

As News Corp savages its enemies, the ABC must strive for unity. Which makes it the perfect target
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'The Australian's – and the Murdochs' – aim is not merely to please its subscribers. It is to delegitimise the ABC.'

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The other day I got angry enough about an editorial in the Australian newspaper – which castigated in vicious terms two of the ABC's most accomplished journalists – that I wrote a letter to the editor. A waste of time, of course: the letter wasn't published.

So I posted it on Twitter, where it got thousands of likes, replies and retweets, almost all of them supportive. But as Ann Braine, a former teacher from Perth, tweeted: "Unfortunately those who should read it, won't."

She's right. And they won't read this either. The Guardian is not part of the diet of readers of the Australian, and vice versa.

It's a cliché to say that we all inhabit news silos these days: we are seldom confronted by views that differ from our own. And what's true of social media is becoming just as true of the so-called mainstream. Advertising no longer pays journalists' wages. What their employers need are loyal, paying readers and viewers. And in general, people pay to read stories that reflect and reinforce their views.

Paul Kelly, the Australian's ageing but seemingly immortal political guru, sees in these developments the inevitable demise of "objectivity" and "impartiality" in news. He spelt out this view three years ago:

These days every media organisation has an editorial culture – just think of CNN, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, Fox News, the Guardian, the Australian and Sky News, to list names at random. Which one is politically impartial? None ... Knowing your audience means knowing their demographics and their politics. It's about being professional.

Kelly's opponents – and there are many – argue that choosing to cover subjects that will interest your audience doesn't mean abandoning the ideal of telling those stories "objectively": following the facts wherever they lead; not omitting inconvenient truths; not perpetuating myth, or playing to mere prejudice.

Rupert Murdoch has never had much time for "objective" news. Tabloid journalism, for him, is about emotion, not facts. With the launch of the Sun in late 60s Britain, he and editor Larry Lamb carved out a huge readership that no other newspaper had even realised was there: largely male, working class, culturally and politically conservative.

Playing to that audience's convictions and prejudices made Murdoch a fortune in Britain. With no national tabloid newspapers in America, he couldn't find a way to reach it in the United States until cable television gave him the perfect medium. Fox News, playing to essentially the same audience, has made him a far bigger fortune.

For decades, Murdoch was content to let his "quality" newspapers – the Australian and the Times of London – separate news from comment in a way that his tabloids never did. That's how Paul Kelly ran the Australian, and David Armstrong after him.

But for Murdoch, the point of owning these prestige papers has always been less about describing the world, and more about wielding political influence. In 2005 he promoted one of his favourite editors from Brisbane's Courier-Mail to run the national broadsheet.

Chris Mitchell was a driven, workaholic newspaperman, who as editor-in-chief steered the Australian's coverage towards campaign journalism that appealed to its chosen audience: the big end of town, especially the resources sector; educated conservatives; the self-employed and self-made. Forget those university-educated, left-leaning liberals, argued Mitchell. Let the Fairfax papers and the ABC look after them.

But even his enemies will admit that at heart he was a journalist. When his reporters found a big story, even if it wasn't one that the Coalition government would like, or that his readership would eagerly devour, he backed them: Caroline Overington broke and pursued the AWB's sanction-busting in Iraq; Hedley Thomas forced the federal police to release Mohammed Haneef; Tony Koch exposed misogyny and violence in Queensland's Aboriginal communities; John Lyons in Jerusalem infuriated Australia's Israel lobby with his focus on the plight of the Palestinians.

But things have changed. News Corp has split from Fox. The profit-geyser of Fox News can no longer subsidise Rupert's loss-making favourites – the Australian, the Times,

the New York Post. Google and Facebook have gobbled up Australia's advertising spend, making the Australian more than ever dependent on its paying subscribers.

And Rupert himself is in semi-retirement. Lachlan Murdoch has for at least a decade been the real power at News Corp Australia – and Lachlan is more rightwing, and more ideologically focused, than his father.

So now, under its editor-in-chief, Chris Dore, our national broadsheet files less “straight” news than ever. The paper is full, it seems to this reader at least, of what feels more like propaganda than news.

