption made by most news outlets is that people want to hear about themselves or, preferably, their neighbours. Much is said about localism and how people want to hear about, see and read of things that happen in their necks of the woods. How much of this relates to commercial factors and how much relates to the real needs of audiences and readership is debatable.

Parochialism sells advertising space in newspapers, radio and television. If you want people to look and listen to retail ads, conventional wisdom suggests you have to put local stories around them to attract attention. Good examples of the "local" argument are the throwaway community newspapers which have taken a fair slice of revenue away from the metropolitan dailies.

The parochial news-value argument centres exclusively on *geography*. What is not taken into account is *emotional geography*. Who wasn't shocked by the human impact of the twin towers incident in New York? What baby-boomer wasn't touched by the killing of John Lennon? Which mother of a young child isn't moved by a story of baby-stealing in the United Kingdom? There are many, many events which happen around the world that form part of the emotional neighbourhood and provide an instructional and often broader view of the world at large.

The real problem with the "Let's give 'em Parish Pump" mentality is it conveys the impression that most important things happen nearby, or at least within our borders. It promotes an insular, introspective view of the world. We risk becoming exposed to fewer options and being trapped in the popular political or social "loop" of the day. We're at a juncture in our history where knowledge of events, ideas, perspectives, issues and cultures outside our own is critically important. Globalisation is a reality, and most countries aren't big, or strong, enough to imitate the political and cultural narcissism of countries like the United States, France, China, or Japan.

Guide:

- ✓ On numerous occasions, spokes-people point to what is happening overseas and generally they focus on process or data. They leave the "life" out of their argument by concentrating on collections of statistics, scientific conclusions and the like. This can have the effect of producing blank indifference in journalists and audiences.
- ✓ When using overseas models to support an argument or position, utilise the "Emotional Proximity" factor. Talk about what people are "doing", how they are "reacting", what "happened" to them and so on.

bits of stories...

As mentioned in 'all portions and no cake', it's a major concern amongst many who have cause to deal with the media that the "whole" story never seems to get out. Elementalism is both a cause and effect of the near-sightedness of news-gathering. It describes the habit of dividing so-called reality into unrelated bits, or parts, or categories. The relationship between the parts gets lost: think of it in terms of a cake or of a family scattered all over the globe which loses contact with individual members. It can result in news consumers having little idea of how things fit

together. Stories are told in a fragmentary fashion and relationships between people/s, nations, issues, contradicting ideas and events are seldom made clear

There are a number of other contributing factors which influence the incomplete, sometimes incomprehensible, reporting of political and issue-based material:

- Some reporters, sub-editors and news producers have little appreciation for the depth of the issues they cover or edit. They simply don't understand the complexities of some of the most pressing questions facing our society.
- Many news-gatherers presume that if the issue is too complex for them to understand then it will certainly be too complex for an audience or readership to comprehend. They fail to understand that wholes are essentially systems which can be 'chunked' into palatable parts and then re-constituted. It's easier to throw complex, big picture stuff into the "too hard" basket
- Often, the disturbing lack of context in news and current affairs output is simply the result of the dunce-ification of the profession. The failure of journalism schools to insist that students develop a broad and liberal knowledge of issues and a trained mind to evaluate them is spawning a more naive breed of reporter. The pre-occupation with throughput by some academic institutions is producing quotable-quote-quoters who are glorified stenographers, rather than well-rounded and world-wise news gatherers.
- The tendency in television to make vision the most important element in a story, the focus on personality, the supposition that audiences have attention spans from between 30 and 90 seconds and readers won't go beyond the first five column-inches of a newspaper story, the obsession with action, the blurring of news and entertainment on television all contribute to story-telling in bits.

Guide:

- ✓ Make a map, whenever you have the opportunity. Provide colourful diagrams of "wholes" and their connecting "parts". Make them simple visual representations of the bigger picture.
- ✓ Strategically connect your concrete explanations with well chosen big picture values, beliefs or ideas.
- ✓ Make a verbal map. Say "this goes with that goes with this to make this"
- ✓ Question interviewers who make assumptions or obsess about a "part". One well-known politician makes a habit of saying, in live television and radio interviews, things along the lines of "*Hey, wait a minute; you can obsess about leaves if you want, but wouldn't you like to see what the trees and the forest look like?*"
- ✓ Utilise! Put your knowledge of fragmentation to work. Create events/action, bytes of information which illustrate the macrocosm and relate events-action-proposals-rebuttals to a few powerful themes.

not virtual reality, but virtually no reality...

It is not by accident that a news story is called a *story*. Since the beginning of time, information has been passed on through parable, anecdote, allegory and fable. Usually the stories had a point and in many cases they linked to a higher order of things: a virtue, a lesson in life, a theme. Today, in the media, many stories exist in and of themselves.

There's an old saying that there's no content in content worth knowing and the keys to all riddles are to be found in context, process and structure. Few people in contemporary news-gathering seem to have encountered this particularly pithy observation.

