
Media

Bridget Griffen-Foley

NEWSPAPERS LOVE ANNIVERSARIES. Anniversaries of disasters, political milestones and sporting triumphs make good copy. Newspaper anniversaries are even better, providing publishing companies with opportunities to celebrate — and remind loyal readers of — their historical significance and their ‘scoops’. The New South Wales press historian R.B. Walker included an entry in his index for ‘firsts’: the first newspaper at Maitland, the first penny daily, the first tabloid and so on. Doubtless the publications themselves crowded about such milestones at the time.

The quest to celebrate longevity has led to some odd commemorations. When, in 1971, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a special supplement for its 140th anniversary, its arch-rival, the *Daily Telegraph*, was moved to run an article entitled ‘Telegraph nears century’. (That honour was eight years away.) And who could forget the *Good Weekend* magazine’s 1996 spread marking the closure of the Fairfax presses at Broadway? Old printers were probably startled to see glamorous models, dressed in evening gowns, swimsuits and skimpy newspaper ‘dresses’, posing in front of the presses to mark each of the five decades of printing at Broadway.

Since history is written by the victors, the Australian newspaper industry’s most significant milestone may go largely unnoticed. Two hundred years ago, on 5 March 1803, Australia’s first newspaper was launched. As the title suggests, the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* was a government gazette published ‘By Authority’ of the governor. Printed by a convict, George Howe, the newspaper retailed official announcements, together with shipping news, colonial gossip, and excerpts from foreign newspapers. Volume 1, number 1, of the *Sydney Gazette* also contained Australia’s first advertisement. Australia’s newspaper press was heavily commercialised from the outset; the front page of the London *Times*, with its dense advertising columns, was a model for Australian publishers.

In each of the other Australian colonies, the first publication was also a government gazette. Early newspapers usually started as weeklies and became tri- and bi-weeklies before going daily. By the time the *Sydney Gazette* ceased publication in 1842, around a dozen newspapers were being published in New South Wales. Most notable, perhaps, was the *Sydney Herald*, which had recently been purchased by the Warwickshire immigrant John Fairfax and was soon to become known as the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Many of Australia’s major dailies, including the *Daily Telegraph*, the Melbourne *Argus*, the Hobart *Mercury* and the Adelaide *Advertiser*, originated during the prosperous middle and latter decades of the nineteenth century.

As in all settler societies, newspapers here followed the

spread of settlement. The gold rushes, land selection and the growth of agriculture stimulated the development of both towns and newspapers. In its heyday, the goldmining town of Coolgardie had two morning, one evening and four weekly papers. Colonial newspapers were often published to push the claims of a city — such as Port Lincoln, Geelong, Ipswich and Launceston — that was a major rival to one of the capital cities. The *Tasmanian*, emanating from Launceston, and the *Maitland Mercury* were the precursors of a large body of country newspapers. As railways facilitated wider and speedier distribution of metropolitan newspapers, their country counterparts became more parochial. Provincial newspapers came to serve their communities with reports on, and debates about, local matters, while at the same time training compositors, journalists and editors who often graduated to metropolitan newspapers.

Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers were ephemeral. Some were simply bizarre. In 1864 the *Riverina Herald* reported that among the ‘waifs and strays’ brought down by floods on the Darling River was a copy of the *Tandower Times*, a single sheet issued in the Menindee area and written by its editor while he was ‘imprisoned on the top of a high sandhill surrounded by miles of water’. Despite his precarious situation, the fellow took it upon himself to rail against wife-beating. When floods and droughts isolated towns, enterprising publishers used whatever materials were at hand — satin, calico and brown paper — to print their treatises, some of which were barely more than a page.

