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CHAPTER ELEVEN

FROM GONZO TO PoMo:
HUNTING NEW JOURNALISM

MARTIN HIRST

PART I: A LOADED REVOLVER. POSTMODERNISTS IN DENIAL. CATCHING UP WITH MR ED.

New journalism has also been called ‘Gonzo journalism’ after the nickname of one of its founders, Hunter S. Thompson. (Conley, 1997, p. 225)

This could well be an ‘urban myth’. Gonzo might be a contraction of the Spanish word ‘gonzagas’ which means ‘to fool’. Or, it could be from a French Canadian word ‘gonzeaux’ meaning ‘shining path’ (Othitis, 1997). Whatever. When I recently asked a student to include Gonzo in his seminar presentation on ‘alternative’ magazines he had a simple question ‘What’s Gonzo journalism?’ ‘Yeah, right.

That Adam didn’t know is no real surprise, he wasn’t even born the year Hunter S. and his attorney were somewhere around Barstow ‘when the drugs began to take hold’ (Thompson, 1993, p. 46). I laughed like a kookaburra when Adam came into class with a copy of Dr Thompson’s The Hell’s Angels, a Strange and Terrible Saga in one hand and a Revolver in the other. No, not Gonzo’s favoured .357, Revolver is a street magazine published in Sydney! Associate editor Oscar Hillerstrom told Adam that Revolver does, to some extent, favour a Gonzo style:
[Thompson's] style is to be loose and free, in a sense, with language, yet at the same time be very sharp and very concise with what's actually going on...with mainstream papers it's the other way 'round. They are very concise with language, but the truth is sometimes swept aside. *Revolver* is an entertainment magazine and it's entertainment as a magazine'. (quoted in Webb, 1998)

So, are Gonzo and New Journalism alive and well in Australia at the end of the millenium? Let's take a look at the forensics, if we can find a body!

Australia's unheralded 'Honcho of Gonzo', Ed Hunt, says young people today are not so much angry as they're 'despairing'. Like me, he believes the postmodern pundits share some responsibility for this. Ed's notoriously hard to catch and I arrived home one day to find a note pinned to my front door with a Bowie knife, it was headed 'Points of contact between Gonzo and Australia':

*July 31, 1992—Hunter S. Thompson, [Rolling Stone editor] Jann Wenner, P J O'Rourke and Bill Greider meet with Bill Clinton at Doe's Eat Place only weeks before the Presidential Election. Bill has already done his very popular saxophone routine. Rolling Stone journalists are representing the 'rock vote'. Bill gets the cover!*

*Jan 18, 1993—Peter Corris, Reg Mombassa, Linda Jaivin and Kathy Bail meet with 'President' Keating at the Ashfield Hotel. Keating gets to reminisce about his days as the manager of the band, the Ramrods, and spread the 'gospel according to Paul' to Australia's 'rock vote'. Paul gets the March cover of Rolling Stone. Yea gods! What a coincidence Marty!? (Bail, K., 1998, June 11. Personal Communication. Kathy Bail is the editor of HQ magazine).*

*Is this a naïve, copy-cat journalism OR a cynical political strategy inspired by the success of Mr. Bill's rise to politico-rock stardom? I would suggest both. I guess this link revolves more around 'rock journalism' than Gonzo, though Linda Jaivin's piece in RS has elements of Gonzo in the style (perhaps she's too tame?).*

*Having considered the material from the Net, I am of the opinion that Gonzo is alive and well Down Under—if only in a twisted, entertainment-focussed way.*

Ed had included his own distilled comments on Gonzo, with
some help from Christine O., our email Gonzo buddy. It’s easier to put the list in than to recreate definitions from scratch:

- overlapping themes of sex, violence, drugs, sport and politics;
- use of epigrammatical quotes and references to public figures;
- a tendency to wander away from the topic;
- sarcasm and vulgarity as humour;
- creative and conversational prose style;
- close scrutiny of the world around the writer.

Mr Ed, you’re a genius, a legend in your own lounge room. Thanks, and look out for the sharks! Ed had left me a pile of stuff he’d downloaded from the WWW. There are plenty of people out there who worship at the many virtual shrines to Gonzo. The best of them is *The Great Thompson Hunt*, by a young Canadian, Christine Othitis. There you will find everything you need to know about Gonzo and the New Journalists, as well there’s some of Christine’s writing. The URL is


Bookmark it!

New Journalism emerged in the 1960s as a response to ‘a revolutionary period’ in which ‘the usual “five Ws” approach to journalism’ failed to meet the needs of a young and angry generation (Conley, 1997, p. 225). What are we to make of claims (Hartley, 1996) that there is a ‘new’ kind of journalism emerging as we approach the end of the twentieth century? New Journalism was new in the late 1960s, but what is ‘Postmodern Journalism’? As we shall see media theorist John Hartley calls it ‘semiotics with funding,’ I call it ‘bullshit’!