The literary tradition is in decline. So is the thinking that supports it and demands that precision and logic accompany good pen-ship. Notice how the writing style in books and newspapers has measurably changed over the past two decades. You may also observe that we are speaking less as we write and writing more as we speak. Radio and Television are the principal forces behind this, arguably, welcome return to the oral tradition.

Many journalists, however, react to style guide directions to write for the spoken word by assuming it gives them licence to be less precise in their writing. Popular cliches, the vernacular of the mythical ordinary person, cheap surface metaphors and misapplied conceptual metaphors often disguise the reporter's inability to create clear, unambiguous, precise copy.

We have come to rely more on the story as the world has grown harder to understand. However, today's fables and parables seem to have little connection to higher logical orders: they tend to concentrate on people *saying* and to a lesser extent *doing* things in isolation. *Moreover, the coverage of contemporary issues is increasingly reflecting the metaphors of war, drama and sport, particularly in television reportage.* The media lens is firmly fixed on the protagonists and antagonists. Television news is coming to represent a nightly collection of mini soap-operas with characterisations so facile a first year Theatre Arts student would have no difficulty in identifying them. Radio, print and digital media are following suit.

Scandal-mongering has become a grossly profitable staple of contemporary journalism. We all, though some of us would be loath to admit it, have a predilection for the social and personal details of those who are highly visible in our society. Some of the more original thinkers in psychology today see gossip as a primary activity of the psyche and suggest that something psychological underpins our tastes for stories of souls in disarray. They posit that storytelling and tittle-tattling are manifestations of the psyche's myth-making function and help provide psychic balance. Human 'dirt' it would seem keeps people grounded and reminds them they're not alone in the petty and not so petty daily perpetrations of the seven deadly sins.

The problem of gossip in the media arises from the pretence that it's bone fide journalism. Stories are presented in the typical news or current affairs format and encourage the audience to see them as true rather than a simple ruse to titillate. You will find no disclaimers at the bottom of gossip articles or reports which state that creative licence has been applied in the absence of any facts to support the fanciful and often outrageous inferences drawn.

Guide:

- ✓ Don't allow yourself to be characterised or to be placed in a role within a mini-drama not of your own making.
- ✓ Challenge the unwritten contract of Interviewer-Questioner versus Interviewee-Respondent. Begin to ask interviewers or reporters questions, particularly in live radio and television interviews. Questions like "*Why do you say that?*", "*How do you know that?*", "*What do you think would happen if we rescue this issue from the insupportable angles you have built around it?*"
- ✓ Listen carefully to any labels or facts used and the inferences reporters draw about you or other personalities. Challenge fact-inference distortions as they arise by asking "*What makes you think that?*"

- ✓ Refuse to engage in clashes of personalities. Do not label your opponents. Stick to what you think is important and the ideas you're trying to get across.
- ✓ If the story focuses on an individual event, or an individual, do not allow reporters to extrapolate extravagantly. If they do, ask questions such as, "*How can you take an isolated example and generalise it across the whole issue?*"
- ✓ If reporters ask you about popularity polls don't fall into the trap of reinforcing them. Ask the reporter questions like "*What do polls actually mean though?*" or "*How many people were asked in this poll?*"
- ✓ One of the most powerful things you can do is not to allow or imagine that you have to play the game the way the media wants you to. You choose the location; don't accept the question agenda if you feel an interview should cover other areas, don't allow deadlines (or falsely asserted deadlines) to dictate the time and location of your appearance. In other words, don't allow yourself to be pushed around.
- ✓ Always impose your own context or structure during any media encounter.

a missing link...

Ask most journalists to categorise the types of information they work with and they'll probably say there are two distinct classes of data: *fact* and *opinion*. Facts are seemingly all-important in journalism, except, of course, when they're not. There is a tradition in some sections of the profession that before a fact can be disclosed in a story it must be confirmed independently. Like many of our other time-worn conventions, the practice of checking facts for accuracy, reliability, relevance, etc. is declining. In the newish atmosphere of bottom-line journalism, time is money and reporters are either choosing, or being forced, to short-circuit the sometimes laborious process of checking facts.

There is also a highly disturbing drift in journalism towards fact-inference distortion. An inference is what is called an abstraction and is based on the making of assumptions. It is a process by which you draw a conclusion about something on the basis of some fact that you have brought to bear on whatever you're thinking about. Inferences can be valid or invalid, logical or illogical, weak or strong. The taking of so-called facts and stretching them well beyond what is actually implied is common fare in the mass media of today.

Notice also the growing trend towards attribution and away from confirmation. It is now generally acceptable for journalists to report unsubstantiated facts by applying 'According to' short cuts. Observe how often journalists attribute information to 'unnamed sources', 'unconfirmed sources', or 'sources close to'. These linguistic toys used by reporters can be seen as no more than sleights of mouth to obscure the fact that they are reporting gossip.