A self-conscious expression of colonial cultural awareness and sophistication, newspapers thrived in a society with free education. In 1882 one commentator calculated that there was one paper per 6722 Australians, compared with one paper per 18,000 in Britain; a year later, in *Town Life in Australia*, Richard Twopeny contended that Australia ‘is essentially the land of newspapers’. The publishers of the Melbourne *Argus* must surely have been chuffed by Twopeny’s assertion that it was ‘the best daily paper published out of England’, although by Federation the conservative *Argus* had little to celebrate, with sales around a fifth of those of the more liberal, protectionist *Age*, Australia’s leading broadsheet.

At the end of the nineteenth century, metropolitan and provincial newspapers were joined by suburban papers, at least in Sydney and Melbourne, and weeklies that were companions to metropolitan dailies. Publications such as the Melbourne *Australasian* and *Weekly Times*, the *Sydney Mail*, the *Queenslander* and the *Western Mail* contained a digest of the week’s news, feature articles, fiction and illustrations. They were sent by coach and rail to thousands of country readers, some of whom contributed parts and stories. As publishing books locally was expensive and the market was

small, they played an important role in fostering Australian creative writing. Weeklies and larger newspapers published poems and serials, providing many colonial writers with their basic income. They also, as Ken Stewart argues, helped to foster a shared literary tradition between city and country.

The most famous weekly was the *Bulletin*, established in 1880 and the sponsor of a distinctive radical national literature. By the end of the decade, the Christmas issue of the self-described 'Bushman's Bible' was selling an extraordinary 80,000 copies in a population of only around three million people. The *Bulletin* also helped to introduce to Australia a new, more popular style of journalism. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, publishers sought to appeal to the increasingly literate lower middle classes. Headlines became more dramatic, stories were shortened and more pictorial material was used. Some newspapers even began removing advertisements from the front page, although the august *Sydney Morning Herald* held firm until 1944. The Australian newspaper industry became more professionalised, with the creation of cable news services and the Australian Journalists' Association. World War I, which brought with it an upsurge in the volume of news as well as a shortage of newsprint and higher cable rates, further encouraged the trend towards brevity and immediacy.

THE END OF the war ushered in the most ruthless period hitherto in Australian journalism. For capital city dailies, 1923 marked the height of competition, with twenty-six metropolitan dailies having twenty-one owners. Meanwhile, the newspaper groups of Hugh Denison, a wealthy tobacco manufacturer, and Keith Murdoch, a journalist turned editor, were engaged in a bruising battle for the hearts and minds of Melbourne; in 1925 Denison's Associated Newspapers retreated to Sydney. Through the Herald & Weekly Times, Murdoch established a national media chain, the likes of which Australia had never seen. In Melbourne he secured the morning/afternoon combination that was the key to the success of later newspaper empires, and bought into newspapers in Brisbane and Adelaide, as well as several radio stations. The Packer dynasty also emerged during these years; with Denison's often inadvertent help, R.C. Packer and his pugnacious son Frank variously managed, acquired and established several newspapers and magazines.

Sydney journalism was particularly tough, with stories of proprietors arming themselves with revolvers and bodyguards. Stunts and political scandal abounded; under R.C. Packer, the *Daily Guardian* offered free insurance to regular readers and even introduced the Miss Australia contest, while Premier Lang tried (and failed) to push through legislation to bankrupt the Packer family. Newspapers such as the *Sydney Truth*, subtitled 'A Fearless Exposé of Folly, Vice and Crime', delivered sensational investigations of opium use, prostitution, sex crimes and randy nuns. Staid broadsheets such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* were forced to modernise and compete for scoops. In this environment,

it was difficult for the labour press to compete with titles emanating from companies with vast capital reserves. Numerous labour newspapers had been established after the great strikes of the 1890s, but many were short-lived or had a limited readership. Various attempts were made to establish a labour daily to counter the biases of the 'capitalist press'; all struggled to find adequate capital, sufficient advertising support and a large readership. One exasperated editor was heard to complain that the majority of workers 'would rather read our [racing] tips than our leaders'.