If there is ‘Postmodern Journalism’ in the 1990s does it speak to an angry generation and where does it come from? Can we point to changed circumstances that amount to a ‘revolutionary’ period? Certainly there has been a ‘revolution’ of sorts in technology, the creation of what Richard Harwood calls a ‘new media age’ (Harwood and Postman, 1995). Postmodernists claim that the ‘information revolution’ has finished ‘modernism’ for good, but in politics they prefer that sick modernist ideology, ‘liberalism without compromise’, to ‘revolutionary’ change:
The radical option is [no longer] to oppose power but to create different kinds of power...that might be more fluid, flexible, diverse, multiple, but is, for all that, still power. (Wark, 1998, p. 36)

New Journalism was the antithesis of this statement. Gonzo attacked the military-industrial complex and encouraged youth to tear it down. Postmodernists not only want to destroy our collective memory of the sixties (Wark, 1998), they are in denial about the existence of the military-industrial complex. They see instead an ‘entertainment’ structure, driven by Hollywood and the Pentagon (Wark, 1998, p. 28). There’s a simple, but effective answer to this: *Somebody has to make the Tamagochi!* 

I’m sitting at the computer and it’s 36 hours till deadline. Two o’clock on a Sunday afternoon and there’s an almighty screeching of tyres outside. When I look out the window there’s Ed’s intensive-care white Kingswood ute, ‘Lucille’, hard up against the fence; engine running and the driver’s door flung open. Ed sprints up shouting. ‘I need my knife, there’s a black snake under the dashboard.’ He retrieves the knife and dives back into the ute. After a couple of minutes of indescribable noise and horror Ed emerges, the snake gutted, filleted and ready for the BBQ. ‘Nice work, Ed,’ I mumble as he pushes past and heads straight for the liquor cabinet. ‘Yeah, I need a drink. What’re ya doin’?’

He doesn’t wait for an answer, grabbing the first few pages off the printer and getting comfortable in my study. ‘Sure Ed, take a seat. Let me know what you think.’ How I’ve come to regret my innocent invitation. You can’t stop maniacal intelligence when it’s fuelled by 47 proof Wild Turkey. But what the hey! ‘Settle in Ed, but remember, anything you say might be taken down and used against you. That’s the way it is buddy. You know the rules.’

**PART 2: POSTMODERN JOURNALISM. ‘REVOLUTION’ AS FASHION ACCESSORY.**

The movie is the principle mode of American public storytelling. (Wark, 1998, p. 30)
In *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*, John Hartley makes an argument for Postmodern political reporting:
sensitive to its readership, to the political importance of the story, and to the transcodings of time, space and subject matter that characterize a public sphere that is inside a mediasphere inside the semiosphere. (Hartley, 1996, p. 125)

For Hartley the appearance of an edition of *Vogue* magazine, in French (of course), edited by Nelson Mandela, ‘marks a decisive shift from modernist to postmodern journalism’ (1996, p. 126). I could bare my teeth and argue with Hartley’s statement that *Vogue* is the ‘most recognized name in [French] journalism’ (p. 125)—the editors of *Paris Match* or *Le Monde* may have something to say about that Monsieur Hartley. I’d like to take Hartley by the throat, shake him like a wounded animal and chew on the meagre evidence he offers to defend his thesis—one issue of *Vogue*, plus a handful of stories about a soapie star past her use-by date—but there’s no point.

My urges are more primal and I harbour an ugliness that demands a response. I want to rip the heart out of Hartley’s claims for this ‘new’ ‘postmodern’ journalism. I asked a colleague whether it was fair on either side to claim a family link between New and Postmodern Journalism? He looked at me over the top of his whiskey glass, smirking: ‘No, the link’s not that close. But you could say they’re from the same gene pool.’ Thanks Gerry, now we’ll see some action.

What is Postmodern Journalism? No one explains it more clearly than Hartley himself:
Postmodern journalism is capitalized cultural studies, semiotics with funding, a carefully controlled textualization of politics for a popular readership which is highly literate in a mediasphere where scholarship has scarcely ventured. (Hartley, 1996, p. 127)

‘Is that clear now?’ The question’s nudged out in the direction of Ed’s armchair. I can tell from his answer that my booze has made him forget the incident with the snake: ‘If you can make sense of this gibberish without feeling like you’ve been evicted from Hartley’s low rent “mediasphere” you don’t need drink. Marty, fix me another Turkey on the rocks’.
I ponder the aesthetics of a drunk Mr Ed hovering over my shoulder as I struggle with Hartley’s dense concept of a Postmodern Journalism that ‘aestheticises’ politics by combining the public with the personal, critique with fashion. According to Hartley, traditional ‘front-page’ journalism ‘values one side of a binary opposition over another’ in a nasty ‘modernist’ way, while ‘semiotics with funding’ (advertisers pay a fortune for space in *Vogue*) is ‘much more dialogic’.

The public struggle against apartheid is represented in *Vogue*:

in terms of things that traditionally belong to the private, personal sphere—not least style, fashion, personality, sensuality, beauty. (Hartley, 1996, p. 127)

I can’t help thinking in my unenlightened modernist way that what Hartley is praising here is no more than clever marketing by *Vogue*—turning a life and death struggle into pretty pictures and Nelson Mandela into a bankable fashion accessory. Ed’s not satisfied. ‘You know what I think?’ It’s purely rhetorical. ‘No, what?’ He lets fly and even an old cynic like me pops an eye: ‘This makes Mandela a fancy brooch on a gaudy low cut sweater. The advertisers and *Vogue* marketing have chipped in for dry cleaning, removing the stain of Apartheid’.

