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When too much entertainment is barely enough: current affairs television in the 1990s.

Martin Hirst, Tiffany White, David Chaplin and Justine Wilson.

Current affairs television: entertainment vs news values

Tabloid television is here to stay, but is it a good thing? This debate has assumed a new importance in the past year as competitive pressures push television networks into experimenting with more and more “infotainment” programming in their news and current affairs time slots (Lipski, 1993). There is no doubt that increasing emphasis on entertainment is having an impact on traditional news values, but we disagree with a ‘post-modern’ analysis that suggests the “infotainment” hybrid should be embraced as the “new wave” of television’s future (Lumby, 1993; Lumby and O’Neil, 1994).

Any comparative study of Australian television inevitably involves the discussion of a broad commercial-non-commercial distinction. This reflects the historical political economy of Australia’s television industry; its early days were modelled on the British regulated system, but from the outset it had strong commercial components more akin to the model of our American “cousins”. Australia’s television system is a hybrid and reflects what Cunningham and Turner (1992) call the “mixed economy” of the media industry in the 1990s. The potential impact of new delivery systems (such as pay-TV) is hotly debated, but not yet a reality in Australian television.

Consumers of television current affairs programs in Australia appear to have a wide range of styles and products to choose from. The choice, however, may be in fact one of style, rather than content. It cannot be taken for granted that current affairs programs deal in “facts” and serve as a neutral forum for a public discussion of important events and processes in Australian society (Weaver, 1990). The very nature of the television medium and the historical development of current affairs as a genre may have undermined the ability of such programs to effectively fulfill their assumed functions: to place events in perspective (Albert & Spenceley 1982: 3).

According to critic Robert Denton, television does not easily meet this criterion, because the medium demands that “television journalism must be
entertaining and highly visual" (1991: 98). In the commercial setting of Australian television this "entertainment value" overrides standard "news values" in the majority of current affairs broadcasting. Producers and executives are well aware of this situation and it is exacerbated by the battle for audience and advertising. The non-commercial ABC is still affected by this pressure, where the success of, and the continued funding for, ABC current affairs is as much driven by ratings as the commercial stations.

The differences between commercial and non-commercial networks are partly explained by the different target audience demographic they are “aimed” at — the ABC has a solid reputation for “good” current affairs that provides reliable and useful information, while the commercial stations do not deny that their primary function is entertainment. Former Real Life producer Gerald Stone was recently quoted as saying “I don’t give a shit” and being “cheerfully unconcerned” that some of his peers blame him for the soft focus look of commercial television information programs (Hall, 1994). A quick reference to earlier work in this field shows that Stone’s attitude has been remarkably consistent throughout his long career, from his time with the ABC, to Channel Nine, where he produced 60 Minutes, and until his sudden resignation in August 1994, with Channel Seven as executive producer of Real Life (Clements, 1986: 5; Gawenda and Levitt, 1988: 50-52; Hall, 1994).

Ian Clements suggests the modern television current affairs program is “most deficient in its ability to inform adequately” (1986: 5). He suggests that the major constraints on TV current affairs are lack of time; short interviews with interrogative formats; and the style of reporting being too filmic. The deliberate combination of “entertainment” with “news values”, “corporate journalism”, the positioning of stories and the closure of interpretation affected by the presenter’s comments produces current affairs that relies on personality and conflict (Clements, 1986: 6). In a reply to Clements, the then head of ABC television news and current affairs, Jack Gulley, defended the proposition that hard news does not work in the early evening transition time slot. He cites the ABC’s experience with the one-hour news and analysis program The National in 1985 — it was taken off air after only eight months because the audience dropped to seven per cent, less than 300,000 viewers in the major metropolitan markets (Gulley, 1986: 14).

The contemporary current affairs format that characterises mid-evening flow programming represents the transition between the blurred images of the decontextualised and reconstituted news and the narrative entertainment scheduled later in the evening. Weaver argues that news-oriented current affairs does not work in the early evening, but provides “a virtually constant stream of drama, which offers in turn a form of panacea for the audience” (1990: 16).

We argue here that this is true for the ABC and commercial networks. The form and the flow are achieved by a subtle integration of language and image between the various elements (Williams, 1974: 116), whether, news;
current affairs; drama; documentary; serial; commercial; promotion; advertisement, or station announcement: “In all these ways, and in their essential combination, this is the flow of meanings and values of a specific culture” (Williams, 1974: 118).

Although it is outside the scope of this paper, we might suggest that current affairs programs have much in common with the more openly “infotainment” and “advertorial” shows, such as The Investigators; Beyond 2000; Burke’s Backyard; Holiday; The Home Show; Real Life; and police stories such as Cops. Casual viewing alone reveals some interesting parallels in the use of such techniques as the “ambush” interview, complete personification of the story angle and reconstructions of events not recorded for the segment. Each of these devices highlights the dramatic and tends to overshadow “news values”. It is perhaps not a coincidence that this type of program often follows the mid-evening current affairs show, representing the next step in the time-slot transition.