Fierce competition, rising costs and the Depression's impact on advertising receipts saw nine newspapers collapse in the early 1930s. Established newspaper proprietaries looked to milk the economies of large-scale production; they invested not just in metropolitan, Sunday and sporting newspapers, women's magazines and radio, but created Australia's most dominant cable service, Australian Associated Press, and laid the foundations of a local newsprint industry.

A survey by UNESCO in 1952 showed that Australia had 1.7 per cent of the world's newspaper circulation but much less than one per cent of the world's newspapers. Within a few years, only Sydney and Melbourne had a competitive daily newspaper market. But at least the 1960s were distinguished by the establishment of Australia's first national dailies: the Fairfax-controlled *Australian Financial Review*, which had been launched as a weekly in 1952, and the *Australian*, founded by Keith Murdoch's son, Rupert. Overcoming the considerable difficulties entailed in distributing newspapers across a vast geographical area, these titles challenged the provincialism so characteristic of the Australian press. The *Australian*, in particular, encouraged improvements in the standard of national reportage and the coverage of the arts.

The Menzies government largely caved in to existing media groups intent on dominating the new medium of television. Even before television began in 1956, the Australian newspaper market was experiencing a falling away in the growth of sales. As the trend for lower circulations as well as

fewer newspapers emerged, the press increasingly relied on specialist 'lifestyle' sections to yield advertising revenue. Supplements on motoring, education and display homes, which blurred the line between news and advertising, began falling out of newspapers, as they do today. As the major newspaper groups looked for new markets to conquer, they also increasingly bought into the provincial press.

Suburban newspapers proliferated during the postwar baby boom. The rise of the private car (identified as a problem by metropolitan publishers), the spread of home ownership and the growth of suburban shopping malls saw thin, poorly printed suburban titles transformed into fat, usually free papers with a good deal of local news and advertising. Naturally, their potential did not go unnoticed by the major metropolitan proprietors. Indeed, Rupert Murdoch secured his foothold in Sydney by buying the Cumberland chain of suburban newspapers in 1960, leading to a turf war with a syndicate hastily assembled by the Packer and Fairfax groups.

Postwar migration also greatly multiplied the production of ethnic newspapers. Australia's first foreign-language newspaper, published in German, had made its debut in 1848, but, after the war, the range of newspapers published for ethnic groups steadily increased. By the 1990s there were over seventy such newspapers published in more than thirty languages. Aboriginal land councils and legal aid services also produced numerous newsletters and newspapers in the 1960s and 1970s, and the 1990s saw a resurgence in Aboriginal newspapers led by the nationally distributed *Koori Mail*. The women's liberation movement gave rise to various roneoed newsletters and revived the goal of a truly feminist newspaper, and in 1970 the first political publication for homosexuals, *Camp Ink*, emerged.

Newspapers such as these not so much competed as coexisted with the established metropolitan newspapers. By the early 1970s there were only seventeen capital city dailies, all owned or controlled by three groups: the Herald & Weekly Times, Fairfax and Murdoch's News Ltd. Then, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, avarice, recession and legislative changes saw old proprietorships such as Fairfax vanish, the Herald & Weekly Times fall into Murdoch's hands, overseas investors make significant inroads into the Australian press, and afternoon newspapers collapse.

The issues and problems now confronting traditional hard-copy newspapers are not so different from those that faced their twentieth- and even nineteenth-century counterparts: cost of newsprint, reliance on advertising support, influence of new media technologies, attempts of governments to control the flow of information, and repressive libel laws. Meanwhile, the Australian people live in a society with perhaps the most concentrated print media ownership in the Western world.

This essay draws on articles by John Arnold, Max Corder, Denis Cryle, John Henningham, Ken Inglis, Clem Lloyd, Elizabeth Morrison and Ken Stewart; monographs by Murray Goot, Henry Mayer and R.B. Walker; and entries by David Bowman and others in the *Australian Encyclopaedia* (1955, 1996).