

**Technological change and industrial unrest on Murdoch's *Australian*:  
a retrospective on the VDT dispute (1976-1982)**

**Denis Cryle, CQU**

This study overviews a period of dramatic change in Sydney newspapers associated with the introduction of new technology in the form of Visual Display Terminals (VDTs), with a particular focus on its implications and impact at the *Australian* newspaper and News Limited's Sydney plant. Such a case study can be located within a range of contexts, not merely News Limited's subsequent international strike-breaking reputation after the Wapping confrontation, but equally within the industrial and political climates which prevailed both locally and nationally. Whether these combined to produce the same outcomes in Sydney as those in the United Kingdom is a key question addressed by way of conclusion. With this implicit comparative framework in mind, this case study seeks in the first instance to unravel the complexities associated with the implementation of new technology on the *Australian*. For while many of the volatile ingredients which led to Murdoch's confrontation with the British unions at Wapping were already present in the Sydney experience of this period, significant differences persist between the industrial changes on the *Australian* and those on Murdoch's British papers. In view of its complexity, this study focuses predominantly on events in Sydney, using local developments at Fairfax as the starting point to explore the changing relations of newspaper managements with industrial unions, including both printers (PKIU) and journalists (AJA).

The existing literature devoted to changing newspaper technology in Australia from the 1970s militates to some extent against a case study approach. Lloyd, for example, covers strike action by journalists from the perspective of the Australian Journalists Associated (AJA), acknowledging that the 1980 national strike over the introduction of VDT's constitutes "an industrial saga which warrants its own major study" (1985:280). Equally broad though pertinent are the reports contributed to the national committee inquiry on *Technological Change in Australia* (1980), although these deal mainly with preliminary developments at Fairfax. Valuable contemporary accounts also exist for the period by leading union officials such as John Lawrence (1988) and E.C. Bennett (1979). The AJA's

annual reports and its newspaper *The Journalist*, when supplemented with its strike publication, *Clarion*, provide a useful blow-by-blow account of key events. In contrast are the major studies of Murdoch and News Limited (Shawcross, 1992; Page 2003) which give little or no space to these Sydney developments, either as a prelude to the Wapping episode or in their own right. Nor are the newspapers themselves, generally anti-union and pro-technology in tone, of much assistance, while annual company reports tend to oversimplify or simply pass over discomfiting aspects of a volatile situation.

Not surprisingly, case studies involving VDTs in the Australian context are relatively sparse. The most significant for our purposes is Souter's lucid account (1981) of events at Fairfax during 1976-77 when its chapel, on behalf of printers, took a strong stand over the way in which the company was planning to proceed with new technology. There can be no doubt that printers were in the front line of technological change and that the balance of industrial power subsequently shifted to the AJA and the journalists. Equally useful, though somewhat later and more directly influenced by Wapping, is Timothy Marjoribanks' case study of the *Adelaide Advertiser* and the workplace impact of the new technology (1997:205ff) in the wake of Murdoch's 1987 takeover of the Herald and Weekly Times. In view of the limitations presented in the existing literature, much of the necessary research for the *Australian* case study has been undertaken by the author in order to ascertain the specific impact of personalities and events at the paper during the decisive 1976-82 period. In examining the role of managers and editors, most research was undertaken by the author at the News Limited archives in Sydney. To fully gauge the impact of workplace changes, however, the author has also undertaken in-depth interviews with *Australian* production staff, including journalists and printers, who worked at News Limited during the period in question. Retrospective material jointly presented to the News Unlimited Conference by Swancott and Harvey, the latter an AJA official and former *Australian* employee, has proven to be equally valuable.

In opting for a case study approach rather than the informed overview provided by authors such as Reed (1999) and Lloyd (1985), this analysis follows the precedent set by Marjoribanks' study (2000) of technological innovation in the British newspaper industry, notably of the *Financial Times* during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite the significant difference that his case study operates in a post-Wapping industrial climate unlike our own, Majoribanks' basic argument for a case study approach, on the grounds that "the relation between technology and workplace organisation" is specific to "the circumstances of each workplace", remains pertinent for our purposes. In asserting that:

the manner in which technology is introduced into the workplace and the associated reorganisation of workplace relations are the contingent outcomes of historically developed workplace relations within a specific organisation (2000:577),

the same author advocates an approach which he designates "historical institutionalism". Such an approach, undertaken on the basis of participant interviews with a cross section of the workforce (the *Australian* in this instance), encourages researchers to move beyond generalist studies towards more finely-tuned analyses which integrate scenarios of technological change with an understanding of the ethos prevalent in specific organisations. At the same time, historical institutionalism represents an attempt to synthesise and transcend previous research on technological change and those established approaches which have either focussed on the innovative impacts of the technology itself, or upon the role of agency in the same process and the reception accorded technology by the social actors concerned (Marjoribanks, 2000:576).