And the Australian pursues its enemies with more vitriol than ever – foremost among them, the ABC. In many ways, Aunty is the perfect target. Unlike those of the News Corp tabloids, almost all the Australian's readers watch or listen to the ABC – or would, if they weren't convinced of its irremediable leftwing bias. They all have a view about it. With its vast output, there's always some ABC target to mock, or satirise, or demonise. There are columnists and “journalists” at the Australian who make a full-time occupation of it.

Like all the best propaganda, the Australian's anti-ABC crusade is based on a nugget of truth. Compared with the Oz and its readers, the ABC does indeed lean to the left – as indeed do the majority of the Australian population. And as I've argued before in these pages, in the big cities, where commercial talkback radio is dominated by rightwing shock jocks, left-leaning talk radio listeners gravitate to the ABC; and the ABC's presenters, like good professionals, “know their audience”.

Best of all, the ABC can't fight back. The Australian can editorialise about “Those Who Conspire to Lie” at the ABC – and even name the reporters that it considers the culprits – without fear of a libel suit. And the ABC has no pack of febrile columnists to hurl abuse back across the parapet. Its sober response to the Australian's editorial is hardly going to put fire in the belly of its supporters.

But the Australian's – and the Murdochs' – aim is not merely to please its subscribers. It is to delegitimise the ABC, to attack its very *raison d'être*. In that same 2018 article in which Kelly announced the death of “impartial” journalism, he drew the obvious conclusion:

In a time when politics defines the market position of a media organisation, how can the ABC be impartial, and how long can it continue the pretence that it is? This is the real dilemma of the public broadcaster under a charter purporting to be free of bias ... The hoax becomes more and more absurd.

The ABC Act enjoins its board of directors to ensure that the corporation's news programming is “accurate and impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism”. But “objective journalism” doesn't exist any more, Kelly is arguing – and therefore, nor should the ABC, as a taxpayer-funded media goliath.

We have seen the process at work over the past two or three decades in the United States. The public broadcaster, PBS, has never been much of a power in the land. But the commercial TV networks, the cable news innovator CNN, the giant American

newspapers – the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times – all subscribed to the ideal of “objective journalism”.

Now, Fox News, massively helped by Donald Trump, has succeeded in persuading half the country that those pillars of 20th-century journalism are purveyors of “fake news”, “enemies of the people”, hopelessly biased to the left. And as conservative readers and viewers have abandoned them, they are pulled by their own commercial imperatives to satisfy those who remain – the “liberal” half of the population.

And so the process continues. It has done enormous damage to the US polity, now so bitterly divided that democracy itself is under threat. It must not happen here.

So it’s more important than ever that the ABC remains “impartial” – by which I mean, not toothless, but ready and willing to take on the shibboleths of the left as well as the right.

Four Corners is a program whose main object, arguably, is holding the powerful to account. The governing party is inevitably more often a target than the opposition – and the Coalition has held power since 2013. But it must find other targets too.

In a little-remarked but extraordinary Four Corners program some years ago, Sarah Ferguson provided solid proof that people smugglers do indeed drive the traffic in unauthorised boat journeys to Australia. In 2015 Çaro Meldrum-Hanna exposed the bizarre relationship between corrupt Health Services Union official Kathy Jackson and the Fair Work Commission’s Michael Lawler. Sally Neighbour, Four Corners’ executive producer, whom the Australian bizarrely accused of “bad, lazy, deceitful journalism” last week, won one of her many Walkley awards (albeit 20 years ago) for uncovering corruption in remote Aboriginal communities. These are the kind of stories that Four Corners must continue doing, and indeed, do more.

There are plenty on the left who maintain that the ABC has been bullied by the Coalition and the Murdoch press into kowtowing to the right.

Recent events demonstrate that that is far from true.

It is true that more than half the Australian electorate voted for the Coalition, and it is their ABC too. Yes, the Murdoch press reflects a conservative worldview, just as the Guardian reflects a progressive one – albeit, in my view, with more journalistic rigour. Somehow, the ABC must reflect everyone’s – to be part of the paste that sticks the country together, not the hatchet that drives it apart.

The Australian will go on hacking away. But objective journalism, and political impartiality, are still ideals worth pursuing. An Australia without the ABC, for me, is a prospect almost too grim to contemplate.

- ***Jonathan Holmes*** has led *Four Corners*, *Foreign Correspondent* and the *7.30 Report*. He presented *Media Watch* from 2008 to 2013