

## Censored!

During times of war, the Government of the day is invariably conscious of how the local media is portraying the conflict, and above all, very concerned about the publishing or broadcasting of any material that might benefit the enemy.

During the Second World War in Australia, one of the Ministerial portfolios was “Minister for Information”, who had sweeping powers with regard to censorship, and indeed was directly in control of an important public official, the Commonwealth Censor.

In 1944, the Minister for Information was Arthur Calwell, who was serving under the then ALP Prime Minister, John Curtin. Calwell was then a multifaceted politician who would eventually go on to lead the Labor Party in opposition, only to miss out on becoming Prime Minister during the federal election of 1961 by the narrowest of margins. Perhaps if his relations with the press had been better, things might have ended differently.

Calwell was somewhat awkward in appearance and speech, and was endlessly lampooned in the newspapers, sometimes appearing in cartoons as a giant parrot. Perhaps it was partly because of this, or for other unknown reasons, he detested newspapers and the media barons who ran them.

Earlier in the war, Calwell had stated, “I am no believer of the so-called liberty of the Press, which actually amounts to liberty for certain newspaper proprietors, who assume the right to exploit the nation and boost their own circulation”.

In 1944, Sydney had begun to recover from the depths of wartime depression. Two years before, it had been a grim picture. Thousands of Australian soldiers had been killed, wounded or captured fighting the Germans and the Japanese in widespread theatres of combat. Darwin had been bombed and Sydney Harbour penetrated by Japanese

submarines, convincing many that invasion was imminent, and real estate prices across the eastern suburbs plummeted as people fled inland and away from the coast.

However, in the following two years the Allies gradually got the upper hand, and by 1944 it was considered unlikely that there would now be a Japanese invasion. The emphasis of the media gradually returned more to domestic issues.

The media of the day consisted of daily newspapers, magazines and the radio. Newsreels were also displayed at the cinema, appearing before the main show. Television was twelve years away, and concepts such as privately owned computers and the Internet were too far-fetched even for science fiction writers.

Daily newspapers were by far the most influential media, with a typical Sydneysider's workday beginning with the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Daily Telegraph*, and then for the trip home on the train or tram, the *Sun* or the *Daily Mirror* were the popular choices.

These newspapers were run by powerful media barons, including Frank Packer (*Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*), Warwick Fairfax (*Sydney Morning Herald*), Ezra Norton (*Daily Mirror*), and Hugh Denison (*The Sun*). There was no love lost between these groups, with frequent circulation and editorial battles erupting among them. Together they comprised most of the notoriously tough jungle of the Sydney daily newspaper scene.

However, a remarkable series of events was to unite these rivals in a way perhaps never seen before – or since – and these events were precipitated by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1944.

In America, with the war finally running the way of the Allies, censorship had been relaxed, but in Australia it was, if anything, tightened during 1944. Rupert Henderson, who was general manager of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, issued a statement that said, in part: "... because of censorship, many American war correspondents have left Australia, and this was one reason why America is not properly informed on Australia's policies." He added, "Australian correspondents have not been able to inform their papers truly of Australia's effort."

This statement infuriated Calwell who, in turn, issued his own release, accusing Henderson of lying and exaggerating, and threatened

to call him before a Parliamentary Censorship Enquiry Committee.

When the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* proposed to run the story, together with Henderson's response to Calwell, the Censor directed that all copy must be submitted to him before publication. The copy was then returned, but with Henderson's reply heavily edited.

*The Telegraph*, under Frank Packer's personal direction, then ran the story, but with blank spaces placed where the Censor had cut out information. This was a threat to one of the Censor's most important powers – that of withholding the fact that censorship had ever taken place, and was a declaration of war on the power of the Censor.

Events then escalated quickly. Calwell ordered that all copy from the *Daily Telegraph* be submitted to the Censor on a daily basis before publication, and the placing of blank spaces was forbidden. The other newspapers joined in the struggle and several confrontations occurred when the Commonwealth Police arrived to prevent the distribution of newspapers. It was rumoured that on two occasions newspaper staff were held at gunpoint, although this was later vigorously denied by the police. However, the *Telegraph's* printing presses were shut down, although a small number of papers were produced in midnight printing runs at the old *Labour Daily* plant at the corner of Brisbane and Goulburn streets in Surry Hills.

Calwell became so infuriated that he ordered the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* off the streets altogether, followed soon after by the *Melbourne Herald* and the *Adelaide News*. This precipitated street protests in which hundreds of university students marched through Sydney streets, converging on the Censor's office and demanding the reopening of the newspapers. There were minor clashes and a few arrests.

Frank Packer, a tough and pugnacious character, had not been idle. He convened a meeting of all the different newspaper heads in the *Daily Telegraph* boardroom at the Consolidated Press Building in Elizabeth Street, where it was decided to mount a High Court challenge to the rulings of the Censor. The High Court quickly upheld this challenge and the papers were soon back on the streets.

A meeting of the full federal Cabinet, which was about to issue

a statement backing Calwell and denigrating the newspapers, was hurriedly called off when the High Court ruling came through. The crisis was over.

It was an awesome display of the power of the press, with the newspaper proprietors easily defeating a senior Cabinet Minister. The lesson of this has not been lost on following generations of politicians, who now go to great lengths to ensure generally peaceful relationships with the media. An army of PR staff and “spinmeisters” of all persuasions is employed to maintain this status quo, and it seems unlikely that such open warfare between Government and press will ever occur again in Australia.

Since 1944 the media landscape has changed substantially, with the power of newspapers significantly eroded by the arrival of television in 1956 and then the birth of the Internet giant during the 1990s. The Internet has led to a great diversification, with “home publishing” flourishing and global distribution possible, even by individuals operating on a shoestring budget.

