

Friends of the ABC (NSW) Inc

Mike Carlton's address to the Friends of the ABC Annual Dinner in Sydney on 26 Aug 2011

I joined the ABC at 9am on Monday the 7th of January 1963. Fresh out of school with my NSW Leaving Certificate, Honours in English and Economics. I was not quite 17 years old, and hired as a 1st year cadet journalist, on the princely sum of £11 a week.

In those days a university education was regarded as a distinct handicap for a journalist: unnecessary at best and frivolously elitist at worst. Much better to toss 'em in at the deep end to see if they could swim.

So – after signing an oath of allegiance to Her Sovereign Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second - that I would faithfully serve her - I was tossed into the ABC Radio Newsroom at Kellett St in the heart of Kings Cross. I wonder sometimes what happened to that oath. I guess it's still on file, somewhere.

The Newsroom *was* little more than a room...two of them, actually. One for reporters, one for sub-editors, with a couple of partitioned offices. One broadcast studio for reading news bulletins, and another narrow room full of chattering teleprinters. You got there via the back entrance of Woolworths, past their garbage bins, and up in a creaking lift to the third floor.

It was a cavern, lit by harsh fluorescent lights which pierced the fog of cigarette smoke. There was that old time newsroom aroma of heaped ashtrays and old newspapers and stale linoleum polish. In one corner there was a cabinet which contained monitors for eavesdropping on the police, fire and ambulance radio networks...they gave off a constant, staccato squawk...and as bulletin deadlines approached, there was the clatter of ancient typewriters...keyboards hammered and carriages being slammed back at the ring of the bell.

I thought it was absolute heaven. Just like the movies. As a teenager, brought up on the North Shore, wet behind the ears from a private school, I had never been in such an exotic place, filled with the drama and romance of newsgathering. Or so I thought. And in King's Cross, too, the epicentre of Sydney vice and crime. It could hardly get more thrilling.

God knows how I got the job. I'd been knocked back by every newspaper in Sydney – and there were four of them in those days. I'd actually accepted an executive traineeship at Qantas...for heaven's sake...when suddenly, to astonishment and relief, the ABC came through. And so there I was, in my brand new, navy blue Fletcher Jones suit...ready to take on the world.

Until I arrived, the junior cadet there had been one Stuart Littlemore. Who, in those days, had long and wavy blond hair, believe it or not, and an air of ineffable superiority. Which, unlike the hair, he still has. On one side of the newsroom there was a truly enormous Oxford Dictionary for the use of the journalists, a weighty tome roughly the size of your average suitcase.

Littlemore was consulting it one day when the Controller of News, W.S. Hamilton, walked past. Hamilton had a fine line in sarcasm, and he didn't particularly like Stuart.

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“ Ah, Mr Littlemore, “ he said. “ Don't tell there's a word in the English language you don't understand.”

“Not any more, “ said Littlemore, with a toss of his golden mane. It was a moment that went down in ABC Legend.

It probably sounds insufferable to say this, but as cadets at the ABC we regarded ourselves as something of an elite. We were told we were something of an elite. The chosen few. Not like the poor wretches who'd managed to get jobs only at the *Fairfax Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Packer Daily Telegraph* – or even worse, the afternoon tabloids, the *Sun* and the *Mirror*.

We were to be keepers of the pure flame of independent journalism, beholden not to governments, media barons or commercial interests. I profoundly believed in all that stuff then- and I suppose, deep down at some level, I still do. We all did.

My fellow cadets - apart from Stuart Littlemore - included Bob Connolly, who would later become a prominent film-maker, who produced that famous *Rats in The Ranks* Documentary. Peter Best, who eventually went on to advertising and to write musical scores for feature films. Jeff McMullen, later of *Four Corners* and *Sixty Minutes*.

And the inimitable Bob Ellis. The first of us to have a University degree for god's sake. For which, of course, he was regarded with great suspicion. It may be difficult to believe this now, but Ellis arrived in our midst as thin as a rake, pale and languid, weighing perhaps no more than 60 kilograms wringing wet.

And clad in an enormous woollen garment like a Soviet field-marshal's great coat. A tremendous thing it was: so large and voluminous that Ellis had to take two or three steps before the thing itself began to move. And as far as we could gather, he actually lived in it. It was his place of residence. Its huge pockets seemed to carry most of his personal belongings – books, magazines, theatre tickets, even the odd toaster or frying pan, we thought.

He was a colourful, bohemian figure...in great contrast to the rest of us private school boys. And boys we mostly were. In my time, anyway, there were only two women cadets: Glenys Bell, who went on to be a feature writer on the old *Bulletin Magazine*...and Diane Willman, who became one of the ABC's first Middle East correspondents. Caroline Jones, at that time, was a typist at the ABC in Canberra, I think.