I look at Ed, grinning like a salt-water crocodile: ‘You know Ed, I think Pilger agrees with you. Did you see his excellent doco on the ABC last Tuesday night?’ ‘Yeah, he basically thinks the “New” South Africa’s a bloody frightful place. They’ve replaced one form of oppression with another. Now the bad guys have black faces too!’ This is getting out of hand, I try to slow him down: ‘Steady on Ed, we don’t want to upset the children’.

‘Perhaps we’re being a little unfair,’ I subtly try to change the subject by fixing Ed another drink. ‘If we assume for a moment that Hartley’s right, that there is Postmodern Journalism, we might expect to find it in a journal describing itself as “the magazine of the 21st century”’. I shove a copy of *21C* into Ed’s hand, for indeed that’s what it claimed to be. He appears to be interested and returns to the armchair, leaving me to get on with writing.

Unfortunately *21C* didn’t make it to the twenty-first century. *21C* first appeared in 1995, but 26 issues later it’s over in the current format. Thanks, in part, to a lack of demand for advertising space
between its expensive covers (it retailed for $9.95). In issue #25, which is the second last, the masthead slogan has been changed to ‘scanning the future’, but it does contain an article that might be Postmodern Journalism. I ask Ed to take a look at McKenzie Wark’s ‘Pop Politics,’ in which a series of typical action movies, like Independence Day and Broken Arrow, are used as a metaphor for America in the 1990s. He reads out a line from the piece: ‘Hollywood still does a remarkably good job of articulating the virtual republic’ (Wark, 1998, p. 30). He’s laughing so hard it nearly chokes him, clearly he finds it amusing. ‘Marty, this is no more than Hartley’s “capitalized cultural studies”. Hollywood movies are NOT the real world.’

This new fashion in journalism is really only a version of what Wolfe was arguing against in the 1960s, a trend he described as ‘Neo Fabulist’. While Wolfe is talking here about the novel, his comments apply equally to Hartley’s ‘semiotics with funding’:

...the Neo Fabulist becomes like the engineer who decides to give up electricity because it has ‘been done’. (Wolfe, 1973, p. 41)

The postmodernists have this attitude towards history, their only claim to fame is to place ‘postmodern’ in front of everything, as if this is enough to invent it again.

PART 3: OBJECTIVITY ‘SUCKS’—THE GONZO APPROACH TO POLITICAL JOURNALISM. ROCK’N ROLLIN’ ROLLING STONE.

I don’t quite understand this worship of objectivity in journalism. Now, just flat-out lying is different from being subjective. (Hunter S. Thompson, 28 August 1997, in Hahn, 1997)

In the 1960s Gonzo was radical chic and explicitly political—in the sense that it was the response of a generation to the troubles of its time. New Journalism was soon identified with those who dared to expose the vested interests that hold together the large news proprietors and the owners of the ‘military—industrial complex’. Thompson went to Washington DC in 1972 to cover the Nixon campaign and to write about it in the same way he covered other stories, ‘as close to the bone as I could get, and to hell with the
consequences’ (Thompson, 1994, p. 14). However, there was one consequence he couldn’t ignore. Thompson’s friends began to desert him, slithering into the night, in case they said things in his presence that would ‘almost certainly turn up on the newsstands two weeks later’ (Thompson, 1994, p. 15).

One of the features of New Journalism is that the point of view is both obvious and subjective. There’s honesty among all the weirdness in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72*; at least you know where Thompson stands:

Objective journalism is a hard thing to come by these days. We all yearn for it, but who can point the way? ...Don’t bother to look for it here—not under any byline of mine; or anyone else I can think of. (Thompson, 1994, p. 44)

*Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* is not, in Thompson’s words, a ‘reasoned analysis of the ’72 election campaign’. Rather, in true Gonzo style it is ‘more a jangled campaign diary’, written over the 12 months between the primaries and the November election as a ‘high-speed cinematic reel-record of what the campaign was like at the time, not what the whole thing boiled down to or how it fits into history’. (Thompson, 1994, p. 17)

Like much of Thompson’s work, *Fear and Loathing* was written to be serialised in *Rolling Stone*, and for 20 years the magazine was synonymous with New Journalism. However, *Rolling Stone* was primarily a music magazine. As founding editor Jann Wenner said in his introduction to the book celebrating a quarter century of the magazine:

We understood that music was the glue holding a generation together. And through music ideas were being communicated about personal relationships, social values, political ethics and the way we wanted to conduct our lives. The mainstream media at that time—movies, television, newspapers and magazines—were paying scant attention to what turned out to be one of the biggest stories of the times: the emerging generational upheaval in America. (Wenner in Love 1993, p. x)

In the 1990s *Rolling Stone* is not the same magazine it was 30 years ago. As Christine Othitis notes, today’s *Rolling Stone* is a schizo-
phrenic publication:

For a magazine that so vehemently protested the [Vietnam] war, I find its credibility shaky when half the magazine is made up of ads for the Army, Navy, cars and shoes. Many feel that when [Rolling Stone] moved from San Francisco to New York, it had joined the ranks of all the other magazines and newspapers out there that they had once fought against. RS wasn't out anymore, it was in'. (Othitis, 1997)

This makes me uncomfortable. I get Kathy B. on the phone. She was a Rolling Stone editor in a previous life and has the info I need.