Historical institutionalism, as outlined above, involves case studies of the relevant industry, management and labour organisations. It equally requires that attention be paid to the role played by competitors and governments (industry and government contexts) on and around the vital questions associated with the introduction of new technology into the workplace and the renegotiation of workforce roles. Consequently this study of the *Australian* in the critical years 1976-82 identifies four

phases for analysis, rather than a single decisive event. Just as the situation of the *Financial Times* was greatly influenced by what had taken place at Wapping (Marjoribanks, 2000), so it will be contended that the industrial dispute which erupted at Fairfax during late 1976 had significant implications for News Limited and its printing workforce. This initial conflict over the new technology and the historic Cahill court decision which resulted (1976-78) were followed by a second phase (1979-80) in which News Limited, following Fairfax's example, introduced the new VDT technology at its Sydney plant with serious disruption to existing work practices and journalistic routines. Inter-union rivalries between printers (PKIU) and journalists (AJA) were influential during this second phase, fuelled by negotiations over the extent of their role and access to the new technology. The third and better known phase of the case study, in which *Australian* journalists continue to be prominent, was the lead-up and aftermath to the Justice Alley's controversial opposition to AJA claims for a VDT allowance. This rebuff contributed in turn to the escalation of industrial unrest beyond Sydney and the longest-running national dispute in the AJA's history. Finally, but no less important for the *Australian* were the ongoing effects of unrest on the paper during 1981-82, when workplace relations, under the heavy hand of News Limited management, deteriorated still further. In an unexpected aftermath to the wider dispute, the newspaper was threatened with closure, a scenario which was narrowly averted, albeit not without an unprecedented shake-out of its journalistic workforce.

### **'Sitting on the fence': News Limited and the Fairfax dispute of 1976**

John Fairfax Limited, still the dominant newspaper group in Sydney, was the first to embrace the opportunities offered by computerisation and cold type in an effort to reduce labour costs. At this time, an estimated 85% of North American dailies were being composed in cold type (McColl and Forward, 1980:152), although its adoption was not yet widespread in the United Kingdom. According to Souter (1981:559ff), Fairfax's desire for competitive advantage, combined with the deepening economic recession after 1974, encouraged it to proceed quickly with workplace change at Broadway in the late 1970s. As early as December 1975, when the rival *Australian* was embroiled in a

journalists' strike over the accuracy of its election coverage, Fairfax was pressing ahead with plans to introduce its ambitious but flawed Aryscom system by 1976, with the help of a Dutch consultant. It comprised VDTs or Video Display Terminals, linked to Harris 2200 terminals which were in turn connected to Digiset phototypesetters. The new system effectively eliminated the traditional work of machine compositors, readers and stonehands. Metal type was supplanted by tape, fed into the Harris system by operators for subediting, after which the newspaper was prepared by phototypesetters and manual makeup prior to final production.

In retrospect, Fairfax managers took industrial risks by pressing ahead without union participation (McColl and Forward, 1980:165). Despite assurances that compulsory retrenchments would not occur, the company refused to negotiate with its Chapel or the PKIU over its log of claims to accompany the implementation of Aryscom. Union demands included not only better long service leave and severance pay but also shorter working hours and improved wages, as a trade-off for increased company profits and productivity. None of this was guaranteed by Fairfax management. At the same time, the PKIU was unable to secure agreement with the Australian Journalists Union on the vital issue as to who should be given access to the VDTs. Its leadership was convinced that printers ran the risk of industrial oblivion if they did not press the claim of their membership to exclusive access to the new technology ahead of the journalists.

The ensuing deadlock precipitated a bitter sixty day strike at Fairfax in the final months of 1976, involving up to 1400 production personnel in a Wapping-style confrontation which cast militant unionists and pickets against police and the non-union production workers (Souter, 1980:569). Although journalists did not go out in support of the printers during this important episode, the dispute escalated to other unions including postal workers and electricians. Their militancy was undoubtedly linked to the Fraser government's tough policy on union unrest and its declared intention to wind back such Whitlam reforms as Medibank. Turner (1983:149ff), in reviewing the state of trade unionism

after Whitlam, notes that, while unionists felt increasingly under siege, the ACTU, the peak Australian union body, was encouraging its members to pursue individual claims following Fraser's successful re-election in 1977. The all-out confrontation at Fairfax encouraged intervention by leading New South Wales union officials and subsequently influenced the PKIU's decision to take its claims to arbitration. However, deliberation in the courts was protracted in view of the complexity of the issue. Justice Cahill of the New South Wales Industrial Court did not bring down his historic determination until August 1977, by which time Fairfax's timeline and plans for Aryscom were being revised and postponed. Political and industrial contexts undoubtedly played a part in widening the dispute (Souter, 1981:564-565) but it did not assume the epic scale of Thatcher's Britain where the printers' industrial power base would experience an unprecedented assault.

In the subsequent context of Murdoch's and News Limited international reputation for strike-breaking at Fleet Street, it is worth noting that the company did not adopt this approach nor emulate Fairfax's tough tactics in the early Sydney phase of technological change. Until that point in time, the culture of the Australian-based company had been to recognise union membership of the PKIU and AJA, and to conduct separate negotiations with each. Indeed, News Limited's willingness to rescue ailing papers like the Sydney *Mirror* and the *Truth* chain in Melbourne and Brisbane had earned it a reputation in the industry as a company willing to keep on staff rather than close down unprofitable print operations. Goodwill persisted in the *Mirror's* Sydney Chapel, where Murdoch's interpersonal dealings with officials and members inspired a wary respect, in contrast with the hierarchical formalities which prevailed at Fairfax or the standover tactics of Packer senior (Kensell, 2005). In the case of the *Australian*, production workforce had been merged into the *Mirror* chapel, a tightly organised body run by moderates who contrasted their own pragmatic dealings with Murdoch with the "emotional baggage" of the AJA and their fellow journalists (Cairn, 2005).