And so we were introduced to the mysteries of journalism. Which turned out to be rather less glamorous than I had hoped. I could already type, which was a help. But we also had to learn shorthand. Once a week we were despatched to Miss Hale's Business Class at Wynyard, to learn the mysteries of Pitman's shorthand...which was taught in almost Edwardian business style, with phrases like “ I refer to your esteemed correspondence of the 15th ult, “ and so on. Not a lot of use if you were trying to cover parliament. In fact, we spent most of the time skiving off at the pub.

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We were expected to have a shorthand speed of 120 words per minute if we ever hoped to graduate as full-blown D-grade journalists. I never got within a bull's roar of that, and I don't know anyone who ever did. Thankfully, shorthand was already falling into disuse.

But we were also taught to report. Sydney City Council meetings....the occasional car accident...dusty courtroom reporting, royal visits, and so on. Enlivened occasionally by a spell at State Parliament – which was a great mystery to me – but better still, a run at what was then grandly titled the Aviation and Shipping Round.

This meant that I was chauffeured from my home in suburban Chatswood out to Sydney Airport before dawn – in a Commonwealth car, would you believe, with uniformed driver who opened the door for you.

And there at the airport we - The Sydney Airport Press Corps, as we grandly styled ourselves - would lie in wait for what might be as many as four or even five flight arrivals before lunchtime. Qantas, BOAC and possibly Pan Am. And we would accost any visiting celebrities, principally to ask them what they thought of Australia. The cultural cringe was alive and thriving.

One of my ABC colleagues put that very question to the actress Vivien Leigh – “What do you think of Australia, Miss Leigh?” He got an icy glare in return, and the reply: “I don't know, dear boy, you're standing in the way.” Occasionally we would try on another question. Much to his bemusement, the distinguished British conductor Sir Malcolm Sargent was asked what he thought of The Beatles. Not much, as it turned out.

Celebrities who didn't match up to our high expectations were quite roughly handled. When Frank Sinatra had the hide - the sheer effrontery - to keep us all waiting by turning up an hour late for his press conference, he was asked to spell his surname and to state what he did for a living. You messed with the Sydney Airport Press Gang at your peril.

Although sometimes the targets fought back. When Sir Robert Menzies arrived home from a trip to London and Washington, I was ordered to ask him a question. For television, no less. That might not surprise you these days, but then to question Sir Robert was seen as grossly impertinent, if not down right subversive.

Menzies' normal style was to parade before the cameras and say: “I have had a long and tiring journey to meet Australia's great and powerful friends abroad. I shall be giving a full report to the parliament when I return to Canberra.” And then he would sweep out of the room, followed by a conga-line of grovelers.

I, however, had been instructed to bowl one up to him. And I remember to this day what I was told to ask: Mike Carlton, ABC News. Sir Robert –what did you discuss with President Kennedy?

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There was a shocked silence, that seemed to go on for ever. My fellow journalists were aghast. Menzies, when he recovered from his astonishment, glared at me from beneath those famous eyebrows and spat out: "I have not seen you before, young man. And I have no wish to see you again." Turned on his heel and sailed from the room.

It was all grist to the mill. There was a great pride in working for the ABC, then as there is now. Although the place has changed so profoundly in 50 years that the old ABC - The Australian Broadcasting Commission - is barely discernible.

But we were taught the craft of journalism – and of broadcasting - with great care, by senior men and women – and yes, there were a couple of senior women in the sixties. Almost without exception, women journalists working for newspapers were assigned to the fashion or cooking sections, or the social pages. But at the ABC they had proper jobs. For many many years in my youth, the ABC's foreign editor was a woman, the redoubtable Ann Ringwood, and a very fine teacher she was.

For we learned to write, with brevity and precision. Sub-editors tossed our copy back at us if it wasn't up to scratch, and we re-wrote it until it was. There was a huge compendium of style guides we had to master...words and phrases that were banned, and so on. Clichés were an abomination. Verbosity, prolixity was anathema. We were taught that - in a 15 minutes news bulletin - every word had to count. And so it did.

We were also taught to broadcast. On air. With the coming of television, it was becoming slowly and reluctantly apparent to ABC management that journalists might occasionally have to report on camera. And even, perhaps, that they might be heard reporting in that holy of holies, a radio news bulletin : although the powers-that-be resisted that reckless innovation for years.