'Yeah, it is a bit more corporate these days. But perhaps that because the distinction between “mainstream” and “alternative” has broken down. There is some good New Journalism in Rolling Stone, but it really sticks out against the advertising.'

Kathy mentions a few names: John Birmingham, Paul Toohey and Linda Jaivin. She says Paul's written a book, God's Little Acre, that contains some classic writing in the Gonzo style. 'There's a great story about going out to Cabramatta on a train with some junkies.' Then there's Linda's piece about spending the night as an 'S&M victim' at the Hellfire Club, 'but then she got into it'. We say goodbye and Kathy promises to send me some clippings. Unfortunately, they won't arrive before the Turkey runs out. Ed's still here, his stinking sweet bourbon breath on my neck. I don't know how he manages to focus, reading over my shoulder as the cursor flies across the screen, chased by my fingers. But he's still thinking. 'It's a queer and wrecked world Marty, ruled by market forces.' My ears prick up. 'Yeah Ed, go on, I'm still listening.'

'If it doesn't sell...it doesn't get said! These shit-eating dogs called account execs have got a whole generation by the nipples. I don't think music's got much to say these days. Even Geri's had enough of the fucking Spice Girls and wants out...If those no-talent bimbos are the glue holding Generation X together... we're all stuffed!'

I show him a piece John Birmingham emailed me, something he wrote for Rolling Stone in early 1997 about cops attacking a rock concert in Brisbane. 'Marty, this is a classic, it's all about music, sex, drugs
and power. We’ve found it, a pure example of Gonzo Down Under.' He reads out a line, ‘“Expecting their conservative National Party boss would back them up, they were probably horrified to discover he might just leave them with their dicks in the breeze”.’ We piss ourselves laughing. Way to go John, thanks a million.

PART 4: ‘ORSTRAYLEE-YUH’ IN THE SIXTIES—OVERCOMING THE ‘CRINGE’ FACTOR. THE ‘FERRET’—AUSTRALIA’S ANSWER TO GONZO?

I inhaled, I snorted, I did all those things. Of course I did. Journos can do that. We can do anything. No one cares about us (Malcolm Farr, personal communication, 1997, September)

In the 1960s when the global economy was expanding and social questions dominated the political agenda, there was money around to pay for investigative journalism. There were plenty of ‘Establishment’ journalists breaking stories about the war in Vietnam and racial hatred in the American south. Watergate shook the ‘Establishment’ to its worm-eaten core. In Australia, we were perhaps five years behind. It was the ugly and treacherous dismissal of the Whitlam government that shaped a new political generation of journalists. However, they had also been ‘dope smokers’ and anti-war in the late 1960s. The Daily Telegraph’s chief political correspondent in Canberra, Malcolm Farr, speaks for many of his generation:

I remember going to a lot of rallies, both as a journalist and just as an individual...I was in the last conscription period...I was at university through the [Vietnam] moratorium...the Whitlam government was quite an eye-opener...

For Malcolm Farr and many of his colleagues in journalism the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975 was an important influence, pushing them either to the left or the right. But it wasn’t just politics, other aspects of the time had an impact. Whether or not they inhaled and snorted enough to be considered Gonzo is a moot point.
In the 1960s Australian culture was beginning to emerge from a Menzian time warp, imperial influence shifted from Britain to Australia’s new partner, the United States. While Menzies is best remembered for his shameless and sycophantic fealty to the British crown, his successor, Harold Holt, proclaimed ‘All the way with LBJ’.

There’s no doubt that the sixties mood for change had an impact on the ‘baby boomer’ generation. In October 1970 a wealthy and slightly eccentric businessman, Gordon Barton, capitalised on this sentiment and published the first issue of Nation Review. A magazine that was definitely anti-establishment:

There were Vietnam marches and moratoria...and the stench of police corruption in the three eastern States was so high even the pollies were finding it difficult to ignore it. The excesses of hippiedom had begun to give way to the first murmurings of women’s lib and gay lib and friends of the earth....And we were young men with a great passion to create something new in Australian journalism...(Walsh, 1993, p. 7)

In response to the first issue the then NSW premier R. W. Askin, wrote that the publication was ‘quite attractive as a newspaper’, but would improve with ‘a little less cynicism and a little more objectivity on various public issues’. The arch conservative Askin was as tough and cunning as an old dingo living on the edge of an outback town. Such wild dogs sniff the wind and slink towards corruption. This was a sure sign that Nation Review was living up to its motto, ‘like a ferret, lean and nosey’ (Walsh, 1993, p. 15). Walsh himself is proud of the Review’s bias. In Ferretabilia he writes:

It was a well-credentialled left-liberal paper, but too often it was weighed down by its sense of its own seriousness and worthiness. Even the humour...[was] high literary. (1993, p. 13)

One of the magazine’s political correspondents told how he had been rolled in an ALP preselection battle for a Melbourne state seat. Niall Brennan’s ‘participant–observer’ account has the flavour of New Journalism’s personal and narrative style.