In an article criticising the function of the narrative form in news broadcasts, Gary Woodward quotes a memo from the network president of American NBC Reuven Frank, which highlights the importance of “entertainment value” in news:

every news story should, without sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. (1991: 205)

Interestingly, criticism of television current affairs from a socially conservative perspective displays a remarkable degree of agreement with the “critical” discourse outlined above. The influential Quadrant magazine has long been a trenchant critic of commercial current affairs television, rivaling the journal’s sometimes illogical hatred of the “left-wing” ABC. Ronald Conway (1987) wrote that on commercial television news and current affairs are presented “with much the same glossily enamelled blandness and inconsequence [as soap opera]”. In 1991 Quadrant columnist Clement Semmler repeated the critique, beginning:

No intelligent person could sit through the content of commercial TV programs without the most acute mental anguish. (1991: 10)

While this says more about Semmler’s arch-conservatism than it does about the intelligence of the average commercial television viewer, it shows the extent of his dislike for the drama-information-entertainment mix.

In contrast, Lumby and O’Neil argue that the critical perspective is “typical of a widespread bias among Australian journalists and academics...which hampers their analysis” (1994: 150). They suggest that the “accepted and long-held hierarchy” of “quality” versus “tabloid” journalism on television “is not only inadequate, but counterproductive” (151). In their view new technology, such as micro-cameras, is helping to blur the distinction be-
between "public and private spaces" (151) and collapsing the boundaries between news and entertainment. In defence of tabloid television Lumby and O'Neil argue that it has given public policy debates a "human face" (157).

Catherine Lumby (1993) uncritically suggests that the use of hidden cameras makes "great television" and praises programs like Real Life for tackling an agenda outside the traditional concerns of news and current affairs, opening them up to a new audience — women. However, we believe it is not enough for "infotainment" programs to "canvas" topics such as "anorexia, misdiagnosis of breast cancer, compulsive disorders (Real Life); infertility, inadequate car safety standards, the undervalued nature of domestic labour, domestic violence and Downs syndrome (A Current Affair)" (Lumby and O'Neil, 1994: 156). Our detailed content analysis of such segments indicates they often reinforce the status quo and the subservient position of women, even whilst courting women as viewers.

This paper attempts to understand this demand for drama and entertainment as a driving force in Australian television current affairs. Commercial programs are compared to the ABC's 7.30 Report and the results explained in terms of the balance between perceived "entertainment" and "information" (news) values; story content; and the role of "personality" journalism.

Is it, as Rodney Weaver suggests (citing the works of Ericson, Baranek and Chan on Canadian television), a process of negotiating control by establishing two exclusive and opposing categories of audience interpretation: reassurance and deviance? (1990: 16)

Methodology

In our first study four complete programs from Real Life (Channel 7), broadcast at 6.30pm each day in most capital city markets, but at later times in some regional areas, were compared to the 7.30 Report (ABC) broadcast in NSW on the same days (27, 29 April; 2, 5 May 1994). A second study, comparing 7.30 Report to A Current Affair (Channel 9), broadcast at 6.30pm in metropolitan and 7pm in some regional areas, was conducted over the 11, 12, 14, 18, 19, 20 and 21 April 1994. To supplement this approach we analysed a number of episodes of all three programs from dates in March 1994.

A total of 54 stories from the 7.30 Report and a combined tally of 54 stories from Real Life (18 stories) and A Current Affair (36 stories) were then recoded and compared. This approach is justified because the programs under discussion are very similar in format, content and presentation and appear on competing channels in similar time slots. For ease of comparison the data is organised into three tables which are presented and discussed later in the paper.

Our methodology follows Albert and Spenceley's analysis of current affairs television in Brisbane during a one week period in 1982 and Rodney Weaver's work on ACA, Hinch (Channel 7) and the 7.30 Report, over a two-week period in 1989, in which he demonstrated the links between dramatic
narrative and the inverted pyramid news model. From his analysis Weaver suggests that dramatic narrative is "a maxim acknowledged and adhered to by all three daily current affairs programs" that serves an incorporative/inclusive function: "this one's for you" (Weaver, 1990: 13). We have already described this as an archeological approach; the idea being to analyse a section of the "site" in order to categorise the main features. Our purpose is to update our knowledge of television current affairs by offering a critique of the content and style of contemporary programs using the tools developed over the past decade of similar research.

Results and discussion

Story categories

The decision to assign a story to a particular category was based on what was judged to be the dominant approach of that story, even though it may have overlapped with other categories. Table I divides the stories into eight categories based on the six used by Albert and Spenceley (1982) and Deutschnan's categories (in Stempel, 1989). These are outlined below.