I remember when the finally tried it – the first insertion of a taped reporter's piece into the 7.45 am breakfast radio news bulletin, on 2FC, 2BL and the regional stations. Oh, the carry on. Executives came in early to watch. Producers and sub-editors were on stand-by ...the news reader rehearsed his introduction...a technician was there to actually play the tape...people consulted stopwatches and cued each other. And away it went...to a round of applause from the throng gathered outside the studio.

Premature applause, as it turned out. The Governor General of the day, Sir Paul Hasluck, had been listening at Yarralumla. And he did not like it one bit. He took great offence that the measured tones of the newsreader...the seamless flow of the bulletin... should be interrupted in this capricious and unnecessary fashion. And he wrote an angry Vice Regal letter to the chairman of the ABC, demanding that it be stopped forthwith. Which indeed it was: for six months while they worked out what on earth to do next.

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But they did teach us to broadcast. Firstly, how to write for the spoken word, which is a very different thing to writing for a newspaper. It's an art. And then they taught us how to deliver those words...with the correct breathing, the proper inflection, the right pauses in the right places. These were invaluable lessons that I carried with me for my entire career, ABC and commercial.

But above all, they taught us the three great rules of ABC journalism. Accuracy. Balance. And Fairness. Those three principles were deep in the very DNA of the ABC then – as in theory they still are - and we took them very seriously. Not simply because we were instructed to, but because they were fundamental to the ABC's raison d'être. There was no point in working at the ABC, really, if you were not going to observe those rules. That's what the place was there for. Accuracy, balance and fairness, in the service of its audience.

Sometimes it was carried to absurd lengths, when they would count line by line the amount of election coverage given to the various political parties, to make sure that one didn't get an extra sentence of copy beyond the others. But to file an unbalanced story was a mortal sin. An uncomfortable feeling which has never really left me.

I will spare you the laborious detail of the rest of my career. I did five years as a foreign correspondent in Indonesia, Vietnam and elsewhere. I was, and still am, enormously proud to have been part of that seminal daily current affairs television program *This Day Tonight*: with the likes of Bill Peach, Gerald Stone, Caroline Jones, Peter Manning, Peter Luck, Quentin Dempster, Kerry O'Brien, Andrew Olle, Richard Carleton and so on. They were the glory days.

And even though I ventured eventually into commercial radio and television – and, indeed newspapers - I always thought of myself as a creature of the ABC. The place taught me not all I know – far from it - but it laid an unshakeable foundation on bedrock, upon which to build a career in journalism and the media. I retain a great affection and respect for the place, as almost anyone who has ever worked seems to do.

So it pains me to say to you tonight that I believe that – in many aspects – the standards and practices of the ABC have ebbed from their high watermark. I think the outsourcing of so much program-making over the years has been little short of tragic. I look back on the sixties and seventies and even the eighties, when the television studios at Gore Hill teemed with activity, a creative ferment. There was always a drama in production...writers, producers, actors, directors thronged the corridors. In another studio: Playschool. In a third, rehearsals for a light entertainment or a quiz show. And the editing suites would hum to the production of the ABC's own documentary programs, nature shows, or a concert by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. But now, almost all of it gone. All that in-house creativity...and the boldness to experiment...outsourced to commercial production houses of often very-uneven quality. For every

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class act like, say, an Andrew Denton or the recent *Rake* series with Richard Roxburgh, there seems to me to be an increasing amount of cookie-cutter rubbish which you might just as easily find on Channel Ten. Or the rest. Made not because it's any good, but because it can be on-sold to the Kiwis or the Canadians, or even the Japanese or whoever.

As Quentin Dempster put it in a piece written for the Herald only a few weeks ago: "Through a long and deliberate board and management policy to dismantle and de-skill internal television production, the ABC is now totally dependent on the commercial television production sector for almost all Australian non-news content."

"What's wrong with that?" he asked. And he supplied the answer: "Our creative independence is being crushed out of us along with a conduit for diversity and originality nurtured in a creative training ground. The ABC cannot be truly independent unless it has a capacity to create and produce its own original programming. The public trust in the ABC is based on an expectation that we are independent of commercial influence. We are not."

I think that's true. But I am more concerned by the decline in news and current affairs. There, I believe, standards have slipped to an alarming degree. To the point where an ABC Television 7pm news bulletin these days is very little – if at all – different to the commercial competition that went out an hour earlier.

We get Tweedledee, Tweedledum and Tweedledumber. Road accidents. News stories which are not news at all, but warmed-over products of the giant public relations and marketing industry which now has journalism in a stranglehold. An endless supply of weather stories from the United States about minor floods in Alaska, or cars snow bound on a freeway somewhere in Connecticut: of no interest whatsoever to an Australian audience, but thrown into a bulletin because they are readily available to cover over the holes, like Spakfilla.