It was like a gathering of the chieftains, or a harvest festival after a bad winter. Footscray Town Hall rang to the patter of jovial Labor Party
The *Review* continued to cover politics this way and on Anzac Day 1971 a piece by Mungo MacCallum, ‘We that are Left shall grow old’, so rattled Labor stalwart Arthur Calwell that he felt it necessary to sue the magazine for libel (Walsh, 1993, p. 28). MacCallum’s piece can be fairly described as New Journalism in that it is highly opinionated and iconoclastic towards the ‘grand old men’ of the ALP parliamentary left.

Far from being a grand old conscience, they have deteriorated into a narrow and embittered gerontocracy, whose actions seem motivated by almost anything except the desire to enhance the party’s electoral prospects. (MacCallum, 1993, p. 28)

In 1971 being different meant using ‘fuck’ in the *Review* (Walsh, 1993, p. 16), something that many mainstream dailies still refuse to do, preferring to amend it to f**k, or f***. However, the ‘f-word’ does not a Gonzo make. We have to look a little more deeply into the soul of ‘The Ferret’ to know for sure. On the occasion of the magazine’s half-year ‘birthday’, when it was still called the *Sunday Review*, New Journalism was far from the minds of the editor and staff:

*The Sunday Review* is ... witty and abrasive commentary [and] is clearly descended from the historic traditions of Australian journalism. (Walsh, 1993, p. 20).

So was New Journalism active in Australia and who is the antipodean equivalent of Hunter S. Thompson? It might not be stretching it too far to suggest it could be Evan Whitton, whose journalistic career began on the Melbourne *Truth*. In a collection of his writing, *Amazing Scenes: Adventures of a Reptile of the Press*, Whitton mentions Wolfe’s New Journalism as an influence. However, Whitton says since reporting has been around since ‘about 120 AD’, that perhaps it could be called ‘neo-journalism’ (1987, p. 13). Ed’s now slumped a foot or so lower in the easy chair, but despite (or perhaps because of) the Turkey his mind’s on the game. ‘Hey Marty, I like this bit, but let’s get real.’ I didn’t realise he’d been scribbling and drawing for hours. He hands me several sheets of paper, mostly illegible, but
with some nice cartoons and this pithy comment scrawled across one page:

The lizard may have clawed its way out of the bag; but has no reason to get its frills in a knot. The easy way out is to warm your belly on the Federal Highway.

The Turkey’s slurring his speech, but I try to get it down accurately.

‘Maybe it’s because we’re also cynical and casual in our approach to politics, unlike America in the sixties, when everyone who wasn’t “stoned” was “uptight”?’

I think he’s onto something and reach for my copy of Mungo MacCallum’s *Australian Political Anecdotes*, where I find the following, ‘the cynicism with which the media and the public have regarded the whole [political] process has produced an air of informality’ (MacCallum, 1994, p. x). This in itself may be enough to explain why Gonzo was not a ‘goer’ in Australia.

Mungo MacCallum is my personal pick as Australia’s answer to Thompson. But when I finally get him on the phone I’m disappointed to hear he doesn’t think that Gonzo is a term applicable to Australian journalism. Certainly not in the ‘drug-rattled’ and ‘made up’ sense it applied in sixties America. Mungo tells me that the ‘factional’ nature of much Gonzo appears to contradict all that journalism is about—truth telling.

MacCallum says that certainly the sixties were a period of change and that Australian journalism had a ‘rebellious’ streak and was ‘irreverent’ in that it wanted to ‘take apart’ the social structure and see what was really going on. However, he told me that at the time no one in Australia was reading Tom Wolfe, or William Burroughs. Despite this, *Nation Review* exhibits some strains of New Journalism and perhaps at the far reaches, fed on the flesh of Gonzo itself. *What’s next?* (Mungo MacCallum, personal communication, 1998)

Most contemporary Australian journalism continues to worship ‘objectivity’, even if it does contain opinion. Ninety-nine per cent of political reporting is only churning out the dominant ideology. It rarely, if ever, goes outside the framework of parliamentary
free-market liberal democratic ideas. Unfortunately there's not much around today that wears the Gonzo crown with any panache.

I've asked Ed to take a look at *Revolver*, it has an interesting way of involving the reporters in the stories, mainly band interviews. But he's firmly of the opinion that, in the end, it's just another music rag. 'What about Mindvomit?' I ask. He looks over the *Revolver* column written by Chris Fleming: 'Yeah, it's funny, but it's not reporting. It's good satire, but it's not journalism'. You're right again Ed. We pull a pile of the *Independent* and my collection of *New Journalist* down off the shelf, but after several hours we can't find anything to celebrate there either. 'It's gone', I call out to Ed. 'Extinct, like the Tasmanian Tiger.' As a last ditch attempt to find something current and Gonzo, Ed's poring over the *Republican*. He looks up from the floor, 'Is this dead too?' 'Yeah', I reply. My heart's not in the chase any more. 'It only lasted about four issues. A shame, but no Gonzo there buddy.' Richard Evans wrote a bitter obituary for the *Republican* in the Media Alliance magazine:

The worst thing that can come out of *The Republican* fiasco is that it convinces people that an independent newspaper is an impossibility. This is not true...It just requires skill, innovation, a bit of luck and a lot of cheek. (Evans, 1998, p. 19)

Ed opines that *The Republican* most likely bored itself to death and I agree. 'Worthy it is and Gonzo it's not.' Ed says he can't believe that critical Australian journalism's so dead. 'Well, there's Eureka Street', I offer, but I'm not hopeful, 'it's published by a bunch of Jesuits in Melbourne'. Ed's blasphemy shocks even this lifelong atheist. 'Sweet fucken' Jesus, "for God and Gonzo", hey Marty? This country's gone straight to the friggin' dogs under that low lying bastard Howard. Gimme the bottle!' Ed's shit-faced, but at least the Turkey keeps him quiet.