1. Politics:
   Stories in this category examine political processes and decisions.
2. Political Personalities:
   This category focuses more on a specific politician or politicians, not primarily on process, decision, or issue.
3. Public Morals/Crime:
   This category refers to stories that draw attention to the activities of individuals or groups whose activities the program believes should be of concern to the public.
4. Public Health/Welfare:
   This type of story deals with health and welfare issues of general interest to the community.
5. Human Interest:
   These stories rely primarily on the emotive response elicited from the audience for their impact.
6. Sports/Lifestyle/Arts:
   These stories are not considered "hard" news, but do not rely on an emotive audience response.
7. Frivolous:
   We use this category to describe stories that appeared to have absolutely no point at all, other than pure entertainment.
8. Personal Finance/Business:
   The stories in this category were mainly thinly-disguised "advertisements" for personal finance packages. Their point was to offer consumer "advice" directed towards specific products, such
The results in Table 1 show that there are important differences in story content between commercial programs and the 7.30 Report.

There is a notable absence of political stories in the samples from Real Life and ACA, and only five political personality stories on ACA compared to nine on the 7.30 Report. If these categories are combined the difference is even more pronounced: 21 for 7.30 Report and only five for both ACA and Real Life. The average length of the political stories featured on ACA was four minutes, 11 seconds, while the average length of a political story on the 7.30 Report was eight minutes, 45 seconds. This suggests a difference in depth of coverage as well as in time devoted to treatment of political material.

The input from Canberra-based Paul Lyneham is important to the high incidence of “political” and “political personality” coverage on the 7.30 Report. The commercial networks do not rely on such “heavyweights” in their early evening time slot and tend to treat political stories in a “lighter” fashion. The inclusion of the “political personality” category is valid because these stories focus mainly on individuals, not policy or process. Examples from our analysis of the 7.30 Report include Graham Richardson’s retirement from federal politics; former NSW Agent-General in London Neil Pickard’s compensation claim; an interview with NSW Labor politician Peter Anderson about why he was dumped in a pre-selection ballot; and a Paul Lyneham review of the federal government’s White Paper on unemployment, which he presented as a mud-slinging match between Paul Keating and John Hewson.

### Table 1: Content analysis by story category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Current Affair</th>
<th>Real Life</th>
<th>7.30 Report</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political personality</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public morals/crime</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health/welfare</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human interest</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport/lifestyle/arts</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frivolous</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal finance/business</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Table 2 divides the stories into “information” or “entertainment” based on the perceived primary function. Stories in the “entertainment” category were judged to have little serious impact on the lives of most Australians. Those in the “information” category were more serious in tone and purported to tackle issues that might be important in the “public domain”. This approach slightly modifies the approach taken by Albert and Spenceley and matches their coding of stories as “light” or “heavy”. Table 2 shows our coding of stories according to the categories of “information” and “entertainment”. It is interesting to note the numerical reversal of categories between the commercial and non-commercial programs.

Table 2: Entertainment versus information content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>A Current Affair</th>
<th>Real Life</th>
<th>7.30 Report</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Per Cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>59.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is a function of this style of current affairs reporting that often the narrative focus in a story is personalised. If the “star” is not the reporter or interviewer, it can be an “unusual” characteristic, or action of the talent. Table 3 groups the stories into those based on “personalities” and those based more on “analysis”. Stories in the “personalities” category tended to rely on an individual for their narrative stream, while those in the “analysts” category did not hinge on an individual and were more socially focused.

Weaver argues that the focus on “personality” provides only a limited range of categories — heroes; villains; fools and victims (1990: 13). Often the dramatic “role” is “thrust upon him or her [the subject] by the interpretation of a reporter” (14).

Finally, while the sample size is quite small and direct empirical comparisons are therefore less valid, the accidental symmetry of the samples

Table 3: Personality and analysis in story content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>A Current Affair</th>
<th>Real Life</th>
<th>7.30 Report</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Per Cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>61.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
makes this method useful. We also feel that the historical precedents quoted above justify our decision to limit the sample. Where it is appropriate we have included comment on specific editions of the programs to highlight our analysis.

**Time slots, time outs and time-wasting**

As noted above, we wanted to concentrate on this early evening time slot because it is in this transitory space that “entertainment” clearly takes over from informational “news values”. It is the time when the evening’s “recreational” viewing is planned and the networks want a switch that will maintain audience flow and advertising revenue. This has important consequences for the mix of “news values” and “entertainment”, resulting in the hybrid “infotainment”.

All three programs under review occupy time slots that are advertised as being 30 minutes long. That is, the program starts on the hour and finishes at half-past (or vice versa). However, advertising on the commercial stations and promotional material on all of them cuts into this time. This has implications for both overall running time and the length of individual stories. The average number of stories on each episode of *A Current Affair; 7.30 Report* and *Real Life* is four (in round figures), although the average for *7.30 Report* reached five on two nights during the study period.

Our calculations show that on average *ACA* runs for 20 minutes, 52 seconds and *7.30 Report* for 27 minutes, 20 seconds. We also note that on a number of occasions Ray Martin and Stan Grant spend program time promoting other events; for example, on April 12, Ray Martin heavily promoted a Kevin Costner special he was “hosting” later that evening. Time is also spent promoting stories that will appear later in the program (averaging over two minutes each night), perhaps, for example, showing extensive “teaser” footage of Elle Macpherson, but leaving the interview with her until the end of the program (*ACA*, April 21, 1994).