Journalists can and do hide their own inferences, assumptions and conclusions behind imaginary sources with impunity because of the highly useful ethic of protection of 'sources' at all costs. This practice often gets out of hand during wars, crises or major disasters. It doesn't hold with the even most elementary benchmarks of the burden of proof and stories containing so-called facts from unnamed or unspecified sources should be given the same status as gossip.

Opinion on the other hand is the real grist to the media mill: the quotable quote being the jewel in its crown. Opinion is what people say to journalists or what people say in public fora. Your experience of opinion may tell you that people can say a lot of things: they can say stupid things, profound things, can express personal insights and prejudices, can say something as a

‘truth’ without ever having put it to the test, can confuse recall with reality, can take a so-called fact and hallucinate a range of assumptions around it - the list is endless. Nearly all opinions can be seen as hallucinations in one form or another.

The point to remember is that opinion can have as many variations as human beings on this planet, because opinions are personal. Opinion is an expression of preferences, of beliefs that may or may not be true, of untested faith, of ego-driven emotions, of unfiltered assumptions, inferences and conclusions, and may, or may not, be rational.

There is a third class of data that is largely overlooked in contemporary journalism and that is *Reason*, also known as *reasoned judgement*. Many journalists fail to grasp the significance of this third, vital class of information. They don’t seem to have the skills, tools or discipline to make distinctions between opinion and reasoned judgement. This is reflected in their propensity to treat all opinion as being equal as long as it comes from the mouths of the politically and socially visible. And it gives those who have access to the media carte blanche to make the most stupid, inflammatory, manipulative, divisive and unreasoned assertions without having to carefully and reflectively think them through.

The distinctions between fact, reasoned judgment and opinion can be illustrated as answers to the following types of questions:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| (a) <i>Facts and Truths:</i> | Questions with only one valid answer. |
| (b) <i>Reasoned Judgement:</i> | Questions with better or worse answers, depending on the strength, logic, relevance, etc. of the response. |
| (c) <i>Opinion</i> | Questions inviting expression of personal preferences. |

Guide:

- ✓ Listen carefully to the questions being put to you. Question any inference being treated as fact. Ensure you have a very clear idea in your own mind whether it is **a**, **b**, or **c**, you’re being asked to respond to.
- ✓ Build your own argument using the Reasoned Judgement format. Develop strong propositions (themes) and build precise and logical supportive arguments (FAB statements)
- ✓ Filter the statements of others for clarity, precision, relevance, depth (complexity vs superficiality), breadth (range of other viewpoints on same topic) and logic. Show how your reasoned argument challenges opposing statements.
- ✓ If asked to respond to an opinion as defined above ensure you identify it as such. Example: “*You’re asking me to respond to someone’s personal opinion. It’s a bit like saying ‘so and so doesn’t like pork’ and expecting me to comment on that. Opinions are personal, and you haven’t offered me anything of substance to respond to*”
- ✓ If you’re going to proffer an opinion, preface it as such. But, it is much better to offer a well reasoned argument with strong supportive statements.

jolly little spins...

Not all fingers can be pointed towards the media for the personalisation of news and current affairs. The Visibility industry and the increasingly sophisticated methods used by Spin Doctors in the Public Relations field have helped immeasurably. It’s estimated that between 65 and 70

percent of all news in most developed countries is manufactured and distributed via press release. In many undeveloped or authoritarian countries you can assume that very little has not been vetted by censors or promoted by propagandists.

The tragedy is that today's news-gatherers are as susceptible to the expertly crafted messages of the spin doctors as anyone else. Mind viruses (irresistible propaganda) spread with little or no critical analysis in the media. The media is an ideal medium for virulent mind viruses because they encounter so few natural predators! Feel like being one of the few?

ego versus altruism...

The personalisation of news encourages reporters to focus on the players rather than the plot. A shameful example of this reporting genre occurred in the business and finance sector in the 1980's. All eyes (and pens) were on the new gladiators of commerce. Various, usually breathless market commentators appeared nightly on Australian television screens with enthusiastic and personalised reports on the latest forays and excesses of John Spalvins, Alan Bond, Laurie Connell, Christopher Skase, George Herscu et al. The financial press was so mesmerised by these dazzling practitioners of the art of sleight of mouth and hand, that it didn't notice they had their hands in the cash register. With the exception of Paul Barry and Trevor Sykes, (and a few late-starters) little analysis of the meaning of all the "activity" was ever undertaken. Many tens of thousands of people were caught up in this nightly drama and risked and lost their savings.

The concentration on the *people* involved in the major issues facing our society is now a mainstream activity. This, in turn, encourages reporters to choose spins, angles and story genres which can be easily encapsulated into the mini-drama format of radio, television and cable.

Personalised news encourages its consumers to take an egocentric rather than a socially concerned view of politics and other issues. Social researchers report that Australians appear to be more separate from one another, are less certain about things, have more suspicion, are more afraid and somehow feel more alone. Can part of the blame be laid at the door of the media for creating a super class of high-visibility players and relegating all others to the role of passive spectators?