Not that News Limited was slow to introduce new systems but it did attempt to do so in the context of existing industrial agreements. A month prior to the Fairfax dispute on 3 September 1976, the News Limited chapel had served its own log of claims on the company, seeking assurances against retrenchment of permanent employees for a period of two years and a moratorium on computerisation until the expiry of the existing agreement (Cahill, 1977). A key figure in these and subsequent negotiations at the Surrey Hills plant was Brian Hogben in the role of Group General Manager (Editorial). A former *Mirror* editor and old fashioned journalist, Hogben was well known by the workplace and perceived by printing officials as “good to deal with” and “not ruthless enough” (Cairn, 2005). AJA officials at the *Australian* like Barry Porter recalled Hogben as hardworking and intelligent, but overstretched by the demands of Murdoch’s expanding media interests (Porter, 2004). On behalf of the company, Hogben agreed to the Chapel’s request for job security and a reasonable time-frame for the introduction of VDTs, but balked at proposals for a 5% wage increase and a 17 ½ % loading on long-service leave (Cahill, 1977). These issues, though unresolved at the time of the Fairfax unrest, did not provoke a comparable response at News Limited. When its printers took their claims to court in the following year, the New South Wales Industrial Commissioner simply recommended that the parties continue their negotiations as part of a new industrial agreement. Differences between News Limited management and printers persisted but the capacity of Hogben and his industrial adviser, Bill O’Neill a former printing union official, to deliver on long service arrangements and offer a better redundancy package than that being proposed by Fairfax (McCarthy, 2005), were undoubtedly influential in minimising local disruption at this stage.

Throughout the Fairfax dispute of late 1976, the News Limited Chapel provided funds for its fellow strikers but did not itself engage in sympathetic strike action on the job (Cairn, 2005). By contrast, when its Chapel engaged in a wildcat twenty-four hour strike in October, Fairfax management approached the court for an injunction to prevent further union strike action (McColl and Forward, 1980:167). A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial on the subject took the management line in

asserting that the confrontation was a political strike aimed at damaging newspaper interests rather than improving the lot of workers (McColl and Forward, 1980:167). Significantly, when Fairfax requested that its copy be processed at Surrey Hills, in the course of the dispute, Ken Cowley, News Limited's foreman and a former printer on the *Australian*, declined assistance (Cairn, 2005). Harry Kensell, the long-serving father of the News Limited Chapel, considered that his own company "sat on the fence" during the Fairfax unrest, preferring where possible, to secure on-site agreements with its workforce at its competitor's expense. AJA official and *Australian* journalist Barry Porter, confirmed that News Limited was unpredictable rather than compliant in negotiations with its Sydney competitors. Hogben, more so than the other Sydney newspaper representatives, enjoyed plenipotentiary powers in his dealings with unions, in part because of his complex responsibilities across the company and the nationally based operations of the *Australian* and News Limited itself. Another difference in management attitudes over the new technology were the differing estimates of job losses provided by Fairfax and News Limited. In 1979, News Limited's Sydney plant estimated that production job losses under the new VDT regime would amount to some 85 positions (mostly readers) or 20% of its workforce (425). In comparison, Fairfax's projection were more draconian with projected losses of 432 (43%) from a total workforce of 1094 (McColl and Forward, 1980:175, 177).

It would be difficult to overstate the implications for the Australian newspaper industry of Cahill's historic industrial ruling of 5 October 1977 concerning the new VDT technology and workplace demarcation. The critical ongoing issue, along with questions about redundancies and payouts, was the Industrial Commission's ruling concerning the new demarcation of workplace labour associated with the introduction of the VDTs. This complex and politically sensitive judgement extended implicitly beyond the troubled Fairfax operation to News Limited's Sydney plant. Confident of a favourable ruling, the PKIU had moved to arbitration after strike and put its case for exclusive access to the new terminals, one which some of its own officials regarded in retrospect as doubtful, if not untenable. In the event, the print union's bid to restrict keyboarding to its own members was

deemed by Cahill, as well as by company advocates, as “a wasteful duplication... with the disadvantage of increasing likelihood of errors” (1977:15). In the view of its former Federal Secretary, John McCarthy (2005), the PKIU miscalculated by arguing its industrial case on an occupational basis rather than in relation to production more generally.

Of the three unions involved, the PKIU for the printers, the AJA on behalf of the journalists and the Clerk Union on behalf of the typists, the PKIU and the printers were most adversely affected by the outcome. Cahill ruled that the input and subsequent preparation of editorial material would be performed solely by journalists; classified advertising received by telephone was to be keyboarded by clerks, leaving printers responsible for contributed editorial material (letters, guest articles) as well as advertising received by mail or across the counter (Souter, 1981:567). Importantly for News Limited, Cahill, in the same judgement, referred to “matters of general principle” rather than limiting his decision to the “specific grievances” at Fairfax (Cahill, 3 August 1977:8). Disappointment among printers at the outcome was heightened by the reputation of the presiding Commissioner, Justice Cahill, as the respected son of a former New South Wales Labor Premier, deemed by most to be sympathetic to the union movement (Cairn, 2005).