PART 5: ONE 'CRASH-EDIT' DOES NOT A GONZO MAKE.
TANYA'S 'FAX WARS' WITH TRIPLE J. TABLOID TV AND A GENERATION OF DESPAIR.

*Her career ambition is to be to Gen X what Kerrie Anne Kennerly is to the blue rinse set.* (Sarah MacDonald, 1998).
‘Does Gonzo infect the electronic media too?’ When Myles phoned he said it occurred to him that ABC ‘youth’ radio station Triple J might be ‘Gonzo-on-the-air’. ‘You know’, he said, ‘they have that funny news tag that sounds like the ABC theme with a warp in the tape loop’. ‘I’m not sure, Myles’. I held the phone close, trying to stall him and thinking fast. ‘I’d rather write about Hartley’, I suggested. ‘You know I have a fix on him.’ The professor was persistent. ‘Well you know they say “motherfucker” and “cocksucker” on the news. Can you do something on that?’ Maybe, but this close to deadline? I’m too old for JJJ these days, well outside their demographic, so I wouldn’t know. ‘What do you think about the Jays, Ed, are they Gonzo?’ He takes another sip of Turkey and looks a bit vacant as he ponders the question:

‘Yea gods! Think about the finer art of Gonzo, Marty. Are these not the primary traits of [radio and television comedy duo] Roy and HG? They may struggle to qualify as journalists, BUT Gonzo they are!!!! If the style of Gonzo is throwing yourself into a situation and writing your way out, Roy and HG do this on the radio. However, I guess there are two major differences, which arguably take the edge off Roy and HG in terms of politics. First, everyone knows they’re “characters”, while Hunter S. has built his writing persona around himself. Second, Roy and HG trivialise the important and make the trivial important, thereby focussing on the humour. On the other hand Thompson takes the important to its darkest extremes. But they are fucking Gonzo Marty... no doubt about it.

Christ, I’d never heard Ed so cogent, especially after nearly a whole bottle of bourbon. ‘Yeah, OK Ed, calm down. Look, we know you’re excited about Roy and HG, but what about the rest of JJJ, particularly the newsroom?’ Ed’s fuming now, bourbon-flavoured spittle forming around his mouth. Steadying himself he manages to slur out a few more epithets: ‘Triple Jay news and Gonzo? No bleedin’ way. They just fuck with things to be cool—and cool they are!’ I can feel the scorn dripping down the back of my neck, Ed’s close behind me, waving his arms in extreme agitation. I glance around to make sure he’s not going to knock my head off and then turn back to the screen, fingers poised to record his ranting:

‘Those guys are cool. That’s for sure! So cool that we now have a mainstream “alternative” market—and Triple Jay is a fashion label for
the bastard children of Generation X—who the admen and bean counters have turned into the Generation of Despair.’

Ed’s eyes are brimming with tears. I can’t tell if it’s the Turkey, or pure emotion. Is this hard-bitten man, who’s faced down hordes of jiving teenagers in some of the state’s toughest schools, actually sobbing? Jeezuz, this is scary! ‘Yeah, they have fucken’ attitude,’ he’s almost spitting the words at me:

‘But Gonzo is MUCH MORE than attitude...Gonzo has purpose. I don’t see any purpose in a radio station that feeds on an angst-ridden cool culture.’

Ed reaches for a piece of paper. It’s on the pile I downloaded earlier from the JJJ Website. ‘JJJ news claims to be independent and relevant to a younger audience, but what’s this crap?’ He reads from the sheet:

‘Sometimes fuming—but usually amused—...I arrive and settle down to digest the morning’s news...and there they are: amazing stories from all over Australia and the globe to be edited...pasted...as well as slapped and tickled into shape.’

Ed’s on a roll now: ‘Slap and fucking tickle! They’re not doing anything special. Just cogs in a big media machine. It’s disappointing Marty. But, shit, the truth often is’.

He’s right. On the surface Triple J can appear to be Gonzo, but the news is pretty straightforward stuff. Most of it is taken straight from the ABC’s computer. For one thing, budget constraints limit the amount of expensive original reporting that the JJJ staff can do. But you don’t have to believe me. Several of my students looked at JJJ news during seminars for Specialty Reporting. Their overwhelming conclusion was that there’s really nothing new, imaginative or different in the news. Tanya even got a fax from a Triple J producer who told her, ‘because you pestered me’, that the network’s ‘qualitative research’ rated the environment as the number one audience concern, ‘before politics, sport, sex, drugs whatever [sic]’. The fax also says that JJJ staff ‘maintain an awareness by listening/watching/reading other media’, as well as the following free advice:

Please pass on to your fellow students and your lecturers that LISTENING to the radio and interpreting it yourself are also valuable research
methods. (Rossiter, 1998)