How can you form an accurate impression of what's *actually* going on when the news lens constantly zooms in on the personalities and the players instead of an overall story line? How can you gain an understanding of how events unfold over time when the media is captivated by the colosseum-like thrills of crisis over continuity? How can you condemn news consumers opting for titillation when they're fed a constant diet of stories which concentrate on the impact of scandals on personal careers rather than on the institutions which harboured them?

The burning issues of the moment and the future such as equality of opportunity, hunger, resource waste, global warming, social justice, economic inequality, our place under the sun and so on, are overwhelmed by a melodrama which emphasises individual players over the contexts in which they operate. This trend goes some way in explaining why the Australian public has lost faith in many of our most important institutions. And talking of institutions, notice that in a recent national survey of professions that electronic media journalists registered a twelve percent score in the ethics and morality stakes while their print counterparts could do no better than seven percent! Dentists registered nearly 60 percent. Many of the respondents to the survey may not have received a bill for a tooth cap lately!

This unfortunate trend will only be reversed if news consumers demand change, journalists “wisen up” and the “players” revolt and insist on being allowed to set the scene in depth. This is a big ask and is unlikely to happen.

Guide:

- ✓ Be the first to point out that issues go beyond personalities. Example: “We’re not talking about a clash of personalities here, who’s strong and who’s weak; we are talking about issues vital to people’s lives”
- ✓ Link your statements to higher values, ideals and concepts.
- ✓ Ensure you are not being entrapped in one of the common dramatic themes or metaphors used by the media to portray protagonists. Examples: Fat cat public servant, insensitive corporate developer, union basher, agitator, ivory tower academic, etc.

I’m first!...

Reporters love being first with a story. It helps them build status amongst peers and superiors. It also allows their outlet to declare an exclusive and claim a victory in the seemingly perpetual race to be first with the news.

Being first, in many media outlets has frequently outstripped being *rightish*. The “death” of the Queen Mother which was a complete surprise to her at the time, an airline crash that never happened, the sensational humiliation of an Australian Olympic official accused of covertly supporting a rival country bid for the 2000 Games (based on completely spurious “evidence”) are three of many examples of the triumph of getting it first over getting it right, or at least as right as it can be humanly got.

A reporter, to gain an edge over the competition, needs to have a pool of exclusive sources. Sources can provide a valuable service particularly in investigative journalism. They can point a reporter in the right direction and if the reporter is any good at getting it rightish, s/he will verify the information or documents provided with other reliable sources *before* creating a story. This is good journalism.

Increasingly, reporters run with stories which are not double-checked. A frequently used cheap trick is to treat information from one source as an “allegation” and complete the story by going to the person or institution “accused” for a response.

You may have noticed that the time given over to the “allegation” or the number of column inches devoted to it usually exceeds the length of the rebuttal when the story becomes “news”. This counterfeit form of reportage may well have contributed to the circumstances which led to the suicide of lawyer, Penny Easton, in Perth Western Australia in the late 1990s. Easton was at the centre, not by her own choosing, of a shameful example of political opportunism.

Notwithstanding manipulation by certain political personages and a petition to parliament by her former husband, information which could have helped journalists *get it right* was available. Instead Ms Easton was relentlessly hounded by reporters: some close family members say ‘hounded to death’. The rush to get the story first included invasion of privacy and trespass. A bale-up up in her garage by an infamous local journalist demanding a response to ‘allegations’ (which included a totally spurious claim that Ms Easton was having an affair with a leading member of the opposition of the time) is said to have been the last straw, leading her to perhaps

choose Hell now, rather the Hell on earth.....a life lost to Dramatic Reality and all in a days work of getting it first, rather than getting it right.

Another problem that emanates from the scoop mentality is that a first-but-wrong story can give birth to a swarm of other illegitimate stories. Editors and news producers constantly cast an eye and ear towards their competitors. Almost everyday, reporters, producers and sub-editors are harassed by news executives who ask in the most accusative of tones “How come we didn’t get that story?” A veteran newsman put it this way: “While a news room may wallow in the glory of a scoop it craps itself when someone else gets the jump”. This fear of missing the boat has among other things the effect of promoting shared news values in the media, and this is why you will notice little difference in story selection and even placement across your nightly television news services or the copycat program rundowns of the following day’s talkback shows.

Guide:

- ✓ If you are confronted with cameras, microphones and reporters, do not be goaded into responding to “allegations”, particularly if they’re news to you. Become the **questioner**. Ask questions along the lines of “*Have you checked out this stuff to make sure you’ve not been fed a line?*”, or “*Do you know this to be true - have you verified it?*”, or “*Have you people done your job and confirmed that what you say is true - before running your cameras and trying to make a story out of it?*” Always call into question the integrity of the mass media when dealing with such issues.
- ✓ If you are called upon to comment on someone else’s behaviour and you do not know for sure if there is truth in what is put to you, never comment on the allegations, not even hypothetically. Say something like “*You wouldn’t want me to comment on something I don’t know to be true, would you? Innocent people could be hurt, and a false story could circulate across the media. I will investigate this to make sure you people haven’t been given a red herring*”.
- ✓ Utilise. Develop relationships with reporters you know who have demonstrated over time a commitment to getting it right. Place your stories tactically, selecting the medium, outlet and reporter best suited to the effective promotion of your perspective.

driving the dollar further...