The typical structure of both *Real Life* and *ACA* is basically the same, each having three add breaks in the following format:

- Intro to program/headlines or promo
- Story 1 (promo story 2 just before ad)
- Ad break
- Story 2 (promo story 3)
- Ad break
- Story 3 (promo story 4)
- Ad break
- Story 4/wrap/promo/preview next episode

It is in this area that the most outstanding differences were found between the commercial stations and the ABC. This is most easily explained
by the fact that both *Real Life* and *ACA* must incorporate sponsors’ messages into the half-hour time slot. This device does not feature so heavily on the ABC and there are no commercial breaks: Quentin Dempster moves smoothly from one story to the next and the structure is not as inflexible as that adopted by the commercial programmers. Stories vary in length and the absence of ad breaks allows some stories to be developed in more detail; a story about the harassment of an Aboriginal police officer in the NSW Police Service was given almost 15 minutes (*7.30 Report*, May 5, 1994). This lends some weight to the theory that the commercial current affairs programs do not have as much time as their non-commercial counterparts to discuss, investigate, or explain stories to their audience (Clements 1986).

This does not denote any necessary difference in “quality” between the services; indeed the non-commercial stations could “waste” the extra six or seven minutes they have each evening. However, it does indicate that the commercial stations have to make their presentation more pacy. To include an average of four stories in each episode, the commercial programs have to “tell” each story more quickly. This can be seen in the extra 50 seconds to one minute on average that a story will take on *7.30 Report*, compared to *ACA* and *Real Life*.

*A Current Affair*  

A typical example of a “political personality” story on *A Current Affair* was coverage of the evidence given by Fairfax proprietor Conrad Black to the Senate’s inquiry into alleged influence by newspaper owners before the 1993 federal election (April 21, 1994). The four-minute piece was mostly “actuality” of Black’s rather “theatrical” testimony. Ray Martin’s introduction set the tone for the story, describing Black as a “newspaper tycoon” who gave “our politicians an earful” and Bob Hawke a “tongue lashing”. The inquiry was characterised as a “bucket-dropping exercise”. Martin’s casually scripted return line at the end of the piece, “Mmm, a potent brew”, sums up the conflict between the high-profile “personalities” involved.

In an earlier program, Ray Martin reviewed the resignation of Ros Kelly in a similar way, using crude fade/wipe edits to cut together “actuality” of her press conference. This was immediately followed by an interview with Kelly’s “executioner”, Opposition spokesperson Peter Costello who, Martin claimed, was responsible for bagging Kelly’s “scalp”. He turned the story into a battle of wits between the Minister and her chief nemesis on the other side of Parliament (*ACA*, February 21, 1994).

On April 11 *ACA* covered the previous day’s demonstration by “angry” Macedonians against Immigration Minister Nick Bolkus’ visit to the NSW industrial city of Wollongong. This might normally be considered in the “political”, or “political personality” categories, but in Ray Martin’s hands it becomes an issue of “public morals/crime”. *ACA*’s coverage involves a Martin introduction:
For weeks we've been watching some pretty nasty clashes between sections of the Greek and Macedonian communities in Australia.

For ACA the issue “boiled over again yesterday” (cut to shots of police trying to control the crowd), but the real story is an interview with the Labor MP who organised the Minister’s trip, Colin Hollis. It is worth noting some parts of this exchange in detail, particularly Ray Martin’s first sequence of questions which elicit short answers from Mr Hollis and reinforce generally violent scenes that provide the overlay (file footage) for Ray Martin’s introduction:

**Martin:** “Did you expect violence yesterday?”; “Weren’t you told it was a large and hostile crowd there?”; “It was an ugly confrontation. Did you fear for your life?”; “You were spat upon?”; “Were you punched?”.

The interview takes a very sinister twist at this point. Ray Martin’s next interjection is not a question, it is a statement of opinion and a much longer response is allowed from Colin Hollis:

**Martin:** “It was a very un-Australian reaction.”

**Hollis:** “That’s what I thought, it was very un-Australian. These people come here, they claim Australia to be their home, we welcome them, but we want them to abide by our Australian traditions. It’s their democratic right to protest, we had no objection to that. What we did object to was the violence and also the denial of the Minister to hear a wide range of views from a wide range of the ethnic community.”

Martin then leads Hollis to a second shared conclusion; the demonstration was a publicity stunt that ultimately damaged the cause of the Macedonian community in the eyes of “decent Australians”. In wrapping up, Colin Hollis says he agrees with the Macedonians that the term “Slav-Macedonian” is offensive and that he will “continue to suggest to the minister that the title should be dropped”. Ray Martin, however, doesn’t feel it is necessary to explore the possibilities of differences within the parliamentary Labor caucus on this important controversy. Martin then finishes with another all-Australian sentiment:

And Mr Hollis revealed to me later that he has even had death threats since the controversy flared up. Which is obviously outrageous and troubling for him and for his family.
Ray Martin successfully personalises, depoliticises and then reconstitutes the events and issues in a way that leads to a sympathetic response to Colin Hollis and reinforces the “us” and “them” division created by the editorialising about “un-Australian” demonstrations. This “violence is un-Australian” frame only works when the object of the report is an ethnic community that has “stepped out of line”. Last year it was applied to an incident at a large Arabic-speaking community gathering in southwest Sydney when the police dog squad was let loose on a crowd and the resulting melee described as a “race riot”. The inherent racism of this framing undermines multiculturalism and encourages bigotry.

