

EDITORS, JOURNALISTS AND AUDIENCES: TOWARDS A NEW COMPACT

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Introduction by Steven Maras:

Welcome, it is nice to see so many friends and interested citizens here. My name is Steven Maras, I am the Director of the Bachelor of Arts (Media and Communications) Degree at the University.

It is my honour and pleasure this evening to introduce Peter Fray, who is presenting the culmination of his research project into the role of the editor.

It is the capstone of his Media and Communications 'First Decade' Fellowship, which celebrates the tenth anniversary of the establishing of a media and communications degree at the University of Sydney in 2000.

I am especially grateful to the School of Letters, Art and Media and the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences for supporting the concept of the fellowship.

Peter has been very busy with us in his role as Fellow. The fellowship was anticipated to be for a short time, in a single block, but was extended to take in several segments of time on campus. While he has spent 5 weeks in total with us since he started the role in November 2010, working diligently around his Fairfax obligations he has held the title of Fellow now for most of 2011.

During this period he has contributed to, hosted, or convened, a number of significant events on [democracy](#), the [role of the editor](#), and [wikileaks](#), all with great grace and humour.

Much has been commented about Peter's 'return' to university. Peter tells me his industry mates ask him about it all the time.

The fact is that it was a long held aspiration of the Department to support a professional-in-residence.

Much of the research in the department directly addresses the history, theory and practice of media.

Our desire for the fellowship was to expand this research orientation and to encourage public debate about an aspect of the media. The hope was also to create a bridge with industry, building on our networks and internships. I believe we have gone some way to achieving that goal.

We had no idea when we invited Peter into our corridor how amazingly generous he would be of his intellect and attention (even with the additional obligations of being Publisher since his appointment to that role in February).

We also unfortunately didn't realize his surname was such headline-fodder. 'Editor exits the Fray' is particularly memorable. 'Needs time away from the daily pressures of journalism to think about journalism' is a line that has stayed with me. It seems as though time researching is seen as an equivalent to a Bex and a good lie down.

But this set me to thinking, with respect to the business coverage of media, why not Fray *enters* the fray? What about the broader fray of ideas alongside the fray of the media professional?

For Peter has done I believe a very brave thing for an Australian media executive in admitting that he can benefit from some form of sabbatical practice, some research time.

Rather than rest on the common view that the college of experience and leadership in the industry means one has all the knowledge one needs, Peter has embraced the idea of a need to keep learning, to engage with new ideas and re-engage with some old ones, in order to tackle some of the extremely difficult challenges he faces in his roles.

He seems to me to have engaged then not only in an act of personal development, and life-long learning, but an act of public good.

I wish to keep these remarks to a minimum. But before handing over to Peter I do want say that this is an experiment of sorts, as a lot of practice oriented research is.

What follows is not a typical industry stump speech.

It is not a thesis defence, although I can divulge the now much edited writing that leads to this speech, complete with the references, amounts almost to a small thesis.

We all know unexpected things arise from chance corridor and water-cooler interactions. We have suggested to Peter lists of readings, contested his thinking, supported him with a very able research assistant, Dominic Santangelo.

Peter in his own style has absorbed much of this reading and discussion, taken on some of our ideas, and adapted them to create a kind of research-injected speech that is meant to be a contribution to industry and academic discussion.

I speak on behalf of my colleagues in thanking Peter, and his family, for sharing such an interesting year and project with us. Without further ado, Peter Fray.

Peter Fray:

Good evening and thank you for coming.

I had first thought to call tonight's talk, 'the death of the editor', and then, on a more optimistic note, 'the future of journalism: we can get there from here.'

On reflection, the former appeared a bit downbeat - and, perhaps, tempting of fate. The latter belonged more to the self-help, Anthony Robbins school of public speaking.

So I have chosen to speak on the topic of journalists, editors and their audiences: towards a new compact.

Being aware that I could be misinterpreted, I wish to spell out what tonight is and isn't about.