Yeah, well we did that and our conclusion is that if you want useful, alternative information, you’re wasting your time listening to JJJ! Though it hasn’t always been the case. Until the introduction of the national network in 1990 the JJJ Sydney newsroom did produce more than two hours a day of original current affairs material, as well as interesting and informative spoken-word programming throughout the day. But the purge of talent at the end of that year, Helen Thomas, Tony Biggs and many others (me among them), sealed the station’s fate. Triple J’s management capitulated and handed their souls over to the ‘suits’ and the bad hair boys. The music was blanded out and *The Drum* silenced forever. It still hurts and I sometimes have to scream:

‘Damn you sons of bitches. It’s not important that you fucked up my life, I recovered. But I can never forgive you for destroying the life work of many dedicated reporters and producers. You know who you are; I wonder how you sleep at night!’

Things were different in the early days, but today JJJ is a travesty of its former self. Under resourced thanks to the backward-looking policies of successive Federal Governments and staffed by hip young things with very little experience, Triple J cannot be taken seriously as a force in contemporary journalism. It seems that the reporters working the newsroom today don’t even take themselves, or their craft, very seriously either. Here’s what Ed and I found on the JJJ Webpages, posted by the news staff themselves:

Finally at the last minute [I] dash into the news booth...I run inside, sit down square, pop on the ‘phones, catch my breath...and hope eternal I don’t mistakenly call the chief minister of the Northern Territory...Sharon Stone.

It’s bushfire season. I race into the news studio with 30 seconds to go.

I sat bolt upright in bed and realised I had to read the seven o’clock news in ten minutes.

I rise...shower...clothe...and consume a few items to speed me on my merry way to the Jay newsroom: strong coffee...cola...cappuccino
flavoured chocolate coffee beans and some guarana chewing gum.

Without looking over my shoulder I call out, ‘Shit, Ed, what would the good Doctor make of this tame excuse for substance abuse?’ He doesn’t respond. I look around. Too late, Ed’s fallen full length on to the couch. His shallow breathing indicates the sleep of a troubled man. Oh well, I have to get this finished. I grab the Turkey bottle and take a deep swig, but there’s not enough left to really space me out. Now I’m wishing I had the medicine bag packed for Thompson’s trip to Las Vegas all those years ago:

We had two bags of grass, 75 pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt-shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers ... and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls. (Thompson, 1993, p. 46)

As far as I can tell when JJJ does try to go beyond the mainstream news agenda, it’s not so much hard-hitting exposes, but lifestyle journalism (a staple of Hartley’s Postmodern Journalism). The Morning Show, for example, lists several regular segments about ‘ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING’. This pot pourri includes, ‘why pubic hair is curly, why the economy’s collapsing and what’s the latest musical craze in Botswana’. Nope, if you’re looking for Gonzo on the radio Professor, don’t spin that dial to the Js. There’s nothing there but wallpaper for the ears.

In the early seventies New Journalism did enjoy a brief, but worthwhile, stint on Australian television. However, it too has succumbed to the terrors of the Postmodern, in the form of vacuous ‘tabloid TV’.

In his foreword to Bill Peach’s personal history of the now defunct ABC current affairs show This Day Tonight, historian Ken Inglis describes some of the qualities exhibited by the program ‘intelligence, honesty, guts and good humour’. Qualities that perhaps reflect the spirit of Gonzo in television format. Inglis adds to the mix, ‘a compound of irreverence and skepticism towards all holders of power’ and he concludes, ‘TDT did more than any other program to make that change in the culture of public life’. It might be fair to
suggest that TDT's signature tune alone is a clue to the program's 'difference', 'a new sound, gently percussive, syncopated, sprightly', especially when compared with the ABC's 'sonorous Majestic Fanfare', which was the news theme in those days (Inglis, in Peach, 1992). Hey Myles, maybe you were onto something with that Triple J music thing. It's interesting that Bill Peach was also a contributor to Nation Review. Editor's note: Yes Marty, but wait until you read the travails of Anne Dunn when she tried to monkey about with Majestic Fanfare. It is in chapter fourteen. This is all very profound speculation, with life imitating art.

PART 6: WE INTER THE CORPSE OF AUSTRALIA'S NEW JOURNALIST AND DISCOVER POSTMODERNISM IS AN X FILES PLOT. ED FINALLY SUCCUMBS.

It's perfectly obvious that information has become a form of garbage, and ourselves garbage collectors. (Harwood and Postman, 1995)

Neil Postman says there's an information glut and that journalists sort the rubbish, 'what is on the front page, determined by editors, is a statement of what they think an educated person...should know about' (Harwood and Postman, 1995). The point he's really making is that the media is supposed to help inform a democratic society and assist citizens to make informed decisions on matters of public interest. New Journalism certainly believed it had this function, but I don't think the sort of Postmodern Journalism pimped by Hartley goes anywhere near it.