### **Electronic production starts at News Limited (April 1979-March 1980)**

While the prospect of large-scale redundancies loomed for printers in the wake of the decision, Lloyd (1985) notes that the AJA, which participated in the court deliberations on behalf of journalists, stood to benefit most by a decision which gave the journalists sole rights to use new technology for the collection and preparation of news... It established that journalists would retain their editorial functions and not be excluded from the production processes once computerised production began (1985:276). Certainly, the Cahill decision, taken under industrial duress was influential in Victoria as well as New South Wales and would frame News Limited’s plans, as an interviewing party in the proceedings, for the introduction of its more electronic production system. News Limited printers,

with subsequent support from the AJA, adopted a pragmatic approach to workplace transformation, bent upon securing favourable redundancy and retraining packages for members with agreement from the company itself, keen to proceed quickly with its plans. News Limited journalists, now in a stronger position to capitalise on their workplace recognition were prepared “to give the new technology a go” (Jenkinson, 2004) despite the fact that few had any previous experience with VDTs or the new technology.

This was the local and industrial context in which News Limited laid plans to introduce its own system by April 1979, in competition with Fairfax’s new struggling system. Its implementation on ‘April Fool’s day’ of that year, as an Australian Union official dared to point out to management (Porter, 2004), was accompanied by renewed concerns, voiced previously by printers, with health and workplace safety, including the risk of eye strain and documented overseas cases of repetitive strain injury (RSI). In seeking to understand ongoing workplace unrest in the case of the *Australian* and News Limited, industrial structures as well as union organisation and history play an influential part. The AJA, regarded as a ‘lone wolf’ in the labour movement (Swancott and Harvey, 1989:136) was a much smaller union than the PKIU, with only 11-12 000 members nationally, 4-5000 of whom were engaged on newspapers (Marshall, 1986:4). In the case of the *Australian*, journalists, mostly unionists and Whitlam supporters, ran their own House Committee independently of the *Mirror* and were represented separately in negotiations with management (Porter, 2004). Their unprecedented strike on the *Australian* over allegations of biased electoral and news coverage in 1975 had demonstrated a newfound militancy and activism on the part of the House Committee.

At a time of general turmoil in Australian politics culminating in the sacking of Whitlam by the Governor-General Sir John Kerr (Griffen-Foley, 2003), the *Australian’s* House Committee, on behalf of its members, sent a letter of protest not only to Murdoch as proprietor but to the *Sydney Morning Herald* where it received welcome publicity (Dare, 2001). Accusations of disloyalty levelled

subsequently by Murdoch and News Limited management against the journalists were taken very seriously by the company; in the uncertain aftermath, the leaders were either moved on or banished to other states while a climate of suspicion and retaliation persisted. Derry Hogue, returning to the *Australian* from the London *Times* in 1979, recalled:

the residual discontent from the dramatic changes in editorial content from four years previously in 1975 ... That sizeable change in editorial direction had meant a more than usual changeover in staff and also an increase in the number of editors. One editor lasted no longer than a few days (2004).

This volatile workplace in which News Limited management demanded loyalty and created insecurity would, in institutional and historical terms, pose particular challenges for the VDT experiment, not least because of the arbitrary dictates of its proprietor and the editorial insecurity which imposed ongoing changes for editorial staff.

In the short term, News Limited management, having enjoyed success in keeping printers and journalists disunited, were more willing than Fairfax to buy industrial peace. The PKIU, reporting to its members on News Limited plans, estimated that some 200 jobs would be lost at the plant over time (Bennett, 1979:21), a significantly larger figure than the company itself had calculated in the previous year (McCull and Forward, 1970:177). Although readers were no longer required for production purposes, some PKIU members were retrained in simplified printing techniques, while some compositors were still required for pagesetting in conjunction with photocomposition. In spite of this, pragmatism prevailed for a time within the News Limited Chapel, under pressure from its membership to accept the retraining options and liberal retirement scheme proposed by the company (Bennett, 1979:21; McCarthy, 2005).

During early 1979, News Limited was installing its automated production system, Newscom, at its Surrey Hills plant in Sydney. It comprised visual display terminals, connected to a digital PDP

11/70 processing unit which was networked with Harris Fototronic 7400 phototypesetting machines. As at Fairfax, machine composition was replaced by photocomposition which used negatives and a bromide transfer process for printing purposes (Bennett, 1979:19-21). Under this system, news stories and editorial items input by journalists, display ads by printers and classified ads by clerk typists, were fed into a central database, designed to store up to 1000 pages of the *Australian* on disc packs for correction and proofing by sub-editors. To facilitate the process, News Limited introduced an on-the-job training scheme in conjunction with the unions. Most of those involved in training for the Newscom system were from the editorial section, with sub-editors assuming greater responsibility for the accuracy of copy. For its combination of lectures and hands-on sessions, News Limited recruited and trained its own journalists including unionists for this purpose rather than using executives. However, because Newscom had only been accessed by designers and executives in the preliminary testing phase, it suffered from similar faults as Fairfax's ill-fated Aryscom system. The most serious flaw throughout 1979-80 were the constant crashes recurring on a daily basis. Like its Fairfax counterpart Newscom was seriously underpowered and its patent limitations aggravated the already tense workplace relations, although it is doubtful whether it surpassed Fairfax's dubious April 1982 record of 191 crashes in a single month, for a loss of 2777 minutes (Souter, 1981:108).