It is not my opportunity to join the chorus about the terrible state of journalism, and how it was so much better before, back in the golden days.

I have been a journalist for 25 years, much of it in senior editorial roles, and it has always been better back then. It's a great shame I missed it.

Further, I am not speaking on behalf of Fairfax or the Herald tonight.

I speak for myself and on the basis of both my industry experience and my time at Sydney University.

I would like to thank the university, The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the School of Letters, Arts and Media and especially all the staff at Department of Media and Communications for establishing and supporting this fellowship. I've had a blast.

My speech tonight is in four sections, The Crisis, The Roles of Journalism, The Role of the Editor, The Compact.

What I will argue for tonight is a new compact between journalists, editors and their audiences: a compact that at once acknowledges the current trends and pressures faced by the media and points to a healthier future for journalists, editors and the most important and influential group of all, their audiences.

The key words I want to talk about as part of the new compact are: public good, collaboration, diversity and accountability and transparency.

THE CRISIS

First, I want to survey what is widely seen as a crisis of journalism.

No one can deny the business model of old media is under siege, and new media, in a fragmented landscape, is not yet at the point of replacing its cash flows.

This transition has inspired job cuts, page cuts and cost cuts – and well-run campaigns to save quality journalism.

Some journalists have convinced themselves that the good days are over; it is up to editors to convince them they might just be beginning.

That's a hard sell. As the media fragments, and revenues leave, the fears grow within and outside the industry, that we are seeing the end of days. Bad news sells.

And there's lots of it.

It was always there, but now it comes faster, daily, hourly, all parcelled up in a nasty email or often anonymous Twitter feeds.

One view: the media hasn't been doing enough, it's been blinded by spin, it's too cosy with government, the watchdog is more lapdog.

Or, as former Federal Minister cum author Lindsay Tanner has it, the media is guilty of dumbing-down society and becoming just another arm of the entertainment industry.

Or, as James Fallows puts it, journalists – reporters and editors – broke the news by turning complex issues into not much more than an ongoing game show, where one person wins, the other loses.

All this talk of gloom risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Four out of five Australian journalists agree or strongly agree the community has a negative perception of them and the work they do.

That's an old survey – some seven years ago – but, if anything I suspect, the feelings have grown. Certainly most know that there needs to be a new model.

Australian scholars David McKnight and Penny O'Donnell have surveyed 100 senior journalist and editors about how they see the future.

Some 87 per cent of them agreed that it was important or very important to find a new business model.

Most journalists and editors said they wanted more time and more resources to produce “quality” journalism. That contentious word. And I will return to it.

A Morgan poll four years ago found that 85 per cent of Australians believed newspaper journalists were often biased. Three-quarters said the same about TV journalists and 69 per cent about talk back radio hosts.

A more recent study from Essential Research found trust in daily newspapers in Australia down from 62 per cent in 2010 to 53 per cent in July this year.

The perception is something is broken. And that brings up the question of funding for journalism.

Will they – will you – pay?

Will you pay for some thing you don't actually trust?

We've been giving it away for free on the internet, and now we expect you to pay for it. News Ltd will soon find out how it goes charging for online content behind a paywall.

Fairfax is also examining new ways to extract revenue from content.

The internet – and its platforms like the smartphones and tablets – is made for free loading, made for aggregation.

So, how much will you pay? The industry doesn't know. Not yet anyway. But one thing is for sure – the primacy of print is well and truly over.

Yet print has, up to now, set the news agenda for the day.

If you didn't have the stories produced in the still print dominant newsrooms of the Herald or Telegraph, morning radio, commercial and ABC, would be largely white noise and music.

Clearly, as print dollars shrink, something has to change. The audience online is growing rapidly; reporters want to follow their audiences. More people read the SMH, for instance, now than ever before.

The problem: the online/print business model has yet to catch up.

I have surveyed the crisis, that's the easy bit, but what needs to happen next?