Harwood makes a plea for journalists to do more reporting, by which he means going out and finding the story. He says journalists can only make themselves 'increasingly relevant by having a deeper understanding of the communities in which [they] operate...get out of the newsroom and talk to people more' (Harwood and Postman, 1995). To me this sounds like a plea for a revival of New Journalism, especially when Harwood adds, 'but asking very different questions that elicit peoples' stories so you can understand the meaning of peoples' lives and what they're struggling with' (Harwood and Post-
On the surface there is some similarity between the New Journalism of the 1960s and the Postmodern Journalism of the 1990s. Both claim a birthright in ‘literary’ journalism; both claim to represent a break with journalistic orthodoxy and a blurring of the non-fiction—fiction demarcation line. But that’s about as far as it goes. New Journalism was about exposing the ugly side of life, digging up the corpses and provoking readers into action. On the other hand, Postmodernism is tarted-up carpet-bagging and intellectual posturing, devoid of insight or anything worthwhile. Postmodernism is trash TV; *A Current Affair, Oprah Winfrey* and *Australia’s Funniest Home Videos!* ‘And so we go for the cheap shot, and television for an even cheaper shot. And the result is that we’re all tired with the consequences’ (Frankel in Harwood and Postman, 1995).

In its heyday during the late 1960s and early 1970s New Journalism was very confrontationist. On all the major social issues of the day New Journalism took a radical position. Though, as Wolfe says, we shouldn’t confuse the New Journalists with ‘the technically old-fashioned sort’ who wrote for the New Left (Wolfe, 1973, p. 43). This is where Australia’s own *New Journalist* really fits into the picture. The magazine lasted for 12 years (1972–1984) and 44 issues, but it didn’t promote ‘new’ journalism so much as the New Left. Though it did print some work by journalism students at NSWIT in the mid-1980s, including some of mine! *New Journalist* was an organising tool for rank and file activists in the Australian Journalists’ Association.

Gonzo is an extremist form that spoke to and for a generation that was deeply suspicious of authority and the ‘military-industrial complex’. On the other hand, Hartley’s insipid examples of so-called Postmodern political journalism are no more than the incorporation of once oppositional discourses into the commodity fetishism of late capitalism. Like the Chameleon, PoMo journalism changes its colours to blend into a bright and gaudy environment. In Hartley’s example the black revolution in South Africa is reduced to a fashion accessory for the nouveau riche in western Europe. New Journalism was speaking to an angry generation looking for an alternative
to ‘the system’. Vogue speaks directly to the rich and powerful who are ‘the system’ and Postmodernists speak in tongues, intelligible only to other initiates.

Yossi Melman got it right in his response to Richard Harwood: ‘You talked about superfluous information, garbage. We have it already with television and cable television’ (Melman, in Harwood and Postman, 1995). Unfortunately the Postmodernists celebrate this ‘dumbing down’ of information:

Tabloid television...confronts us with a taste of our televisual future...blurring of the private and public realm, [blending] information and entertainment...tabloid television enacts many of the central dilemmas of the information revolution we are currently undergoing. (Lumby and O’Neil, 1994, p. 160)

There’s that word ‘revolution’ again being used in a technological, rather than a social, sense. But like all clever Postmodernists, these two have an escape clause. If you agree then you’re obviously a ‘pre-eminent Australian cultural studies theorist’ (Lumby and O’Neil, 1994, p.155). But, if you disagree with their superficial analysis, ‘which mimics the way people consume popular culture’ (p.155), then you must be one of the ‘ “pretentious little class of school-teachers and academics”’ that ‘“pisses me off”’ (Gerald Stone, quoted in Lumby and O’Neil, 1994, p. 151). ‘Hey Gerry, do I piss you off? I hope so!’ At this point I’m so pissed off myself that I have to shake Ed awake and get a comment. He’s no use at all. ‘Tell ’em to get fucked, Marty’, is all he can manage.

Postmodern Journalism is the opposite of community building. As Neil Postman says, ‘the fact is most of our modern media have been privatizing experiences...Everything is moving us away from a sense of co-present community life’. This idea is welcomed by McKenzie Wark who wrote ‘we no longer have roots, we have aeri­als’ in Virtual Geography (1994). As Postman says, a virtual community is ‘something quite, quite different from what we would normally think of as community life’. (Harwood and Postman, 1995)

Postmodern Journalism is a bastard child, but thankfully New Journalism is neither mother nor father. ‘You were right, Gerry. I owe
you one.' Postmodern Journalism is the unlovely offspring of Wolfe’s ‘Neo-Fabulists’. It’s a hybrid of fable, myth and fabulous consumerism. The bastard has got parents though. One resides in a Hollywood studio, the other in a Wall Street penthouse. They meet only occasionally, usually to argue about who’s going to collect royalties on the work of the bastard. The child is grown up now and, high on crack, sells its worn-out soul to the highest bidder. This work, while of little redeeming social value, does keep the parents in the style to which they’ve become accustomed. They, not the offspring, are the real bastards!

Phew, I’ve made it to the second last paragraph, with minutes to spare. My great pal, Ed, is snoring quietly on the sofa. I’ve just covered him with a blanket. An empty bourbon bottle lies between us. He holds that dangerous knife so tightly I thought I’d break his fingers trying to remove it. As Ed falls into an alcoholic stupor, I can’t resist recording his last words on the subject. ‘Damn snake, it’ll bite you every time. Unless you kill the fucker first.’

History will judge us my friend. Sleep well.

REFERENCES

Hartley, J. (1996). Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Cul-