On April 18, Ray Martin interviewed National Party leader Tim Fischer. We coded this item as “political personality” because Mr Fischer is not questioned on the important political stories of the day. Rather, he gives his views on the “oppression” of men by “feminists”, who he says don’t allow males enough space to make a contribution in their relationships with women. As we note in our viewing log for that Monday evening, the lead story on the ABC’s 7 pm news bulletin was a new Liberal Party policy package. Channel Nine ran the Liberal policy story at number four in its national bulletin, with the angle that Paul Keating dismissed it as nothing new. That night Paul Lyneham interviewed Dr Hewson on the 7.30 Report, but as the Liberal’s coalition partner, Tim Fischer was, surprisingly, not asked about this important political development on A Current Affair.

Often the link between the content of ACA and a news agenda is slight—a story may be generated out of an incident that occurred within the past few weeks; or the program may take a completely different angle. Janet Gibson’s interview with Australian Democrats leader Senator Cheryl Kernot in March 1994 is a good example. Our analysis of this story suggests that Martin, Gibson and ACA took Senator Kernot out of “politics” and into the domestic sphere. A phenomenon that appears to happen all too often to prominent women who are “making” news.

In this segment, Cheryl Kernot was compared to Ros Kelly, Carmen Lawrence and Bronwyn Bishop who were all then campaigning around various issues (Kelly trying to save her career, Bishop and Lawrence for seats in the House of Representatives). The reporter, Janet Gibson, moves the dramatic narrative from Canberra to the domestic sphere by placing Kernot firmly “at home” with the line: “Cheryl Kernot’s idea of a personal victory is to be a good mother to ten-year-old daughter Sian, who lives in Brisbane while Cheryl spends most of her time in Canberra.” Ray Martin’s closer is a typically inclusive and predetermining embrace of the “conditioned” audience reaction: “Mmm, Janet Gibson reporting there on a good woman” (ACA, March 2, 1994).

The 7.30 Report

In contrast to ACA and Real Life, the 7.30 Report does focus on “analy-
sis”, as opposed to “personality”, in some (but not all) of its political stories. For example, the April 21 story on Conrad Black at the Senate inquiry ran six minutes, 40 seconds and followed a report of Bob Hawke’s evidence ten days earlier (April 11, 1994). Prue Lewarne’s story on Hawke’s evidence began with a reference to “the Bob Hawke of old” giving a vintage performance in front of the Senate committee and mentioned Conrad Black’s appearance “next week”. The journalist then interviewed Liberal Senator Richard Alston, the inquiry chairman. He was asked “who are you going to believe?” and answered, “it doesn’t necessarily follow that one or both are lying”. The piece finished with a cut-away shot of Hawke sitting in the Senate committee room, then the image cut to Quentin Dempster: “Conrad Black next week”, with a cheeky grin on his face that encourages a personalised, “humorous” reading by the audience (April 11, 1994).

The follow-up on April 21 was in a similar style: actuality; cut-away shots of the Senate hearing and detailed narration explaining the background. However, Quentin Dempster’s introduction reveals a use of personalising language very similar to that adopted by Ray Martin on the same night (ACA, April 21, 1994), describing Conrad Black as out to “drive a silver stake” through allegations that he and Paul Keating had done a deal on ownership of the Fairfax media empire. Dempster says the “Canadian tycoon” is “out to settle scores with those who’ve questioned his credibility”.

The story about Graham Richardson’s departure from federal politics was framed with an atmosphere of “he’s a jolly good fellow” by Quentin Dempster’s introduction: “It was a sell out, in fact they were turning the faithful away.” The ex-Senator’s larger-than-life persona as a great Labor “mate” makes him the “star” of this piece by Justin Murphy. Richardson is shown enjoying himself alongside friends, old (Bob Hawke, Bob Carr) and new (Wendy Harmer). Richardson has a two minute right of reply and we cut back to Quentin smiling to camera, completing the party mood (7.30 Report, April 29, 1994).

On May 2, the 7.30 Report opened with a story by Steve Letz on branch-stacking in the Victorian ALP where both left and right have been accused of “ethnic” membership drives. It includes overlay of party officials allegedly encouraging groups of apparently Turkish adults into an ALP branch office to sign up. An interview with Brian Howe recorded for ABC radio was replayed with a still photo of the Deputy PM and a tape recorder. This was followed by a studio interview with NSW Opposition police spokesperson Peter Anderson who lost an ALP pre-selection ballot the previous weekend. Having established the “branch-stacking” frame with reference to Victorian politics, Quentin Dempster introduces Anderson as “one of the most prominent victims of an alleged branch stack” in the NSW branch of the Labor Party.