It's easy to blame the business model, but I suspect there is something else going on here.

The journalism has failed to keep up with needs in society, failed to engage audiences on their own terms, failed, in short, to write what people might want to read.

I will go into this in greater detail later, but there is a valid critique that we have fallen short. That the press has been too transfixed on what it thinks matters, to the detriment of its audiences.

We probably have preferred the political game show over policy analysis, the personal over the substantial, the voice of the lobby group over the person in the street, and sometimes, though I'd argue not as often as some would have you believe, the personal views of reporters or editors may have clouded objective reportage.

We may well have been seduced by public relations and failed to offer truly smart independent analysis of events.

We may well be guilty of group-think and we may have failed by convention or content to give people information which directly affects their lives and assists them to lead better or more informed ones.

Fifteen years ago, James Carey, the renowned US communications scholar, argued the conventions of journalism meant journalists "rely on experts, not always of their own choosing, to supply them with causes and consequences. This renders journalists ... frequent victims of the forces around them rather than defenders of a public interest or common good."

I believe this is one of the reasons why so many people think the media is biased, yet the irony is the convention of relying on experts - or those with a view - is designed to deliver balance and neutrality.

Carey makes an even more pertinent point: journalists spend too much time on the 'what' and the 'who' – and far too little time on the 'why'.

Why is the why so important?

There are many functions of the media but explaining why things happened clearly goes to one of the key ones: to assist people to make informed decisions.

If journalism fails to do this, preferring to shed more heat than light, clearly it is not doing its job – and people will go elsewhere for the information.

Although I promised not to speak from my inside seat, let me say a few things about all of this: it is painful, broadly accurate and yet it is inspirational.

It is prompting deep soul searching and reassessment across the industry, from investors to the shopfloor.

WHAT IS JOURNALISM FOR?

The current crisis is an opportunity to re-state and then re-invent what journalists and editors do and what audiences may want.

Journalism is not about one thing: hard news in the name of the public good.

There are many other functions, some of which receive scant attention or, in fact, are often derided – to the detriment of the audience.

Most scholars– and editors – agree journalism should inform, provide access to public opinion and investigate the powerful, the traditional watchdog role and what journalists mean by the term fourth estate.

But many see other roles for journalism:

How about analysis of events and ideas, advocacy for particular causes or ideas?

How about engendering social empathy, so we can see the world through the eyes of others?

How about entertainment or servicing the economy by bringing the sellers and buyers of goods together via advertising?

Or, how about maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from special interests?

These are all valid roles, though an inordinate amount of time is spent seeing the crisis in journalism through the prism of the press failing its fourth estate functions or its cousin, the public right to know.

We would all agree that investigative journalism or political journalism are vitally important to a functioning media and a functioning society. I am not advocating a move away from them.

What I am saying is that we need to become more sophisticated and radical about the way we talk about journalism and its roles.

As Steve Waldman, author of a recent and mammoth report on the Information Needs of Communities in the US asks, "do we need professional or citizen reporters? Obviously, we need both. Do we need old media or new media. Both. Objective and advocacy journalism? Commercial or nonprofit? Free or paid? Both, both, both."

In the US, the ProPublica website, which won a Pulitzer this year for investigative reporting, is funded by philanthropic means, donations and advertising.

Dedicated to public good journalism, it makes most of its works available for free to traditional media – and actively promotes the good works done by reporters working for it.

It has experimented with using amateur or citizen journalists to monitor the work of governments.

In Australia, we have our own versions of this expansion of the journalistic field.

Two publications to watch: the Conversation, co-founded earlier this year by Andrew Jaspán; and the GlobalMail, funded by web entrepreneur Graeme Wood, and due to launch early next year.

But back to what journalism is for.

Fifteen years ago, in his influential work, *Breaking the News*, Fallows argued that the news industry had to re-embrace its special role as a business that was not just about being a business.