Nevertheless, Newscom's regular crashes undoubtedly damaged morale and threatened production. Most trying for staff and management were the long Friday sessions when the Newscom system was placed under its greatest strain by the production of the bulky weekend *Australian* edition (Jenkinson, 2004). Journalists who did not back up their stories would lose every line while subeditors were placed under increased strain by the demands of the new technology and the shortened deadlines. Catriona Wilson (2004), a journalist and Newscom trainer with the *Australian*, recalled having to retype columns at short notice for the vital Saturday edition. For sub-editors who spent longer on the machines and experienced the frustration of waiting for Newscom to be brought back on line, these delays necessitated 'one or two schooner' breaks at the nearby Evening Star Hotel. *Australian*

production editor, Mike Jenkinson remembered that the system would crash as often as 4-5 times a shift and that:

Each time the subs would be told to go to the pub for half an hour (it took half an hour to get the system back up). Four half-hour sessions at the pub meant about eight schooners and subs were struggling by the end of their shifts (2004).

Even so, the source of these crashes was not solely systemic or due to the volume of the weekend issue. A number of credible sources were convinced that some were deliberate, in protest at the company's "chronic band aid and cheap skate" approach to the problem (Hogue, 2004). Wilson, a trainer herself, recalls having accidentally learnt how to crash the system by dramatically enlarging the type. According to Jenkinson (2004):

There's no doubt sabotage took place, because of the way the computer system crashed as soon as the sub-editors returned to the office. It wasn't difficult to work out how the system could be undone. There was ample intelligence available. All you needed was motivation.

On the same theme, Charles Wright who described Newscom as 'a pretty crappy system' and who became chief sub-editor at the *Australian* after working as a trainer, remarked that the crash "always happened at the same time of night when someone would try to set the paper in 144 point" (Wright, 2004).

Many of the concerns, previously voiced by printers, re-emerged in the AJA's thirteen point submission to the VDT safety inquiry of early 1980; radiation, eyestrain, noise and heat were among them. By the end of February, News Limited journalists struck over the limited availability of terminals and the frequent crashes and production delays (Alley, 12 May 1980:530). According to their local representative and AJA Federal Secretary, Neil Swancott, these crashes were the single most frustrating aspect of the new workplace (Harvey and Swancott, 1989:139). To compensate workers for the inconvenience and frustration, News Limited agreed to pay its workforce a disability

allowance of \$15 per week from the end of March, in what would prove a test case for the newspaper industry. Complicating the resolution of workplace tensions and wage claims was the uneven impact of computerisation on the workforce. Reporters and journalists suffered initially from a lack of terminals and proper work stations, but it was the subeditors, comprising roughly one quarter of the editorial workforce, which felt most pressured under the new arrangements. With the use of VDT's, they had inherited the additional labour of now redundant proof readers, along with some of the typesetting functions of the compositors. Given their increased responsibilities and exposure to the new technology, the AJA remained confident that it could mount a stronger case for the disability allowance, over and above recent award increases.

### **The Australian and the national strike of 1980**

Rather than viewing the AJA and journalists as opportunists with regard to the new technology (Lloyd 1985), it is equally possible to see in the pressures generated by the *Australian's* unexpected success as the first electronically produced metropolitan newspaper, the catalyst for what would become the longest strike in the AJA's history over the VDT disability allowance. Nor is it likely that newspaper proprietors anticipated the strength of this response, given the union's 'lone wolf' status and past record. While the national strike of mid 1980 rivalled the printers' dispute at Fairfax three years earlier, union tactics and organisation differed in significant ways. The Fairfax chapel, which boasted experience and leadership, preferred to act locally, unlike the AJA which used a federally-based structure and organisation on which *Australian* journalists and members like Barry Porter, Nigel Dique and Neil Swancott were well represented both during and after the 1975 dispute. While Sydney exhibited a more volatile industrial climate than elsewhere, the AJA's interstate structure, which paralleled the national network of the *Australian's* bureaux, ensured that the dispute would not be contained to Sydney, as it had been in the case of the Fairfax printers, even though few journalists outside the larger centres had yet encountered VDT's in their own workplace.