And, most awful of all, often scripted with the utmost banality and cliché: Heavily armed police. Grave fears are held. Sifting through the rubble. A close-knit community. Rugged bushland. Neighbours were shocked. Locals have expressed concern. All police leave has been cancelled. The heartbreak task of cleaning up. Tension mounted. The road toll escalated. Emotional scenes. Tributes are pouring in. It took fire brigades more than two hours to extinguish the blaze. Blah blah blah.

I know I will sound like a disgruntled old fart saying this, but if I or my colleagues had written that rubbish forty years ago, we would have been out of a job in 12 months. Now it's common currency. On and on it goes, at tedium, ad nauseum and nobody in any authority at the ABC seems to have the wit or the knowledge to put a stop to it. If I want that crap, I can get it by the truckload from Seven, Nine and Ten. The ABC should be better. Once upon a time it was. Now it's not.

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And so, too, the *practice* of broadcasting - the actual delivery of the words and scripts themselves. It is often abominably bad. And this is a sin which spreads not just across radio and television news, but into current affairs. Even to such flagship programs as AM, or Four Corners. Scripts delivered in what Clive James memorably described as “the plonking manner.” Dah de dah de dah dah... “police say they expect to make more arrests in coming weeks...doctors say the new treatment is a medical break-through...there have been angry clashes in parliament...Mike Carlton, ABC News, Canberra.

Where does this junk come from? My wife, Morag Ramsay, has spent most of this year putting together the commemorative exhibition for 50 Years of Four Corners. Looking back, it is a revelation to see how good those earlier broadcasters were: Michael Charlton, Jim Downes, Peter Ross, Bob Sanders, John Penlington, Mike Willesee, Caroline Jones ...the list goes on. Their voices were mellow and modulated...but above all they spoke TO their audience, not AT it. In short: they communicated. Today, with some notable exceptions, I fear it's an art that's almost dead.

I could go on here, too, about the urgent need for a programming revolution in TV news and current affairs. News 24 has, I think, been a total flop. Almost nobody watches it. It has sucked valuable resources out of other news and current affairs programs...but still does not have enough to do the job properly. Best to scrap it altogether – although that would involve an enormous loss of face, from the Managing Director on down.

And then there is the mess between 7 and 8pm. First news, then 7.30. A programming format invented in 1967 and now, 34 years later, almost unchanged. So often a report on 7.30 is merely a repeat of what we saw 15 minutes ago on the 7pm news, with a few added bells and whistles. When Kerry O'Brien quit last year, the ABC had the opportunity to do something radically different in that time slot. They even called in some high-priced consultants to sort it out, for heaven's sake.

But in the end, bugger all happened. News stayed the same. The 7.30 slot got a garish and hideously expensive new set, with red and blue lighting that looks like there's a fire engine parked outside. The two new presenters, Leigh Sales and Chris Uhlmann, are very good journalists, no doubt. But they struggle with an old-fashioned format way past its use by date. A priceless opportunity for transforming change was squandered. The audience figures show it: Give or take on different nights, roughly 250 to 300-thousand viewers switch off when the news finished at 7.30. Not good. If it were commercial television, heads would roll.

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But let me finish on an up note. The good news is that some things have not changed. I do believe the ABC remains, as committed as ever, to those three pillars of accuracy, balance and fairness. The best of its news and current affairs people are as unswerving now in their belief in the canons of public broadcasting...as unswerving as we were fifty years ago. And in the face of even more attack than ever.

For the conservative assault on the ABC grows ever more hostile. John Howard, as we all know, stacked the board with blatantly political appointees – Judith Sloan, Ron Brunton, Janet Albrechtsen and Keith Windschuttle – ostensibly to rid the place of political correctness, as he used to sneer. But in fact to bring the ABC to heel by imposing a political correctness of his own ideological biases.

And the onslaught from News Ltd, most particularly The Australian newspaper, is ferocious and unending. Based largely on the notion that, if there's any broadcasting to be done, it should be for the profit of Rupert Murdoch.

I don't think the Tories will ever win this argument. Every opinion poll ever done shows that the Australian people value the ABC, and hold it in very much higher regard than they have for Mr Murdoch's organs and emissions.

But that won't stop the conservatives from trying. And we can be sure, if we ever come to that unhappy day that Tony Abbott becomes Prime Minister, that the undermining of the ABC would reach a new intensity.

For all its faults, its flaws, its imperfections...the ABC remains one of our great institutions, one of our finest achievements as a people. It is possible to imagine the ABC being better than it is. But it is impossible to imagine our country without it. And for those reasons – and many more – it must be cherished, nurtured, and defended.

Ends