Fifteen years on, there are reasons to be optimistic that new lands are in sight, even if we are still testing our navigational skills. We are still in uncharted waters, but maybe that's okay.

As Fallows himself has recently said, “As technological, commercial and cultural changes have repeatedly transformed journalism, they have always caused problems that didn’t exist before, as well as creating opportunities that often took years to be fully recognised.”

Journalism is not just one thing. A more academic way to say this is that we need to explore alternatives to what American scholar Barbie Zelizer calls the “unitary model of journalism” – that is, journalism that only links the media’s public good functions to the provision of hard news.

Arguably newspapers have been following Zelizer’s advice for years. We have published supplements aplenty on all kinds of topics. But we are also guilty as charged of thinking of journalism as only hard news.

One useful word here is genre. Megan Le Masurier and Fiona Giles, from Sydney University, argue that hard news journalism has been conflated to mean journalism itself, whereas other genres of journalism are quarantined by the use of descriptors, such as fashion, travel, food or that wonderful catchall, lifestyle.

The upside to the genre idea, and asking again what is journalism for, is that it broadens the possible, it allows us to connect to multiple audiences and adds breadth and depth to journalism.

Part of any new compact requires a redefinition of what is news and how it should be written.

This will become more compelling as different forms of journalism are delivered to different people using different devices.

Is the tweet, for example, a new genre?

To which I’d say, yes, though, in a news sense, that depends on what it says.

Now, can I explain so in 140 characters?

And the beautiful thing about the world in which we live is that it may be possible with some judicious editing and brave thinking, to keep everyone happy – the traditionalists and their would-be usurpers.

One of the most pressing questions – for journalists, editors and their audiences – is what is quality journalism?

Quality is often seen as a cipher for rationality and objectivity, implying distance and detachment.

Yet one of the reasons the media is considered to be in such a poor odour is its distance from the people it seeks to engage.

There is also a tendency, understandable as it may be, to only see quality in terms of the hard news watchdog role of the press.

And yet, as I have discussed, there are many genres of journalism.

Journalists and editors like the word quality: who wouldn't want to do quality work?

But personally I find the term 'quality' an intellectual roundabout, and I would prefer to talk about independence.

Quite simply, quality doesn't help us understand the multiple functions of journalism.

We need to embrace a wider range of genres under this idea and look for quality in everything we do.

THE ROLE OF THE EDITOR

What really got me going on the role of the editor was the content farm: a US invention that sees an army of freelancers paid to write stories based on and in response to hits on Google and other search engines.

In other words, what the audience is looking for: this is editing by Search Engine Optimisation.

These stories are then loaded on to websites to drive traffic.

It is a virtuous circle: the public want to see certain stuff, they go looking for it, and, hey presto, the content farms give it to them.

As I said, who then needs editors, stumbling about trying to decide what the public might want or, more to the point, should want?

One of the obvious answers is that editors do much more than decide what goes into the paper.

They are the embodiment of an organization's culture and values.

That is why the *News of the World* editors should have known what was going on with the phone hacking. That is why editors and editors-in-chief are valid subjects of public discourse.

Editors set the tone, and in these fragmented days, editors need to be thought of as more than Captains of objectivity trawling about in a sea of supposed facts of equal worth.

In my reading about what has concerned other editors over the years, there is scant debate about what editors actually do.

When editors talk out, they rarely reflect on their own roles, views and ethics, preferring to use the opportunity to critique their industry. Perhaps editors don't think; they just do.

Tonight, I am going to break for cover and I'd like to suggest the work of an editor can be captured in a few sub-headings: culture; representation; & presentation.

Culture

Editors do not live in a cultural vacuum. They bring their own experiences and life views to the job. They bring their own values and judgements.

But they also reflect the culture of the media – its many roles – and the innate aspects of their own mastheads.

They are custodians of the codes of ethics and the mechanisms that are designed to assure a high degree of accountability and transparency.