In keeping with the case study approach employed by Marjoribanks, it is useful to examine editorial changes on the *Australian* and the role played by personalities in understanding these events. Succeeding Les Hollings, a stabilising if stodgy influence on the paper was Bryan Boswell who enjoyed a reputation among staff as a Cold War warrior and non-nonsense manager (Wright, 2004). A former European correspondent and prolific writer, Boswell had accompanied Bruce Rothwell to Australia in 1975 as news editor of the *Australian*. He was one of a series of British-based Australians determined to stamp the policies of their proprietor and the London office upon the paper as part of what might be termed the 'London factor'. After writing for Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph* in the late 1970s, Boswell was appointed editor of the *Australian* after VDTs had been introduced. The context for Boswell's provocative intervention and subsequent strike action by the AJA was the rejection by the industrial courts of the union's ambitious fifty dollar claim for a disability allowance in favour of a mere five dollars a week. When sub-editors refused to return to their terminals in protest at Justice Alley's ruling, one was sacked at Fairfax and twenty-eight dismissed at the *Australian* on 13 May after frantic in-house negotiations at News Limited had collapsed (Swancott and Harvey, 1989:144). The circumstances of the sackings by Boswell were denounced as particularly callous by AJA members including John Moses, the *Australian's* chief of staff who subsequently joined the strike in protest, and helped to edit the *Clarion* strike newspaper in Sydney. In his own words:

There's no way an organisation could ever apologise for the way people were treated that day. To crowd people into a small office, then pick them off one by one, almost by sniper fire: "Will you work the VDTs?" "No" "OK you're fired. Take the name". It seemed to me a brutal and inhumane way of treating people, particularly professional journalists. Used as I am to way management can behave, that really made me very angry (Moses in Lloyd 1985:279).

The solidarity and length of the national VDT strike over six weeks was testimony to the outrage of Moses and many colleagues, coupled with an abiding belief that journalists should share

some of the economic benefits of computerisation with management. Reaction to the sackings at the *Australian* outside Sydney was decisive including at News Limited's interstate bureaux where visiting executives and Sydney editors had previously employed the same retrenchment techniques as Boswell (Lunn, 2001:76, 174). In this respect, a culture of mistrust and editorial insecurity at the *Australian* persisted during 1980 and in the wake of the national AJA dispute which continued until late May. Although the union won further concessions from proprietors concerning the size of the allowance and agreement that it should extend to all employees, it was significant that Sydney AJA members did not support the return to work and appeared less satisfied with the outcome than branches elsewhere (O'Neill, 2005:31). As events would shortly prove, dissatisfaction was especially entrenched at the *Australian*, where the initial dispute had simmered and erupted in the first half of that year.

The national AJA strike could hardly be regarded as an industrial defeat for the journalists in contrast to the actions of the PKIU. A feature of industrial action at News Limited's Holt Street plant during the strike were protest pickets over the arrival and imminent deployment of overseas staff for what the company described as VDT training. Neil Swancott (1989:149) recalled union fears at the time that News Limited expanding operations and problems would lead it to establish a permanent scab force which could be flown interstate to maintain production on its Australian papers in the event of strikes. In the light of Australian involvement in the strike-breaking Wapping operating six years later, the successful national strike organised by the AJA was effective for the time being in deterring News Limited from strike intervention in Australia, although printers at News Limited and elsewhere remained convinced that the journalists union had 'sold them out over VDTs' (Kensell, 2005).

### **The 1982 crisis on the *Australian***

The further deterioration in workplace relations and the parlous situation at the *Australian* by 1982 prolonged recent industrial disputes and brought the national daily to the point of closure.

Marijoribanks, in his study of new technology and the British press, makes the important point that workplace negotiations occur “not only at the point of introduction” and that, “since adoption takes time,” on-the-job relations “may improve or deteriorate” (2000:222). In this context, the unrest of 1982 on the *Australian* represented an escalation of tensions which had surfaced intermittently among its editorial staff since the mid 1970s. Although long serving management representatives, Brian Hogben and Warren Beeby, endeavoured to break the impasse, the precarious financial situation of the paper and continued editorial changes aggravated an already charged situation.

Ill feeling between journalists and management resurfaced during 1981-82 when the AJA challenged Murdoch’s fitness to purchase Channel Ten licences at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal hearings in Sydney and Melbourne (Swancott and Harvey, 1989:140). In the course of the protracted Channel Ten hearings, allegations of interference by Murdoch executives in order to secure Whitlam’s defeat were widely rehearsed as evidence of bias, along with reasons for the company’s withdrawal from the Press Council (*Journalist*, August 1981). Journalists were increasingly concerned that the expansion of News Limited and increasing concentration of media ownership in Australia were limiting their independence and job prospects. The AJA claimed at the time to have identified instances of unsolicited corrections to the *Australian’s* financial copy concerning Murdoch’s business interests by its CEO Ken Cowley (Swancott and Harvey, 1989:138). Such was the loyalty demanded of News Limited executives and staff, however, that no current Murdoch employee would give evidence to support the AJA case. Cowley’s behind the scenes role came to the fore during the crisis months of late 1982 when he issued a famous ultimatum to striking journalists to return to work under threat of immediate closure, before implementing mass sackings of staff. In contrast with the 1975 confrontation which prompted a steady rather than dramatic depletion of staff, the ‘September massacre’ of 1982, as it became known, was in some respects a reprise of the 1980 situation on the paper, with subeditors continuing to play a prominent opposition role.