Despite these fundamental changes to newspapers, it seems likely that there will always be a place for them in the modern media, with Artificial Intelligence (AI) playing an increasing role in their “production, distribution and consumption”. As well as the old “hard copy” form of newspapers, online versions are increasingly popular and this enables more frequent news updates to be initiated and also the ability to personalise news content according to the reader’s desires.

## The News Avoiders

Ross Fitzgerald and Dick Whitaker – and many of their friends and colleagues – have been experiencing various degrees of depression and angst that they put down to continued exposure to relentlessly repetitive and negatively biased news reporting.

Recognised in psychological circles as “a form of psychological manipulation, social conditioning and cognitive overload”, both old and young are susceptible. Disturbingly, this process runs close to the definition of brainwashing.

A frequent reaction is “news avoidance”, a tactic used in this situation, which many people now employ to protect their mental health.

If one does an Internet search on “News Avoidance”, a fascinating discussion is triggered.

AI recently provided this piece:

News avoidance is a growing global phenomenon, with roughly 40 per cent of people frequently avoiding news to protect their mental health, reduce anxiety, and combat fatigue from overwhelming negativity and political content. Driven by distrust in media, constant digital connectivity, and doomscrolling, individuals increasingly turn away from traditional news, favouring curated or less stressful information sources.

Today’s society, at least in the West, is continuously bombarded with what is termed “news”, frequently updated and displayed across 24-hour cycles. For many years news was disseminated through newspapers, radio and television. But this has now been supercharged with the advent of online media, and even more so by social media that is far less controlled than traditional sources.

Information can now be accessed through mobile phones and online devices that use apps, search engines, email newsletters and

RSS feeds as well as podcasts and live streams. RSS stands for “Really Simple Syndication”, a computer system that allows users to automatically receive updated content from a chosen website.

More than ever before we are flooded with information labelled as news, but more often than not is an amalgam of opinion pieces with various inbuilt biases according to the political and social beliefs of the operators. The phenomenon of “fake news” further erodes public confidence in the media that continues in widespread retreat.

AI further reports that:

Public confidence in the media is in significant decline globally, with studies indicating fewer than one in three Americans trust news reporting, while Australian and British figures show similar crises. Driven by perceptions of political bias, agenda-setting, and misinformation, audiences increasingly view traditional media as partisan, damaging the “Fourth Estate’s” credibility.

Bombarded by constant media releases, many people now tune out, preferring to be uninformed rather than misinformed and have become far more selective with their choice of news sources. In Australia, although numbers are decreasing, the ABC and SBS still remain our most trusted brands, but other outlets do not fare as well. Social media, often promulgated by “influencers” who act on commercial imperatives, are the least trusted of all the outlets.

In the modern media landscape it is often more important to be “first” rather than “accurate”, with the metrics of media success judged by the number of “clicks” received on a website. This attracts “bad news” stories that focus on conflict, scandals or intense debates, particularly between prominent individuals such as celebrities, royals and politicians.

One of the oldest adages of journalism is “bad news sells”. This tried and true principle feeds off some fundamentals of human response that include stronger reactions to negative news rather than positive. This is likely because humans perceive that knowledge of danger and risk is more important for survival than the more usual, everyday situations. Another way that this can be expressed is that “If it bleeds it leads”. It is also possible that there is a large dose of *schadenfreude*

here – the German word meaning pleasure obtained in observing the distress of others.

All the above has been going on for decades, but in recent times has been greatly amplified by the nature and capabilities of the electronic media. Algorithms associated with many of the online news services are set to prioritise stories associated with warfare, disasters, political conflict and scandal, therefore maintaining a negative bias.

An annual survey conducted by the *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism* published in June 2025 reported that globally “news avoidance is at a record high”, with respondents reporting that current news presentations had a substantial negative impact on their mood. In addition, people were bewildered by the amount of news and the choice of coverage – overwhelmingly focused on the negative.

Significantly, responders in the *Reuters* survey reported a return to increased feelings of well-being after reducing their daily news intake. This is accomplished through avoiding news altogether or by operating self-imposed “rationing” where the news is watched or heard according to the wishes of the individual rather than an externally imposed media schedule.

What effect is news avoidance having on the commercial landscape? Many industry professionals believe that the effects are profound and a matter of significant concern. In fact, news avoidance has a significant commercial impact on the media industry, primarily driving a decline in revenue for legacy news outlets and forcing a shift in advertising strategies.

An AI overview reports that:

As audiences tune out due to fatigue, negative mood impacts, or mistrust, news organisations face shrinking audiences and reduced advertising revenue, which in turn leads to cost-cutting, reduced staffing, and a decline in the quality of journalism.

At its best, media news is a vitally important way of keeping the population well informed on current affairs and promoting civilised discussion through all levels of society. At its worst, it becomes an endless conga line of warfare, crime, disease, politics and advertising all glued together by political bias, commercialism and *schadenfreude*.

Two important questions arise: “Can the news as we know it today survive in its present form?” and “Can the trend of news avoidance be reversed and trust re-established between the news media and public?”

As we move beyond the second quarter of the 21st century, the shape of the news to come will largely be determined by the way in which we address these fundamental questions.

In Australia, as in many western nations across the world, accurate and trustworthy news services are an essential ingredient of our democracy and should be readily achievable, once we become aware of the impediments that hold us back. Perhaps news avoidance is a part of that process.

And that is why, in America, the press is secured by the First Amendment, being the only business in America specifically protected by the Constitution.

As John F. Kennedy explained in a Presidential Address on 27 April 1961, the Press exists not primarily to amuse and entertain, not to emphasise the trivial and the sentimental, not to simply “give the public what it wants” – but to inform, to arouse, to reflect, to state our dangers and our opportunities, to indicate our crises and our choices, to lead, mould, educate and sometimes even anger public opinion.