News judgement, or what is placed in the news and where it is placed, is increasingly becoming influenced by market, profit and “efficiency” considerations.

Most major news outlets in radio, television, print and the digital media are now owned by major corporations, some of who care little for traditions and ethics. The maintenance and growth of profits is an understandable pre-occupation, however there are strong indications that profit and ‘efficiency’ motives have begun to seriously undermine journalistic independence and standards:

- Bean-counting editors are now becoming the norm. Journalistic integrity is subservient to the bottom line;
- The fad of downsizing has resulted in smaller newsrooms, the virtual disappearance of investigative journalism, the increased reliance on syndicated news services, story sharing with other newsrooms in the same stable and an increase in networking;

- Concentrated ownership of news and current affairs outlets has further fuelled shared news values (the media hunting in a pack) and reduced the diversity of approach to stories;
- Market research is being used to shape news judgement and content. It is laudable for any news organisation to be interested in what news consumers NEED and WANT. However, the surveys being conducted in this area are usually designed with the assumption that current tightly formatted news formulae are here to stay. The outcome of this narrow research methodology is to provide a news product *which reflects what people prefer amongst the choices commercial media find profitable and convenient to offer consumers*. It doesn't in any measurable way reflect what consumers may need or want in order to understand the complex relationships between people, institutions and events.
- Research is beginning to show that media consumers in developed countries are choosing television more for entertainment and opting for radio, print and digital media as sources of news. Television may well respond with an even fuzzier mixture of burlesque masquerading as news.

The ultimate effect of these developments will be a loss of credibility in the eyes of news consumers, more litigation and a decline in support for traditional news sources. This is already evident in the level of media-bashing that occurs and the diminished status of journalists in national surveys of occupations.

buy now, but who pays?...

The concentration on the people involved in the major issues facing our society is now a mainstream activity. As you've noted, this, in turn, nourishes the practice of choosing spins and perspectives which allow news reports to be turned into mini soap operas. If editors and producers are short of grist to the mini soap opera mill, well, they can always buy some. The practice of what journalists call Buy-Ups is now widespread in many countries.

Buy-Ups describe the process of a news or current affairs outlet paying someone to "tell" a story and they represent a classic case study in the willingness of the mass media to broadcast unsubstantiated claims, dubious slants on stories and often downright lies for gains in ratings and readership. An example of premeditated distortion (with enough distance now for us to perhaps view it with a degree of objectivity) centres on the first wave of Michael Jackson child molestation allegations. Here is a story where the smell of money overwhelmed whatever alluvial facts were present at the beginning.

The story was seeded in the British vermin press, was given a whopping shove by the voyeuristic news shows of American cable television and was finally taken up by mainstream free-to-air media and major print outlets throughout the world. All sorts of cockroaches came out of the cupboard to collect their cheques. The high point of this farce was marked by a former Philippino servant of Jackson's holding an auction where the price of the "story" was pegged to a sliding scale of revelations. In other words, "I'll say this for a hundred thousand dollars, but I'll value-add and say this and this for two hundred and fifty thousand".

in summary...

Most reporters are no more, or less, caring and dedicated than any other sector in society. Most try to produce as accurate a reflection of reality as their intelligence, skills and knowledge permit.

Remember, however, that journalists work within the framework (map) of their industry and from a set of values which are dominant in their sector of the industry.

Both spectators and participants will serve themselves well if they suspend their uncritical acceptance of the *methods* of news gathering and the values reflected in the way reporters go about their jobs. The following set of filters can be used by practitioners and consumers of media to ascertain if a story holds: whether it has enough substance to be considered as a reasonable representation of the event or issue it purports to cover:

- Is the story fragmented or unconnected to the bigger picture?
- is the issue/s clearly and precisely stated?
- Is the information on which the reasoning is based verifiable?
- Is any information being presented as a fact, or is it simply an inference or conclusion drawn by other sources? Is there factual support for the inferences made?
- What values are underpinning the approach to this story? Can the values be supported?
- Are there other values, sets of beliefs and cultural positions that the above values can be compared with?
- What kind of visual images, symbols, etc., is the story built around? Are they congruent with the story being told?
- Are questions:
 - clear?
 - Can they be answered with facts or are they confused with opinions.
 - Are they leading questions? Where are they leading to?
 - Are they intended to steer the interview or the interviewee's response in a certain direction? Which direction?
 - Are follow-up questions in a logical sequence?
 - What assumptions and pre-suppositions are contained in the questions?
- Is one example, or person, being projected on to the "whole"?:
 - Is two-value logic being applied? Does the story fall into the trap of right/wrong, either/or, up/down, liberal/conservative, acceptable/unacceptable, improvement/decline etc?
 - Does it operate on the misconception that there are only "both" sides of the story?
 - Is it trying to match the MAP with the TERRITORY, or does it assume the map IS the territory?