Arguably, management at the *Australian* came under greater pressure during 1982 than at any previous time. The AJA had successfully used the 1980 dispute to extend the benefits of the VDT allowance to all employees, thereby building bridges with the remaining printers and paving the way for further concerted industrial action in the form of rolling strikes. The round of short “guerrilla stoppages” which resulted during 1982 were, according to AJA historian Clem Lloyd (1985:282), more effective than any previous industrial action against the company. Warren Beeby (2001), who succeeded Brian Boswell as editor, claimed that News Limited was losing as much as \$7.8 million at that time because of industrial disputes and that frustrations were mounting among staff and managers alike. The situation showed no signs of improvement in September when the PKIU threatened further action over a thirty five hour week (*Australian* 21 September 1982:3) in defiance of the Fraser government’s campaign against “excessive wage rises and damaging strikes” (Fraser, 1982). A subsequent appeal by the AJA against alleged victimisation on *Australian* at this period confirmed the seriousness of the financial situation. Never a profitable enterprise, the paper had achieved recent economies of forty printing staff redundancies through the introduction of new technology, but its increased production costs and wages bill, combined with a slump in advertising revenue, threatened to double its expected annual loss of \$1 million (Webb, 1985:10) renewing calls for closure from Board members. With the arrival of another controversial British editor Sir Larry Lamb, in the same year, the *Bulletin* reported that “the *Australian’s* circulation has dropped alarmingly in recent months and is now reported to be often under 100,000 on weekdays” (28 September 1982:156).

In keeping with News Limited international presence, several Fleet Street scenarios were to be played out at the *Australian* during late 1982, the first of these undoubtedly influenced by Murdoch’s ultimatum of the same year to the staff of his newly acquired London *Times* to accept large scale redundancies or accept closure (*Australian* 12 March 1982:12). The second, which confirmed the influence of personalities and editorial influence of the London office, corresponded with the abrupt descent of former *Sun* celebrity editor, Sir Larry Lamb, within the News Limited hierarchy. Once in

Sydney, Lamb, who had coveted the editorship of the London *Times*, retaliated by embarking on a major overhaul of the *Australian* in a determined effort to take it further up market. Lamb's belligerent handling of staff during his brief editorship was reminiscent of interventionist predecessors like Bruce Rothwell in 1975. Union officials (Porter, 2004) considered his overbearing tactics to have been a major contributing factor to further stoppages and staff protests. According to Porter (2004), Lamb outraged staff in mid September by dressing down a senior journalist and attempted to insert a front page apology to readers for union stoppages and production errors which staff believed to have been the result of computer crashes. The turmoil climaxed in the same month with Lamb's elevation to the position of managing editor. His successor, Colin Chapman who enjoyed better relations with unionists and a solid journalistic reputation (*Australian*, 1 September 1982:1), was brought under immediate pressure to implement Lamb's plan to downsize staff, lasting less than forty-eight hours as editor when he refused to implement his predecessor's policy. By now, personalities and factions assumed such significance at the paper that neither the AJA officials nor experienced managers could curb the divisions.

After a further week of strikes, Cowley intervened and ordered staff back to work under threat of closure before proceeding with large scale retrenchments (Webb 1985:15ff). It was, according to the AJA, another barbaric over-reaction, reminiscent of 1980, "a junior executive armed with twenty or so white envelopes ... walked from desk to desk in the editorial room of the *Australian*, in full view of the entire journalist staff, greeting his pre-determined victims with a summary sentence of unemployment" (Swancott and Harvey, 1989:138). Robert Drewe, a former *Australian* journalist then writing for the *Bulletin*, recorded that the thirty-nine sackings at the paper included "such well known reporters as Phil Longford, John Webb, Adrian McGregor" and that "top graded journalists were the heaviest hit, two were winners of the Walkley awards for distinguished journalism" (*Bulletin*, 5 October 1982:27). Although Cowley later acknowledged the traumatic impact of the downsizing decision, and the company under staff pressure agreed to offer an additional four weeks in wages to

the sacked journalists (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1982), suspicion of union victimisation lingered on for several years. In 1985, the AJA, brought an action for victimisation of John Webb a union official and former chief of staff at the *Australian* in relation to the 1982 sackings (Lloyd, 1985:282). Webb, like other senior journalists during these tense years, had been forced to walk a precarious line between AJA activism and award exemption in the event of strikes. The AJA's 1985 case against News Limited, as in 1981-82, was not successful but served to highlight the breakdown of workplace relations and arbitrary retaliation by management.

In conclusion, this case study of technological change on the *Australian* has demonstrated the dramatic impact of the new technology, notably on workplace roles and employment, but equally ingenerating ongoing frustrations associated with its limitations, including four phases of industrial conflict. A range of historical actors have been identified as affected by or influencing on the process of change including managers, unionists and the judiciary through the courts and the flow on of decisions taken in circumstances of compulsory arbitration. At the same time, this case study in escalating industrial and workplace conflict has its underpinnings in the specific work environment and ongoing attitudes of the various protagonists at the *Australian*, including a series of insecure editors, the legacy of previous action by journalists in 1975, and the peculiar situation of the national paper as the exception in a tabloid stable managed from London by an interventionist and at time ruthless proprietor.

