

**Whose News?  
Organisational Conflict in the  
Australian Broadcasting  
Corporation**

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Neville Petersen 1947-1999  
*Australian Journalism Monographs*  
Nos. 3 & 4, May-November 1999

**Review by: P. McGregor**

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Neville Petersen's *Whose News?* is an essential new book for anyone concerned about the role of news as information in our society. The title refers to the ongoing battle for control over news within the Australian Broadcasting Commission (transformed into 'Corporation' in 1983) - from the birth of ABC News in 1947 until early 1999, when Petersen's manuscript was completed. Despite being relatively brief at 65 pages, Petersen provides a comprehensive analysis, exposing the past and offering a better understanding of the restricted policy choices facing the ABC at the end of 1999.

Petersen initially worked for 25 years as an ABC TV journalist, then became an academic researching and teaching media and politics. He is currently one of the more incisive scholars in Australia addressing the historical and contemporary practices of media institutions. Approaching the area through the discourses of political economy, and organisational sociology, Petersen's work parallels that of Robert McChesney in the USA.

*Whose News?* offers a riveting case study of the development of a news service 'independent' of commercial pressures, and the subsequent attempts to further gain 'independence' from government and other voices of authority. Petersen addresses the roles of key individuals, both within the organisation and outside in the society at large. His account is sociological rather than psychological, depicting the group interests and political ideologies that individuals represent. You get a feel for some of the personalities involved, but more for the competing values and principles, historically changing newsmaking practices, and the conflict over alternate models.

To contextualise the 'battle' over how the ABC was to define news, Petersen quotes Anthony Smith's insight that the news "expresses the organisation's own picture of the society to which it is broadcasting"(p.2). He immediately contrasts this statement with the increasingly widespread belief amongst journalists, and certainly ABC journalists, in 'the special nature of their calling'. For Petersen, any plausible account of how the ABC as an organisation has evolved its news policy must include both the complex internal dynamic of decision making and the external political pressures.

Petersen's analysis shows how news came to be the flagship of ABC programming, expressing the organisation's values, epitomising the ABC's 'independence'. News came to represent an essential ingredient of the distinctiveness of the ABC, compared to the lack of independence of the commercial media. (For instance, by 1947 the press in Australia had a well-known, consistent track record of hostility to the Labor Party.) At the origins of the ABC's 'independent' news service, in the immediate post-war period of Federal Labor governments, preferential treatment of those in authority became entrenched, both in policy and practice. However, by the 1960s, innovations of the ABC's Current Affairs journalists had come into their own, and constituted an alternative challenge to the credibility of the News division. By 1984 this conflict was resolved, more to the interests of the former, in the integration of the two divisions.

From 1969 Current Affairs staff and programs came to constitute a challenge to both the ethos and the power of News. Petersen describes this as competing professional ideologies. The 'narrowness' of News, its literal factuality contrasted with the irreverence, investigative reporting and other innovations of This Day Tonight. (TDT - ABC TV's flagship nightly Current Affairs program, began in April 1967). TDT reflected the growing diversity in Australia, the questioning of the 1950's consensus, and as Radio Talks also became Current Affairs, competition between News and Current Affairs escalated. With Current Affairs investigating and breaking stories, management continued to side with News as reflecting the organisation's overall (conservative) values.

Nevertheless, compromises and rapport developed - for instance, by 1970 Hamilton had accepted the ABC should not merely provide "comfortable programming and the safe way"(p.23). Meanwhile commercial TV expanded their News, offering more competition, and then, with the ABC's delays in introducing ENG (Electronic News Gathering), ABC TV News audiences declined steeply. In 1976 there were moves to integrate, under News' control but using the techniques of Current Affairs (!), and also to integrate TV and Radio (but under Radio !).

The AJA (Australian Journalists Association) became increasingly active, but for instance, in their contribution to the Dix Review of the ABC in 1980, they held on to the traditional, limited definition of news as fact, together with deference to legitimate authorities. Yet even the Dix Report was questioning "objectivity", and acknowledging the importance of interpretation. Dix raised various options: the use of a domestic news agency (Australian Associated Press), pressures to integrate News into Programs, and a charter for editorial practice, allowing for a more pro-active role in determining what was news. Yet the increasing use of actuality and voice was also giving more of this role - de facto - to reporters. But, unlike in Current Affairs, TV News remained subordinated to Radio News.

With Bob Hawke's election in 1983, the Commission became the Corporation. Petersen suggests that management

finally withdrew its support once News' priorities no longer accorded with the organisation's needs. With TV News ratings in decline, the new managing director, Geoffrey Whitehead, split Radio and TV, and News and Current Affairs were integrated.

Petersen sees his book as a study of the "tension between professional and organisational beliefs about news criteria"(p.59), and offers a fascinating concluding theoretical discussion.

He locates the birth of the ABC's 'independent' news service, somewhat paradoxically, in "the predominance of official sources...reliance on them to define news...and acceptance of their views...as legitimate"(p.60) "Objectivity", the key concept, could be equated with passivity", and functioned as a "strategic ritual designed to provide a veneer of scientific detachment"(p.64), giving the appearance of independence from vested interests. The ABC's reliance on this rigid formula came to also constitute a resistance to change - and to fulfilling its role of adequately informing Australians - which eventually came from outside, from Current Affairs and other departments that were concerned with context, analysis, interpretation and the role of the reporter as participant. Their definition of news was more in terms of social problems and issues, with a questioning approach to politicians and other authority figures.

Petersen suggests management and the organisation withdrew its unconditional support for News when it no longer represented the organisation's needs. The implication here is that in the integration of News within Current Affairs' broader discourses, the ABC's needs were being expressed. While Petersen reveals the turbulent 'evolution' of the definition of news during the ABC's last 50 years, the strengths and weaknesses of current news practices could be specified further. Perhaps there could be more elucidation of the ABC's current distinctive national/social role, and how or whether its News (still) epitomises that role? Petersen concludes with concern about the current pressures for the ABC to be more "balanced" and "objective": given such 'veneers of detachment' have been shown to reinforce the status quo.

Furthermore, it would be the ultimate and sad irony, if, through the pressures to become more 'objective', instead of contrasting with the commercial media, ABC news came to look like them. The appointment of Jonathan Shier as managing director from March 2000 doesn't augur well for an ABC distinguished from commercial media for its 'public broadcasting', 'independence' and 'editorial integrity'. While none of these terms were even mentioned in the press release announcing Shier's appointment, the terms 'commercial' and 'marketing' were repeatedly used.

His book is also significant because it draws attention to the underlying assumptions in recent government policy in Australia - and also internationally - the neo-liberal globalisation discourse. This includes massive cuts - in both budgets and employment - to the public sector, de-regulation and privatisation policies in favour of 'market forces', (namely, allowing further dominance to existing vested interests), and the de-legitimation and marginalisation of non-economic institutions and values.

The attacks on the ABC need to be seen in this overall context. Consider, for instance, the cuts to the university system and increasing funding support for private rather than public schools; the privatisation of welfare/unemployment services (from the CES to the Job Network, and most recently the decimation of the resulting government jobs agency, Employment National); government support for major corporations in terms of 'corporate welfare' (\$6 billion annually in direct outlays - 'handouts' - and tax breaks, compared to \$5.8 billion in unemployment and sickness benefits), and turning a blind eye to their downsizing; and the ignoring or rejection of the advice of environmental and human rights bodies, (pushing ahead regardless with the Jabiluka uranium mine, and refusing to include any but business representatives to the WTO meeting in Seattle.)

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