A point to remember in respect to news gathering and dissemination is that news 'stories' can be seen on one level as 'little fictions' that sate the public appetite for storytelling. News stories, according to the logic of science and quantum theory can never be seen as complete, are never whole and in the truest of senses are never 'true'.

If you are press-ganged into playing one of the endless cameo roles in the daily soap operas that masquerade as 'news' make sure you are armed with ideas and techniques that serve you

purposes well. It is a far better thing for you to be in control of the agenda than to be simply a bit part player in someone else's mini drama.

On the following pages are a series of tips and ideas on how you can share control of the agenda, get your point across and perhaps counter some of the inherent weaknesses in our news gathering system.

THE COMMENTATORS' BILL OF RIGHTS

You have a right to know what the story/interview is about: You can expect a producer, journalist or interviewer to reveal the general areas of enquiry.

You Have a right to introduce your agenda: You do not have to accept the agenda of the reporter/interviewer, particularly if you feel it does not present a fair representation of the issue.

You may choose not to answer a question: Think of ways to earnestly refuse a question.

Example: "That information has been provided to me in the strictest confidence - you wouldn't want me to breach that trust would you?"

It is reasonable to question the assumptions of the reporter or interviewer: You have a right, indeed a responsibility to query the premises of questions asked of you.

Example: "Your assumption that toxic waste has leached into the groundwater supply is not supported by the facts"

You can answer a question in your own way: As long as you're succinct and direct.

Examples: "This question can't be answered by a yes or a no - let me answer it in my way"

"Are you looking for the truth in this issue, or do you just want a head on a plate. Now let me give you the truth of the matter"

You have a right to answer questions in the context of your major themes: It is totally acceptable to interpret and respond to each question by addressing it in the context of the major themes of your argument or position.

You have the right not to know an answer to a question: If you haven't got an answer say so. Promise to find out and report back.

You have the right to be treated with courtesy: Do not respond to aggression - point it out.

BILL OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Remember your public: Think about the users of your product, position or service. Couch your comments in a framework which includes their needs, aspirations, hopes, prejudices and fears.

Never deliberately offer falsehoods: You have an obligation to provide answers you know to be true. If you knowingly introduce falsehoods, be aware there is usually someone/body (a competitor, disaffected staff member etc) who may provide the media with information which reveals your duplicity.

Play people soft: Play, if you must, the **issue** hard, but never play the person. If you sense you are being set up for harsh treatment, redirect the interview by disarmingly stating, "I'm happy to play the issue as hard as you want, but I won't consent to you being rude and unpleasant to me"

Defend only the defensible: Never the indefensible. If you or your organisation has made an obvious blunder or mistake **take responsibility** and offer speedy rectification. In other words, do the unexpected and reap the kudos.

TIPS ON TECHNIQUE

Preparation...

◆ **Good ad-lib speaking involves preparation:**

- ✓ which groups and individuals do you want to reach?
- ✓ complete a stake-holders exercise to choose your target audience and anticipate stake-holders interests and arguments
- ✓ ask yourself “If I could edit this story, interview or article what would I want to see included?”
- ✓ prepare a maximum of three significant and salient points which support your argument
- ✓ design short statements for each of your three themes which define the essence of your messages

Responding To Questions...

◆ **Always remember your ultimate audience**

- ✓ while you may be talking with a reporter or interviewer, you are ultimately speaking to a readership or audience
- ✓ frame your answers from the perspective of your main stake-holders:
 - “If this legislation goes ahead, you won’t be able to drive on our country roads without the very real hazard of road trains anywhere in the state”*
 - “This new process will mean that you can harvest your crop and not worry about pesticide residues getting into the food chain.”*

◆ **Begin each response with your most important point (theme) to ensure the point will be clear and isolated**

Examples:

“Safety, reliability, and a quick response are the key factors in our new plan.”.....(lead on to supporting statements)

“Bureaucracies are the hardened arteries of Government. Competition ups the ante and gets everyone working better”

“There is a growing strength in women, but it’s in the forehead, not the forearm.”