They need to be free from board or outside control, and need to stay vigilant to remain so, all the while reflecting in their actions, their organisation's corporate and intellectual values.

This needs to happen especially during periods of painful cultural, industrial, technological readjustment.

Editors influence everything they touch – and it shows.

They need to bring to the job a deep sense of commitment to their journalists and audiences – and respect for their views.

They need to inspire and cajole. They need to earn trust and show that they are worthy of it.

In our digital world they now have more opinions to deal with than ever before.

They need to make judgement calls about them. They have to lead. And that is becoming harder.

We have come a long way from the founding 18th and 19th century ideals of the free press, as expressed in Europe and North America and adopted by use here.

As political scientist John Keane notes, the free press “was assumed to be a vehicle for rational knowledge...such knowledge would expose and dissolve irrationality everywhere.”

Clearly this is not how the media now operates...if it ever did.

Some editors stand accused of being purveyors of irrationality.

But the question of rationality – and adherence to an objective style of reporting – brings up some constant and awkward challenges for editors, not least of which is what counts as a fact.

Is President Obama a US citizen? What an absurd debate.

Is Climate Change real or not?

Is a price on carbon a tax?

Was Osama Bin Laden brought to justice or assassinated?

As the late US Senator Daniel Moynihan said: “everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts”.

Representation and Presentation

Much of the rest of what editors do is functional, driven by deadlines, and concerns the dual roles of what can be termed representation and presentation – twin functions of the daily art – or was that science – of editing.

The question is always what to cover and how to display it.

This all may seem a bit ‘so what’, but think about it for a moment and both decisions make a profound statement about how a paper, website or broadcast finds its audiences and goes some way or another to meeting their needs.

By ‘representation’ I mean the political nature of the editor’s role, the many decisions which revolve around the daily agenda of what to put in the paper, website or broadcast, the determination of what stories are deemed more important than others – and what to write in the editorial.

Editors are both representatives of democracy – unelected as they may be – and vessels for its discontents.

They harness the considerable resources and intellectual capital of themselves and journalists to deliver a running critique on parliament at work. We lionise its ideals and lament its failings.

And we editorialise about both.

Thus, we seek to represent the public by having our best guess – based on years of experience and what we think we know people are interested in.

We both watch and participate. We act on instinct and draw on cherished principles.

We make a series of calls, by the minute, as to how we should best represent the views of the public.

We strive to see the difference between what is important and what is urgent, though I fear we often conflate the two, spending more time on the sizzle of public life than the sausage of public policy.

The danger here is that editors and their journalists – working as representatives of the people – are kept out of the deep waters, and away from the real decision makers.

People who have been inside government and then return to the media world are often amazed about how little journalists know and how little access they actually have.

We may well want to be on the outside looking in – as are our audiences – but without knowledge, what are we talking about, what should we ask and how do we set a relevant agenda?

It is perhaps too easy to complain that journalists are victims of a vast machine dedicated to spin and obfuscation.

Many journalists are adept at finding ways to negotiate through this maze and know how to develop trust and access.

But what we -- editors and journalists – most urgently need to do is recast our efforts to go deeper and longer, to have the patience and the aptitude to report deep and long.

We must also have the confidence to set up, develop and articulate our own views on behalf of the citizens we aspire to represent.

There is another important aspect of what editors do: they have a presentational role.

By presentational I mean the look and feel, the page one design, the size and shape of the picture, the way graphics and other data are used.

To my mind the look is almost as important as the content – and can certainly make the difference of tone and accessibility to readers.

Barely a week goes by, when I am not asked when the Sydney Morning Herald will go tabloid.

There's nothing wrong with the question and I appreciate most people who ask are motivated by genuine interest and care about the paper.

Going tabloid is an important presentational and commercial question, and one that if badly executed – IF it were to go ahead – could harm the paper's standing.

Here is another example of the presentational role. In the course of developing the SMH I-pad app, as much editorial time was spent on how the app would look and function as what would be on it.