Finally, in view of News Limited's international status and the pattern of conflict identified with new technology in the British press (Marjoribanks, 1997), it should be asked to what extent events in Sydney and at Wapping directly impacted on one another. Although it has been persuasively argued that Murdoch's victory over the British printing unions in 1986 had ramifications for Australian metropolitan papers, in the wake of the Herald and Weekly Times takeover (Marjoribanks, 1997), it is less clear how industrial relations in Sydney directly influenced subsequent developments

in Britain. While there are obvious parallels, the testimony of key Sydney actors (Porter, 2003; Cairn, 2005) and the specificities of ‘historical institutionalism’ invite caution. In part, this is because Fairfax took the initiative against the printing unions in Sydney rather than News Limited which remained aloof throughout the initial dispute. Supporting a divergent interpretation is the increasingly provocative anti-union role played by the Thatcher government in Britain and the markedly different ethos and attitudes of the Australian and British print unions in their dealings with News Limited. Nevertheless, on closer examination, the local News Limited experience, notably during the national AJA strike and subsequent unrest on the *Australian*, bears a close parallel with the predicament of the London *Times* under Murdoch’s control. For while it might be assumed that loyalty to Murdoch would remain stronger within the Sydney workforce than abroad, the industrial politics of the 1975 strike had eroded good will among the journalists on the *Australian*. When confronted with the onset of technological change and the editorial intervention of such aggressive Fleet Street personalities as Boswell and Lamb, journalists used their workplace influence and industrial organization to challenge management, not on the picket lines as at Wapping, but using disruptive and increasingly effective tactics in the workplace itself.

## References

Justice Alley (1980) The Australian Journalists Association and Nationwide News Pty Ltd (Case no 3143 of 1979), *Commonwealth Arbitration Reports*, v. 237, April – May.

Justice Alley (1980) The Australian Journalists Association and Nationwide News Pty Ltd in relation to VDT allowance, Melbourne, *Commonwealth Arbitration Reports*, 12 May.

*The Australian*, 1975-1982.

Australian Journalists Association (1975-85) *Annual Reports*, Sydney, AJA.

Warren Beeby (2001), Interview with Denis Cryle, 19 January.

E.C. Bennett (1979) *New Technology and the Australian Printing Industry*, Sydney, Printing and Kindred Industries Union.

Justice Cahill (1977) John Fairfax and Son Limited v PKIU, Demarcation Awards, *Industrial Case of New South Wales*, 5 October.

Athol Cairn (2005) Interview with Denis Cryle, 18 March.

*The Clarion*, (1980) May-June.

Tim Dare (2001) Interview with Denis Cryle, 8 May.

Malcolm Fraser (1982) *State of the Nation Speech*, Canberra, Commonwealth Printer, 9 March.

Roy Greenslade (2004) *Press Gang, How Newspapers Make profits from propaganda*, London, Pan Books.

Bridget Griffen-Foley (2003) *Party Games. Australian Politics and the Media from War to Dismissal*, Melbourne, Text Publishing.

Derry Hogue (2004) Interview with Denis Cryle, 7 September.

Mike Jenkinson (2004) Interview with Denis Cryle, 4 August.

*The Journalist* (1975-1985), Sydney, Australian Journalists Association.

Harry Kensell (2005) Interview with Denis Cryle, 9 April.

John Lawrence (1988) *Journalists and New Technology*, Prague, The International Organization of Journalists.

Clem Lloyd (1985) *Profession Journalist. A history of the Australian Journalists Association*, Sydney, Hale and Iremonger.

Hugh Lunn (2001) *Working for Rupert*, Sydney, Hodder.

Timothy Marjoribanks (1997) Globalization and local practice: New technology and workplace reorganization in the newspaper industry, PhD, Harvard University.

Marjoribanks (2000) "The 'anti-Wapping' : Technological innovation and workplace reorganisation at the *Financial Times*," *Media, Culture and Society*, 22, 575-593.

Ian Marshall (1986) *Industrial Relations and Industrial Democracy in the Printing and Newspaper Publishing Industries*, Canberra, AGPS.

John McCarthy (2005) Interview with Denis Cryle, 17 March.

G.D. McColl and J.P. Forward (1980) "Technological Change in the Australian Newspaper Industry" in *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Technological Change in Australia*, Canberra, AGPS, v.4:148-187.

News Limited Archives (1975-85).

Ward O'Neill (2005) "The biggest strike of all," *The Walkley Magazine*, 33, June-July:30-31.

Bruce Page (2003) *The Murdoch Archipelago*, London, Simon and Schuster.

Barry Porter (2004) Interview with Denis Cryle, 24 June.

Rosslyn Reed (1999) "Journalism and Technology Practice since the Second World War" in Ann Curthoys and Julianne Schultz (eds), *Journalism Print, Politics and Popular Culture*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press.

William Shawcross (1992) *Rupert Murdoch. Ringmaster of the Information Circus*, London, Pan.

Gavin Souter (1981) *Company of Heralds*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.

Neil Swancott and Chris Harvey (1989) "News Limited and its Industrial Relations in the Newspaper Industry in Australia. Some Experiences of Journalists and Printers in the 1970s and 1980s" in *News Unlimited Conference*, Sydney, University of Sydney, 8-10 February.

Ian Turner (1983) *In Unions is Strength. A History of Trade Unions in Australia 1788-1983*, Melbourne, Nelson.

John Martin Webb and Nationwide News Pty Limited (1985) *Federal Court of Australia*, No SA2 of 1983, Industrial Law 10 1R 252, Sydney, 29 April.

Catriona Wilson (2004) Interview with Denis Cryle, 29 July.

Charles Wright (2004) Interview with Denis Cryle, 26 June.