- ✓ be able to articulate each of your lead points in less than fifteen words
- ✓ leading with short, encapsulating points is extremely useful for news “sound bites”

- ✓ short lead points in radio interviews quickly define your arguments and link into the Primacy/Recency rule
 - ✓ some of what you say may end up on the cutting room floor. Design your lead responses to compel editors to include them
- ◆ **Use tactically the reporters or interviewers name**
- ✓ refer to an interviewer by name a couple of times during an interview – don't overdo it
 - ✓ in print interviews, refer to the journalist by name as you usually would in ordinary conversation
- ◆ **How you say things is as important as what you say**
- ✓ the mass media admires people who are energetic, involved and direct in what they say. Make sure your responses are forthright and enthusiastic.
 - ✓ respond quickly and energetically to questions – pause only for dramatic effect
 - ✓ demonstrate the strength of your convictions
 - ✓ respond with candour and confidence
 - ✓ indecision and insincerity can be magnified on radio and television
- ◆ **Humanise your responses**
- ✓ your field of expertise is interesting to you. So why not make it interesting to your audience or readership?
 - ✓ one of the obstacles of media visibility is stereotyping: academics viewed as dispassionate pointy heads, politicians being perceived as snake oil sellers, bureaucrats seen as interested in process before people, etc. Make sure that you dispel the stereotype by connecting your message to people.
 - ✓ avoid the temptation to appear self important
- ◆ **Don't be pressured into responding instantly to a difficult question on a complex subject**
- ✓ notwithstanding the above, instead of pausing, use bridging statements to give yourself time to refer back to your main themes:
 - “*Let's look at the important principles of this.....*”
 - “*That's an interesting way of looking at it, but it stills boils down to.....*”
 - “*Yes, but what are the really important issues to be resolved here.....*”
 - ✓ bridge your response back to your major points

◆ **Only comment within the range of your knowledge and expertise**

- ✓ if a question takes you beyond your knowledge or specialist area, say so:

“I can only talk about what I know. A salinity expert is the person you want to speak to about that.”

“I have no knowledge about that specific case. It would be unfair to comment without examining the facts, wouldn't it?”

- ✓ if you don't know, say you don't know and promise to find out:

“I don't know the answer to that question. But I can find out and get back to you.”

- ✓ if you don't have a figure or detail at hand, say you will have to get back to the reporter on that.

◆ **Assume that your own facts and figures are the only reliable ones**

- ✓ facts and figures mentioned by a reporter or interviewer may be incorrect or incorrectly interpreted. Only comment on statistics and detail that you know are true:

“Look I'm not at all sure those figures are correct. I would need to check their accuracy before I could talk about them.”

“I'd need to know the sample size, and look at the framing of the questions before I gave any credence to that survey. Questions can be so easily doctored, can't they?”

- ✓ surveys commissioned by groups partial to a particular viewpoint should be treated with extreme caution. Opinion pollsters know that subtle changes of the wording of a question can produce dramatically different results.

◆ **Ensure that the words that come out of your mouth are your own**

- ✓ a common ploy of interviewers and reporters is to include their own opinions in a question. Go on high alert when you hear phrases like the following precede a question:

“Don't you think....”

“So...”

“So what you're saying is....”

“Are you saying....”

“Isn't that....”

“Isn't it really....”

“Surely....”

“Can't it....”

- ✓ do not mirror the interviewers words back to them:
Instead of: “No I don’t think it’s a case of bureaucratic ineptitude”
Rephrase: “We have to do the front-end research to make sure we’re spending your tax dollar wisely”
- ✓ make sure your main point/s is up front of your answer
- ◆ **Couch your answers in the positive**
 - ✓ say what you *are* doing and not what you are not doing
Instead of: “No, we are not discriminating against Aborigines.”
Rephrase: “We are an equal opportunity employer and we encourage indigenous people to apply for all jobs.”
- ◆ **Speak in the first-person, active voice**
 - ✓ it is important that you convey the impression of action, involvement and decisiveness
 - ✓ statements like “The program will be initiated on a trial basis in Bunbury” reek of dispassion and distance. “We will trial this new program in Bunbury first” indicates involvement and action.
 - ✓ always reflect your empathy towards the human side of things. “The economic downturn in the housing industry has forced the downsizing on us” speaks volumes about you not caring. “It was a tough decision. We reluctantly had to let people go because there was no work.” indicates you are taking responsibility for having made a difficult decision.
 - ✓ remember governments, organisations and companies don’t make decisions or formulate policy, people do!
- ◆ **Follow Einstein’s Rule: Everything should be made as simple as possible but not simpler.**
 - ✓ short simple answers are better than long, complicated ones
 - ✓ use concrete language
 - ✓ a few short, simple sentences using everyday language give the interviewer and your stake-holders less chance of misinterpreting you
 - ✓ simplicity is important in electronic news gathering. You should be able to make your major points to fit a 20 – 30 second grab.
- ◆ **Treat your audience as intelligent but never overestimate your audiences knowledge**
 - ✓ explain your terms when covering a difficult subject
 - ✓ better still, think of concrete terms

- ✓ avoid jargon, acronyms, abstract language and multi-syllabic pomp
- ✓ use metaphor to illustrate your point
- ✓ don't talk down to people

instead of "What you have to understand..." say something like "If you consider"

◆ **Relate hypothetical questions to concrete examples**

- ✓ it may be unwise to comment on hypothetical cases. Instead, particularise them:

"That's a hypothetical question, so it's impossible to know what would happen. But let me tell you what did happen in a similar case"

◆ **Tell the truth**

- ✓ lying can destroy the carefully built credibility of your organisation
- ✓ you do not have to volunteer information which may be misinterpreted
- ✓ you do not have to reveal information as you would in a confessional
- ✓ you can say *"I cannot tell you that. You wouldn't want me to betray the trust of the people involved, would you?"*
- ✓ you can say *"That will be announced in a fortnight. Everyone will get to know at the same time and that way no-one will have an advantage"*
- ✓ you can say *"That is commercially sensitive information and as you can appreciate I can't tell you about it"*

◆ **Keep control of the agenda**

- ✓ beware of the interviewer or reporter who wants to broaden the agenda
- ✓ sometimes interviewers and reporters request an interview under one guise in order to put you on the spot about something else. This is a dishonest practice and it's perfectly acceptable to point out the dishonesty:

"You invited me here to talk about our Skilled Immigrant Program and now you're asking me questions on a very sensitive subject that I have not had a chance to be briefed on. I can not be a party to such dishonesty."

"You told me you wanted to talk about employment opportunities in our industry. Now you bring up a case of alleged sexual harassment that I have no information on. Do you think that's fair or honest?"

- ✓ on occasions interviewers and reporters want to get too personal. On those occasions, take the point and broaden it:

"How do I balance my duties as a corporate executive, husband and father? That question clearly illustrates the problems that many Australian working couples have to contend with...."

- ✓ when interviewers attempt to expand their range of questions beyond the immediate subject area, rein the discussion in:

“Wait a moment. Let’s flesh out the problem of bringing unethical lawyers to account before we move into the so-called high costs of justice”

◆ **Keep your focus on your side of the argument**

- ✓ some politicians and others spend most of their time trying to demolish the arguments of their opposite numbers. This focuses attention on your opponents’ arguments instead of yours.
- ✓ by ‘sticking to the knitting’ you ensure that your points of view are the ones that get coverage
- ✓ state your case positively and tell people about the features, advantages and benefits of your position

◆ **Beware of Factoids**

Writer Norman Mailer coined the term Factoid to describe “Facts which have no existence before appearing in the media”

Factoids are usefully defined as:

An assertion of fact that is not backed up by evidence, usually because the ‘fact’ is false or because evidence in support of the assertion cannot be obtained.

Journalists, writers and interviewers do introduce gossip, innuendo and hearsay into their story content. In Australia there are entire newspapers, magazines, hate radio programs and television shows which thrive on reporting unsubstantiated gossip as news.

Journalists often quote “reliable sources” to give credibility to what they say. Never, repeat, never, take the bait. A question you may wish to ask a reporter or interviewer is:

“Given that you’ll probably refuse to identify your source, tell me, what efforts did you make to double check that information for accuracy before you decided to pass it off as a fact?”

Unsubstantiated statements like “*Is it true that your colleagues don’t have much faith in your leadership*” have been found by researchers (Pratkanis & Aronson, Wegner, et.al) to have a negative effect on the perceptions of those listening or viewing, even after strong denials have been made.

When confronted with unsupported information which forms part of a question immediately question its veracity:

“What evidence do you have to support what you’ve just inferred?”

“Where are your facts supporting that?”

“I know of no facts supporting what you have said. Give me the facts.”

“To my knowledge, what you say is not true. Back up your statement please.”

◆ **Listen carefully for false argument and challenge it**

With the dumbing down of journalism as a profession and the increasing advocacy role adopted by many media practitioners, the role of the interviewer and interviewee is ripe for review.

The pure informational question has given way to a variety of confrontational techniques. Along with such techniques has come a form of questioning which often contains the questioner's biases and assumptions. This practice can be described as the interviewer reading his/her map on to the interviewee's territory.

Given that contemporary interviewers are more likely to transform interviews into a discussion, rather than question and answer session, it offers an opportunity for interviewees to take a more active role in interviews. At times, you may find it absolutely necessary to reverse the roles in an interview and become the questioner.

To avoid being trapped in false argument it may become necessary for you to be aware of the textures and slants interviewers place on their questions. Take the following question as an example and notice how it is crafted to elicit a predetermined response:

“Do you agree or disagree that large corporations should start paying their fair share of tax before there are any increases in taxes that ordinary middle-income Australians pay?”

You may notice that the question contains a major pre-supposition which, if unchallenged, could entrap you. Rather than refute the fact that corporate Australia is not paying its fair share of tax, a more effective way would be to question the interviewers premise:

“What evidence do you have that indicates Australian companies are not paying their taxes?”

“What specifically do you mean by fair share and how have you determined that?”

Questioning the questioner, asking them to “put up”, is most certainly in the interests of audiences and readership. The game has changed and if you want a fair hearing in today's media and reasonable exposure of your position and ideas, you may have little choice but to question the false premises of interviewers.