Anderson claims to be a “victim” of branch-stacking in Liverpool. Dempster describes this as a “serious allegation” and asks if Anderson intends to make a formal complaint:
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Anderson: “No, none at all.”

Dempster: “Why not?” [Aggressively]

Anderson says there’s “no point” and “there’s been enough damage to the party during the last eight weeks”. In response to the next question Anderson defends his record in the branch and says anyone who accuses him of not paying attention to “my local responsibilities ... is a liar”. He then goes on: “I did my best ... and quite frankly there isn’t much more I could do about it, nor do I desire to do so.”

Quentin Dempster tries to pin Anderson on the question of stacking, but in a peculiar way:

Dempster: “So if there is a deficiency in your tactics, Mr Anderson, it is that you didn’t stack as well as the other side.”

Anderson: “I didn’t stack at all.”

Dempster: “And you admit that’s a mistake?”

Anderson gives a noncommittal answer, and Dempster asks if perhaps Bob Carr might have seen him as a “leadership threat and is secretly happy that you’ve been done over?”

Anderson: “I don’t think so. Bob and I have been mates for 28 years. I was always happy to play first grade, I didn’t want to be the captain.”

The interview continues; Dempster gets a minor “scoop” when Anderson shows his typed letter of resignation from the shadow front bench and they both decide to leave the matter in the hands of the ALP state parliamentary caucus.

The very real “political” dimensions of this story are not seriously discussed. While the Victorian report “sets the scene” and was coded “political”, neither story is really driven by “polities”, both rely on other narrative devices. The first on the “cloak and dagger” secrecy of “branch-stacking”, complete with “late night” shots on the streets of nameless and silent “participants”, and the “investigative” device of solemn music, dark lighting and slow motion shots of the “perpetrator”, in this case an ALP official said to be behind the stacking exercise.1 The Anderson story is framed in the same “mate” light as the earlier Richardson piece, but this time it is almost “mate against mate”, with echoes of the State of Origin football and politicians jockeying for position. It is again the “personality” of Anderson, rather than political issues affecting his constituents, that drives the narrative.

1 This style of reporting was followed by reporter Murray Hogarth in a Four Corners program on the same story several months later (“The big stack”, Four Corners, ABC TV, 11 July, 1994).
Quentin Dempster "invites" the audience to judge Anderson's character based on his answers to questions about branch-stacking: Would he do it, or not?

Real Life

Our study shows that Real Life follows the same basic format as ACA: the commercial model of intro-story-ad break. The opening sequence of shots — cutting between Stan Grant and the story captions — is set to loud music to heighten the dramatic effect. In the programs analysed and from our discussion of other episodes viewed by group members, the format does not vary from program to program; it is the most highly structured of the three. Every story is given a caption such as: "Karate Queen — Fighting Machin(e)" about 23-year-old Charlene Machin becoming an international karate champion; or (on the same night) "Trotting — Runs in the family" about a successful father and daughter harness-racing team (April 28, 1994). The introductions by Stan Grant match the organising pattern of the "summary lead" in a classic "inverted pyramid" style (Schudson, 1989; Weaver, 1990). We suggest that the deliberate puns in the story captions also function as a "summary lead" that underscores "entertainment" and underlines "news values".

In a classic example of the "human interest" category, a young boy's fight against cancer becomes "nothing short of a miracle"; the "hero" is described as "one little boy who beat all the odds"; who was "virtually written off by doctors". Stan Grant's "summary lead" — "It now looks like he's won the battle" — sets up a frame for the audience that pits a young "battler" against the uncaring medical bureaucracy ("Miracle Boy — Doctors Amazed", Real Life, April 28, 1994). The second story that night about the exploitation of young workers in a scam "training scheme" follows the same imperative pattern; Stan Grant's introduction begins: "What could be more cruel?" ("Exploitation — Slave Labour", Real Life, April 28, 1994). This item established the villain/victim narrative quite clearly for the viewer. To press home the point, Real Life is able to film a confrontation between a young woman with her child (victim) and the unscrupulous employer (villain).

This "ambush" interview has become a standard feature of this style of program. As Rodney Weaver notes, this framing and construction process "pre-determines" the issue of guilt for the audience (1990: 13). The mother and child as "victim" motif was replayed the following night and Stan Grant's introduction again set the scene: "... mothers [who are] sick and tired of being treated like slave labour"; but "that's what Australian mums have to put up with" ("Motherhood Housewife on the hustings", Real Life, April 29, 1994). Just in case we missed it the second time, it occurred again during the sample period on May 5 ("Married with Children — Second class Aussies"). We suggest it is no coincidence that this is also the name of a popular soap opera parody from the United States shown on Australian net-
work television. This third women and children story followed a news report that a Melbourne restaurant had refused to serve a couple and their infant. *Real Life* did a recreation of this incident — the "villain" is set up by an "ambush" interview — this time it is a sandwich shop owner who doesn't like children forced to confront a woman with a young child. Stan Grant's closing and "enclosing" comment at the conclusion of the story further personalises and trivialises the issue: "Yes, maybe he should remember he was a child once himself" (May 5, 1994).