Given most tablet media apps re-purpose content already made elsewhere – with the addition of platform specific content such as picture galleries and videos – it may be reasonable to see the editor more as curator.

Curating is not just about selecting, but it is less concerned with creation than the traditional editorial top-down model.

As we move deeper and deeper into the digital age, editors are going to become more like curators: people who make multiple decisions about what goes where rather than what should be created.

Does this mean I will become curator-in-chief?

Ten years ago, John Hartley, Professor at QUT, asked whether it is “possible to tell a society by how it edits?”

“Can a period be identified by how it brings ‘matter into a certain form’? Are we in a period where it is not information, knowledge or culture as such that determine the age but how they are handled? “

For Hartley, we are living in a “redactional society” where information is constantly “reduced, revised, prepared, published, edited, adapted, shortened, abridged to produce, in turn, the new(s).”

So, perhaps some of us will become redactors-in-chief?

Hartley’s prescient views are a challenge to both the traditional presentational and representational aspects of the editor’s role.

As he says, “even as its representative democratic function is superceded, journalism itself massively expands.” I take this to mean that everyone can be an editor but I DON’T think it means the editor is dead.

Indeed, this expansion of democratic voices makes the role even more important.

The representative role of the editor, I’d argue, is not superceded.

Far far from it.

In my various editorships, I have pushed for freedom of an alleged terrorist, floated changing the NSW constitution to allow recall elections and published, with help from many others, an independent blueprint for a new transport policy for Sydney – a job which we, as taxpayers, pay MPs and bureaucrats to do.

While I did not use the term myself, these are examples of civic journalism: journalism that the objective method militates against – journalism that aims to provoke a conversation.

In a choice, between objective and civic, I’d plump for the latter when the public consensus needs to be recognised or shifted.

This is the power of the editor. It is a power beyond curation. It’s based on my judgement – yes, of course – but also on principles of justice and a fair go.

Fundamentally, it is about leadership.

David Hicks, an Australian Citizen, was held in Prison for five years without trial.

The NSW Constitution should allow citizens the right to recall moribund and dysfunctional Governments.

Successive NSW Governments had failed to deliver an effective transport system.

Tell me if I am wrong? But is it time to campaign to bring the troops out of Afghanistan?

As Jay Rosen, the doyen of public journalism in the US, says “in the old theory, credibility flows from detachment and distance. You’re credible because you are not involved. Under the new theory of credibility, credibility follows because you are concerned, because you care, because it matters to you what happens in the community.”

In many ways this is not a radical statement; it is what local papers have been doing forever – showing that they care about the local community.

I am often struck by what appears to be a double standard here: local papers are expected to be intrinsically linked to their communities and take a leadership role on an important local issue.

For this they are awarded and celebrated.

National or metro papers, however, are more likely to be criticised for taking overt positions, as if in doing so they are trading off objectivity and pandering to the crowd – or parts thereof.

For metropolitan editors, the challenge is when and how to do it.

Any new compact between editors, journalists and audiences will need editors capable of mustering all their traditional skills and roles – presentational, representational and cultural – and learning new ones.

Perhaps the most important of these is how to listen.

New challenges to the very fabric of democracy arise every day. As the political scientist Simon Tormey points out, there is a scepticism around representation.

There are many people out there who don’t want to be represented per se – by anyone or anything. They just want to be heard.

THE NEW COMPACT

You’ve been very patient.

As you can gather, I don’t believe that everything is broken, but I do believe we need a new way of thinking, a new compact.

The key terms are (1) the public good, (2) collaboration, (3) diversity, (4) accountability and transparency

- 1. The media must constantly expand its public good role, and accept change: in order to thrive the media needs to spend more time contributing ideas, shedding more light than heat; there are other modes or genres it can and should work in. It must assert the rational over the irrational.**

The media has to be more than a sideshow. It is at a point of transformation and from that point there needs to flow a redefinition of quality or independent journalism.

