

Politicng the Media

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The first thing a tyrant does on assuming office is to acquire and regulate the press, Not long afterwards he establishes a department of "information". From then on bogey men---from foreign threats to capital shortages---may be created to justify almost any impost or prohibition. And without effective criticism, he can distribute favours to friends and supporters---all done in the name of "the national interest". Conversely, liberal democracies enjoy some media that are independent from the government, and it is hard to see how there could be liberal democracy without them.

Although Australia has substantial media independence, we are a little ambivalent. The Federal government owns the ABC and SBS and regulates both print and electronic media, the WA government holds shares in a newspaper, all governments maintain propaganda units which, in the case of some State governments, are huge.

Much of this lack of independence was the work of not-quite-frank politicians who felt that it was better that the public be given the politicians' version of events. Some of the government control, however, was part of a design to prevent biases of omission and comission in the private sector. The medicine, which is the wrong medicine anyway, is a great deal worse than the disease.

Because private media do not, as a rule, directly serve those government interests which can compel obedience, their biases are not as likely to cover up gross injustices as those of government media and propaganda departments. Nevertheless, however professional their Journalism, private media, like government media, will from time to time be selective or report inaccurately to benefit a trade union, a business, a political party, a social class or somebody. As well as the inevitable biases of owners, editors and journalists, bias may be bought for cash or favours by governments and by other private interests.

None of this is a serious problem, as long as there is plenty of competition---right- and left-wing papers, papers that report unions or businesses favourably and so on, do not

trouble us. Neither should right- and left-wing, etc. TV and radio stations.

To avoid the problems that heavy and persistent media biases would undoubtedly cause, or perhaps to prevent sustained criticism of the government, most countries regulate the media.

The Australian regulations ensure that several media owners service each capital city but, strangely, encourage every journalist in the country to belong to the same union. Even more strangely they restrict the number of radio and TV stations.

The regulations also attempt to impose standards. Owners of TV and radio stations must be people fit to hold a radio or TV licence and program content must not be racist, sexist or obscene and must contain minimum local content.

One result of all this nonsense is that the Australian electronic media, both government and private, live with the threat of government sanctions and the hope of government favours. Such media are unlikely to be too critical of Commonwealth governments. Regulation can result in high farce, such as the Broadcasting Tribunal's current inquiries into Mr Alan Bond's fitness to own a TV station.

Among other things it is alleged that Mr Bond is not suitable because he is alleged to have:

- * paid the then Premier of Queensland \$400,000 in circumstances where the Queensland government might have returned favours to the Bond Corporation, and
- * threatened to use his TV station to prejudice the AMP society during an argument between Bond Corp. and AMP at the time Bond was trying to take over the Bell group.

The first allegation seems to me to say far more about the unsuitability of the Premier than about Mr Bond. There is, however, point to the second. Mr Bond, as the holder of a government-limited number of broadcast licences, is in a position of privilege under the government and the government should, if it is going to create the privilege at all, restrict the way the privilege is used. In particular, Mr Bond should not use it to obtain advantages, over and above those that cannot be separated from the licence.

The Tribunal can suspend, revoke or impose conditions on the licences, but it cannot get to the nub of the problem: the *Broadcasting Act* itself. Unlike the print media, entry to the broadcasting industry is restricted by government fiat, and licences are obviously worth a lot of money. Moreover, how much they are worth can be changed by the government at short notice.

The picture of Messrs Bond and Packer with their arms around the Prime Minister, which appeared in several

newspapers about three years ago, therefore raised the possibility of an alliance which is potentially far more harmful than anything I can think of that Mr Bond could have agreed with a Premier. There is nothing inherently wrong with Mr Bond being friendly with Prime Ministers, but they were in the position where they could have done each other great favours that no tribunal could investigate.

The restriction the government places on the number of visual and sound transmissions that we may legally receive is unnecessary. The average American can receive, at home, 46 TV stations and 39 radio stations. Over 50% of Americans subscribe to cable TV and another 40% could if they wished. The share of the three major networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, has already dropped from 90% to 60% of prime-time viewing.

If Australians had access to as many stations, the opportunity for any one of them to distort what we think the truth is would be minuscule. Neither the government nor any private interest could suborn them all and suborning only some would be pointless. In those circumstances the good character of the proprietors would not be an issue.

Last year we had a protracted debate about media concentration in which the dangers of government control were barely discussed. The truth is that the media are much more concentrated than they would be if the government got right out of the area. I wonder, though, whether the bureaucrats and Federal politicians really want media that are not beholden to them.

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