A story that treats women in a different way yet complements the "victim" personalisation is the item, "Bad Girls — Wild West Women," which was a slick Hollywood promo for a film Stan Grant described as "the cowgirl version of 'Thelma and Louise'" (*Real Life*, April 29). Stan's "treatment" puts the women's movement firmly in its place:

It seems the feminist lobby isn't happy with simply getting rid of modern day sexual stereotypes [reference to previous story on the 'housewife' as 'crusader']. They're [the feminists] re-writing history (*Real Life*, April 29).

Not content with pushing women into the domestic sphere, it is *Real Life* that is now rewriting the aims and achievements of the women's movement. The statement above again prejudges the issue for the audience, by setting up the "re-write" of history as a bad thing, and implying that most people would be happy to "simply" get rid of stereotypes. But the program shows its true colours in Stan Grant's comeback line: "Ah, give me Clint any day."

The pace of the stories on *Real Life* is quite rapid — on the nights surveyed the lead stories had an average of around 20 overlay shots and 3 interview inserts and the lighter stories were even faster with an average of over 50 overlay shots and much more frequent editing between interviews/grabs. Children and celebrities are important features of *Real Life*, as demonstrated on May 5.

The last story we want to mention is from May 2, 1994, in which the *Real Life* crew used a hidden camera to entrap a general practitioner who the program alleges is falsely signing medical certificates. It is worth noting that the doctor was obviously from a non-English-speaking background — it might make a charge of racism stick, but again it could be accidental. Either way, the doctor in this piece is quite clearly the "villain", but the "victim" is all of us — society is personalised in order to increase "our" identification with the values in the story as presented by the reporter and the framing. The piece ends with a long shot of a couple having a picnic and the voice-over of the reporter: "And the true cost to Australia of sickies, he said [employer spokesperson], is more than two billion dollars a year." In an interesting, but perhaps unwitting, moment Stan Grant comes close to impersonating Mike Moore of the satirical *Frontline* comedy program with
the comment: "Yeah, so much for ethics, huh?" when he pulls out of the story. This particular incident was featured on the ABC's Media Watch soon after it appeared, minus the self-demolishing comment from Stan.

Tenuous links to a news agenda

A number of previous studies in this area have highlighted the link between straight news programming and current affairs (Langer, 1987; Hamburger et al, 1979). Weaver (1990) suggests that this connection has not been as tight in recent years as a result of pressure from "entertainment" imperatives. Clements (1986: 8) argues that news and current affairs units should be more closely integrated to strengthen the news component over entertainment. Similar work by Albert and Spenceley (1982) on two commercial current affairs programs in Brisbane suggests that in this comparative analysis the results would be consistent. After interviewing the producers of State Affair (Channel 7) and Today Tonight (Channel 9) and analysing the content over a week, they found little correlation between the news agendas in the city's other media and the current affairs programs. In our analysis of ACA and 7.30 Report, we correlated each story against items in the television news, or in the print media on the same day. While it doesn't cover the entire period of the survey, it indicates that 7.30 Report appears to be running closer to the contemporary news "agenda".

On ACA, stories in the human interest category contained no news value at all, that is there was nothing of importance to "find out" from viewing the story. Entertainment wins out over information. In the light of this analysis it is a little surprising that Channel Nine promotes A Current Affair as part of its news stable. A television and billboard promotion running during July 1994, with the slogan, "Who's Who of News" links newsreader Brian Henderson with Ray Martin; Derryn Hinch (now in the midday time slot); football commentators Paul "Fatty" Vautin and Peter Sterling; Jana Wendt (60 Minutes) and reporters Mike Munro (ACA) and Charles Woolley (60 Minutes), along with about fifteen other faces.

The internal coherence of the stories was also patterned typically as follows:

- Introduction by host (Grant/Martin/Dempster)
- Overlay and voice-over by reporter
- Interviews with talent/inter-cut with overlay and reporter piece to camera.
- Overlay (closer) with music/voice-over or both
- Closing comment from studio host.

To analyse this link between "news" and station "personality" and to complement the coding of individual stories, the style and visual grammar of presentation was also taken into account. The three male comperes were
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analysed in terms of visual cues, language and manner. While the presenter of Real Life, Stan Grant, is a relative newcomer, Ray Martin (ACA) and Quentin Dempster (7.30 Report) are portrayed as serious masters in their field. Dempster the solid journalist and Martin the confidant of the stars.

Stan Grant did not do any studio-based interviews during the survey period; however, he does appear with props, moves about and is “active” in this way. Both Ray Martin and Quentin Dempster conduct studio and “location” interviews, which breaks up the formulaic pattern. The 7.30 Report also uses Paul Lyneham in Canberra as a regular interviewer/commentator. His stories are often delivered straight to camera and occasionally contain overlay.