Audiences – note the plural – deserve and want better journalism. The very styles of journalism need to change; there is no one size fits all.

One of my pet hates: the inverted pyramid. This is the style used to construct news stories by ranking in descending order different and competing voices. Its aims are noble and expedient: to render the complicated simpler, the abstract concrete.

But what it also does is codify conflict and makes it harder to reveal and explain, harder to find the why. In doing so, it excludes the great mass of citizens who can't be bothered to decode what the hell the journalists are on about.

It disempowers the audience, again, the very opposite of what journalism should be trying to do. It can also take away from the pleasure of reading good writing.

For me journalist David Marr's piece on a hole in the road remains an exemplar.

It starts: "As catastrophes go, the great Bellevue Hill landslip was extremely civilised. The only reported casualties are two cars, a lamp post and a tree. The horse trough on Victoria Road survived in situ."

There are flaws and limitations in some of the key concepts used to describe the functions of the press—phrases like the fourth estate and the public right to know.

I would argue for a new approach to reporting political discourse.

We need to re-invigorate those watchdog functions.

Journalism can – and should – report, campaign, advocate, investigate, reveal, analyse, explain and entertain.

It will be driven by ideas and full of surprises.

But it can't do all of that on every platform. Neither should it want to.

Indeed, old and new media can and must live together and learn from each other to deliver a better democratic outcome.

In fact, I will argue that over time – near time, perhaps – we will need to work to abandon the distinction between old and new.

- 2. That it must collaborate with other agents of democracy (and not just other media) and accept that while journalism sits at the forefront of the public conversation, it is not the only conversation.**

Central to the new compact is how journalists and editors relate to their audiences.

And to achieve this, the future of journalism must be collaborative – with other media, traditional and non-traditional like Wikileaks, but especially with audiences.

This can mean working with start-ups or enlisting its own pro-am forces of citizen journalists to tap into public opinion or monitor the actions of governments.

The media will continue to be an agent of democracy, but when millions of people have the tools to spread mass opinions and hold institutions to account, its pre-eminence is compromised.

Is this a bad thing?

We have only just started to tap into the potential for citizen journalists to work with traditional media.

One of the antidotes to the fears that spin, PR and government propagandists will takeover the media space – is surely to engage and work with an informed citizenry to promote the common good.

Such a coalition, harnessing the skills of journalists and editors in traditional media and the interests –not to mention the eyes and ears–of their audiences, has the capacity to change the nature of public debate.

The immediate challenge for editors is, as US scholar Michael Schudson says, to turn “the current moment of transformation into a reconstruction ... enabling independent reporting to emerge enlivened and enlarged.”

3. That diversity and pluralism of platforms and tools should lead to greater diversity of content and voice.

Editors need to understand, if they do not already, that journalism will be performed across multiple platforms and in doing so reach multiple audiences.

There is no doubt that the platforms they edit – print, website, tablet and so on – will require constant reformation.

I firmly believe that the web is the place for breaking news, the paper the place for thinking news – focused around unique, ideas-driven content – and the tablet experience rests somewhere between, making full use of its inherent capacities to deliver a lean forward, visually rich experience.

In future, I see newspapers spending more time on investigations, analysis and different ways to present information away from the conflict-focused inverted pyramid.

They will certainly need better copy and more nuanced editing. I see the web breaking the news – and views – and offering a far richer and interactive experience.

As curators, editors need not be slaves to repurposing content. They will still be agenda-setters, but they would be foolish to ignore the nuances of platforms and the needs of audiences seeking different information at different times of the day.

What is abundantly clear in the age of Twitter, facebook, Google and the blogosphere, is that the agenda can no longer be solely defined by a self-appointed elite, which includes myself.

4. That better accountability and transparency are crucial to reforming the trust relationship with the audience.

I note the *Guardian* in Britain has recently taken this literally and is publishing part of its newlist – the usually highly secretive litany of the day’s stories – on a live daily blog.

People are being encouraged to get in touch with editors and reporters if they have ideas or information about the stories. It is a trial, and, as the Guardian admits, it has no idea how successful it will be, but it is a fascinating iteration of two key elements of any new compact: transparency and collaboration.

No media company in Australia has come close to such openness, and there is small voice in my head saying that's just the sort of thing those lefties at the Guardian would do.

But it is impossible to deny the potential for such an idea to change the nature of the relationship between media and its audiences – and produce better journalism into the bargain.

My own contribution to the cause of de-mystifying the media has been far more modest and I must confess is a steal from an idea used at the *Guardian*, the *Observer* and the *New York Times*.

The Readers' Editor of the *SMH* and *Sun-Herald* is tasked, in part, to explain how those papers and websites make decisions.

It may still be too early to say whether the position, held by Judy Prisk, will elevate debate beyond a cacophony of complaint or whether it will fundamentally change the nature of the relationship between Fairfax's mastheads in Sydney and its readers or the type of journalism they produce.

If little else, the Readers' Editor has already reinforced in my mind that we have do more to reveal the processes behind the mastheads, we do need to explain how we are held to account (and what happens when we fail) and we do have to show the public more about how we make the sausage.

That 'aint always pretty, but it's more and more necessary for a new compact to take hold.

Everyday I see credible, courageous and important decisions being made by journalists and editors.

And yet the Federal government feels an inquiry is needed to work out how to improve press accountability.

There are hundreds of restrictions on the actions of the press in this country, not to mention a wealth of internal and external codes that set out to define media values, ethics and correct practices.

So, do we need a media inquiry?

What I will say is that every editor I know is aware of what responsible behaviour is in the media –and what it isn't.

What we definitely do need is greater effort to explain to the public what happens on the editorial floor – open the doors on ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Editors need to lead these changes.

And now is a time for leadership. The salvation and re-invention of the media is in its own hands – as is its damnation.

There is no doubt that the products of the media are changing and will continue to evolve.

Journalism is more fluid – or liquid, as Mark Deuze calls it – than ever before.

And fluid journalism needs solid editors, editors who are able to lead and listen and make informed, brave and at times, risky choices about what is done and not done, what goes where and why, and how all these things fit together.

I also see greater emphasis on using the web as the place where audiences not only interact but shape the content of the journalistic agenda.

This idea extends beyond the current fascination with moderation of comments, to using the citizens as a journalism resource, as I have discussed.

Editors will be more than curators – or redactors–of other people's ideas; they will still shape up those ideas and, informed by the citizens, use the wealth of data available to make those ideas come alive.

Representation remains at the forefront of the editor's role, but they will have to acknowledge in thought and deed the inherent difficulty of claiming to speak on behalf of or for the people.

Nevertheless, we should set ourselves goals.

Some examples:

We should campaign to end the shocking disparity between levels of aboriginal and non-aboriginal health and literacy outcomes.

We need to lead a rational debate about Australia becoming a republic – a national need.

We need to lead the debate about the full ramifications of our ageing population – and how the ideal of a ‘fair go’ sits with thousands of Australians living in poverty, many of them elderly women.

What is the goal?

I say it should be measurable change.

Journalism needs, when appropriate, to do more than simply point out the problem and observe what happens next.

We need to be mindful of the many roles of journalism and its many genres.

We need to examine any new way possible to listen to audiences, not just their comments but their ideas.

It is fashionable to talk about the death of journalism or, in my world, the death of newspapers.

I hope I have shown tonight that predictions of demise are both premature and immature.

The media world is a very different place than it was 25 years ago when I started out, different than a decade ago, different than last year even.

It is challenging and scary and yet exciting and re-invigorating.

I have every confidence that a new compact between journalists, editors and audiences can and will be found.

Frankly, it must.

Thank you for your time.

ENDS