Conclusions

While a sample of the size considered here cannot be truly representative of the programming over a longer period, the methodology adopted in this paper and the results are consistent with other Australian studies, such as Albert and Spenceley (1982) Weaver (1986) and Clements (1990). As Bell and Boehringer found when they analysed the 1993 federal election, programmed politics still rules the electronic airwaves (Bell, Boehringer and Crofts 1983; Bell and Boehringer 1993). The changes that are taking place are pushing Australian news and current affairs television ever closer to the American model — it is becoming “ever more sensationalist and trivialised” (Lipski, 1993).

While we are unable to make definitive statements based on the small sample, a number of important, valid points can be made about news agencies and current affairs television. They suggest other lines of questioning that research like this can take up. For example, the link between hard “news” and “current affairs” is maintained today, at least in the marketing strategies of the networks. Station promotions for Brian Henderson’s national news and A Current Affair, which follows it on Channel Nine, heavily push the “links” between the two. The “star” quality of “Hendo” is endorsed by the appearance of a whole studio “galaxy”. However, as Sam Lipski notes in terms of competition for audience:

The quality of journalism, in any old news sense of the term, does not come into it. Instead what matters are gross audience figures, the lead-in to the later evening programs and network revenue from advertising. (October 28, 1993)

This point also raises interesting questions about current affairs in other time slots. We note the overriding imperative to “entertain” that colours the content and style of early evening current affairs. But it is valid to question the extent that this applies to other programs such as Lateline (ABC), Sunday (Channel 9) and the various “meet the press” panel shows across the

\footnote{Observation by Channel 9, July 16, 1994.}
networks. A cursory glance at the programs indicates that they are a mixed bag: Sunday often carries longer filmic reports in what Weaver (1990) suggests are more entertaining rather than informing formats, while Lateline is studiobased serious discussion, piggy-backed on a shorter “investigative” or “background” piece which frames the “conflict” in the ensuing “debate”.

Our work highlights the constricting stereotypes women are slotted into and the way they are categorised according to the character/personalities common to the dramatic narrative. Our research shows there is a persistent domestic frame around the coverage of women’s lives. It cannot be coincidental that on Real Life and A Current Affair women were most often shown as “victims” of another individual’s bad behaviour; or that organised political opposition to sexism is regularly belittled by Ray Martin’s commentary or Stan Grant’s summary leads. Our content analysis suggests that the 7.30 Report also falls back on sexist stereotypes or “dramatic” interpretations of women as victims. For example, the use of dramatised “stalkercam” in a story about changes to “stalking” laws reinforces the idea that women live in constant fear of attack via a dramatic device we are used to seeing in films and television soap and drama.

The findings of our survey are in contrast to suggestions by Lumby and O’Neil (1994: 156) that infotainment’s intrusion into the domestic sphere may have some positive impact on women’s lives. The aim of the TV networks is to increase their female audience (thus making them more attractive to advertisers) — they do not necessarily have women’s social interests in mind.

Our study suggests that there has been a relative period of stability in Australian television current affairs over the past decade. A number of programs have continued to evolve in similar ways and several “hosts” have become established as the industry leaders — a presentation pattern has developed and is now a predictable formula. As Sam Lipski (1993) argues, this may be about to change (perhaps not for the better) with the introduction of new technologies, such as cable and satellite delivered pay TV.

Our small study is consistent with the general conclusions of those cited above; from what we have seen, “entertainment” is winning over “information”. Rodney Weaver appears to have been correct when he suggested that current affairs television is part of the apparatus for maintaining the status quo by dealing with events “as a combination of information and entertainment within a largely unquestioned social framework. Deviance from acceptable social norms is identified and agents of control such as bureaucracies and governments are acknowledged” (1990: 15).

The Australian media is becoming increasingly globalised — following American trends. The “next big thing” on American commercial television is “slice of life” coverage of dramatic court cases, often involving celebrities. According to a recent review by John Lyons in The Australian Magazine, this type of television is very profitable, but it presents a legal minefield and an ethical nightmare. Australia already has plenty of “tabloid”
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Television in the broadly defined current affairs genre. Cross-over programs such as *Cops* and *Hard Copy* “lead” their field. The lines between fiction and life are being blurred by this so-called “reality” television which encourages the dramatic — the live television “chase” of suspected wife-murderer and “celebrity”, O.J. Simpson, is a classic example. This story then dominated the American “current affairs” shows for weeks. The need for dramatic narratives (in both words and pictures) places great pressure on “news” values — entertainment takes over.

We have shown that this leads current affairs programs to follow the lead of infotainment pace-setters and increase their use of reconstructions with actors, hidden cameras and “ambush” interviews. These techniques make for entertaining television, but cannot “seriously inform” (Weaver, 1990) an audience when combined with the narrowing effects of conventional television “news values”. When is enough entertainment too much?

References


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