

## *The Fable and necessity of the free press*

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This paper addresses the highly contested area of political journalism. It outlines influential theories developed in the 1970s and recent critiques about their limitations and effect on public perceptions of the fourth estate. It shows that the vast body of literature<sup>i</sup> generated by theorising about political journalism often lacked the balance of perspectives and analyses from political journalists themselves. Recent literature and empirical data collected from journalists shows that the imbalance contributed to over simplifications that place political journalists somewhere between watchdogs on behalf of the public or lapdogs on behalf of ruling elites (Bowman and McIllwaine, 2004; Neveu and Kuhn, 2002:1-3). Earlier media theorising made a pioneering contribution to public/audience literacy. Chief amongst them were those that exposed how the use of different mediums impacted on perceptions about their messages and the way media workers can be conduits for this process. At the same time these insights characteristically cast journalists as actors on a stage constructed by others and overlooked their more active role both in constructing the stage and their interplay with other political actors. A more integrated approach takes account of first-hand journalists' perspectives and provides a clearer picture of the more complex interdependencies at work in the parliamentary round.

This paper adopts this approach by exploring empirical data from interviews with Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery journalists in 2003-2004<sup>ii</sup> by examining a range of layers of interaction and power plays at work in the parliamentary round.

### **Introduction**

This paper provides a brief historical context in order to illustrate the cyclical nature of these interactions and to illustrate that modern trends in parliamentary journalism show there are 'back to the future' pressures on this news round in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are trends reminiscent of the 1800s when parliament deliberately confined political journalism to verbatim reports of the words of the politicians themselves. This continues to resonate today, extending from print to include audio-visual mediums. Parliamentary journalists are knocked back when they attempt to follow-up officially distributed

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ministerial transcripts or obtain audio comment from talkback radio sessions and any other print material sourced from government media units. Talkback has been described as ‘press conference by talk-back’ - but in this case, access to television cameras is restricted to a single network (Ester, 2004). Other television footage from parliament or its committees must taken and accessed from the government controlled Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS), with the exception of committee or party caucus meetings where cameras are allowed in to record location shots prior to the commencement of proceedings – ‘silent movies’ of the venue and participants. Still-photographer’s access is also strictly limited and controlled by DPS, and tape recorders continue to be banned from parliamentary chambers and committee rooms.

### **Born Adversaries**

Journalists working in the milieu of the parliamentary round are functionaries at the fulcrum of competing forces that see-saw between the fable and necessity of a free press, between secrecy and transparency. The (often de-cried) adversarial nature of the politician-journalist relationship is intrinsic to the evolution of democracy<sup>iii</sup>. Under representative democracy citizens’ core rights in pivot on accountable and transparent governance - democracy has to be seen to be at work. The function of political journalists is an inseparable (if contradictory) part of this equation. Historically this contrariness goes with the territory as it is deeply rooted in their co-genesis and the centuries long evolution of Westminster-based democratic traditions. Legitimising political journalism and other fundamentals such as universal suffrage, were wrested from the system of democracy. Political journalists felt the brunt of the centuries long maturation of modern democratic governance. They were (for instance) thrown out of the houses of parliaments as ‘strangers’ (Lloyd, 1988), forced to garner information from the public gallery, go to extraordinary lengths to get around bans on pencil and paper and face charges of subversion (Sparrow, 2002). In response restrictions on publishing accounts of parliamentary debates were openly flouted most notably in by radical journalists such as William Cobbett (1763-1835iv whose *Cobbett’s weekly political register* contained verbatim accounts (Cobbett, 1816-1819 and Clement and 1821-1829) whilst black markets in unofficial news about events in Westminster had earlier flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries (Sparrow, 2003:8). When the press finally gained a separate physical gallery inside the chambers of parliament in 1848<sup>v</sup> and acknowledgement of a quasi-

institutional role as the 4<sup>th</sup> estate, it was more a case of government bowing to the inevitable than embracing transparency (Sparrow, 2003: 25 and 31).

### **Swings and roundabouts Down-under**

The genesis of political journalism in Australia occurred at a time when benefits could be reaped from a distance and the denouement the centuries of struggle in England during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time parliamentary reporting powered ahead in the antipodean convict settlements, and compared with England the 1820-30s were halcyon days for press freedoms amongst a populace struggling to transform themselves from subjects to citizens (Lloyd, 1999:19). It is likely that these robust and diverse years in Australian journalism laid the foundations for and gave early momentum to, the ‘vibrant oppositional culture of 1880-1919’ (Haeusler, 2005). Certainly the pace of change remains unprecedented. In less than three years, four private mainstream newspapers appeared in Sydney. The inaugural *Australian*<sup>vi</sup> in 1824, followed in quick succession in 1826 by the *Monitor*, the *Gleaner* and the newly privatised *Sydney Gazette* (Ester, 2004). Inevitably the gains created a commensurate momentum for a major (though short-lived) backlash from outraged conservative landowners as John Macarthur expressed in a letter to his son when he said of the Sydney press:

four newspapers...published all in the convict interest and the editors all desperate radicals alike, shameless and ill-principled.’  
(Macarthur papers Mitchell Library vol 3, cited Walker, 1976:11).

And they found champions in Governor Darling in Sydney and Governor Arthur in Hobart. Between 1827-1830 these governors’ attempts to turn back the clock included a ruthless use of sedition laws and application of financial restraints such as stamp duties (Collins, 2005). Editors A. E. Hayes of the *Australian* E.S. Hall of the *Monitor* were jailed after being found guilty of ‘seditious libel on Governor Darling’, fined one hundred pounds and sentenced for fifteen months and six months respectively, and printers and journalists variously banished or banned from working (Walker, 1976:12-13; Ester, 2004)

But in 1831, the cycle swung back in favour of the governed when Governor Bourke, Darling’s successor reversed the oppressive policies. By the end of the 1830s each capital city in the Australian had large and diverse reading publics:

... in 1838, the seven newspapers in Sydney appeared at different intervals – once, twice or three times a week and cost eight shillings. Indeed many subscribers took more than one paper, and so got the news every morning. Similarly in Hobart, nine newspapers vied for custom (Blair, 2003: 23-24).

The ideals of the fourth estate ideals flourished. Governor Bourke told London that without 'free institutions where the Press is wholly unrestricted, no Government can go on' (cited Walker, 1976:20) and the Sydney (and Hobart) press were outspoken advocates for the 'relentless policing of authority' (Blair, 1997:22; Woodberry, 1972). They also overtly supported the rights of their fellow Aboriginal subjects (Lloyd, 2002 :11) and the first Aboriginal newspaper<sup>vii</sup> the *Flinders Island Chronicle* was published in the same era between 1836 and 1837 (Rose, 1996).

Furthermore, from 183, when journalists were officially allowed to prepare verbatim reports of proceedings of the Governor-appointed legislative advisory council – a step behind representative democracy, but a step ahead of press freedom in the English parliament where, for a decade until 1848 journalists continued to be squashed into the public gallery. Recalled by renown journalist and author Charles Dickens in this way <sup>viii</sup> 'I have worn my feet by standing to write in a preposterous pen in the old House of Lords, where we used to be huddled together like so many sheep. (Dickens,1865 in Fielding, 1960).

Thus the first step in the battle to legitimise political journalism was securing a physical place inside parliament in order to make a record of proceedings and inevitably, the next was to be free to mediate, comment and analyse. Chalaby, (*The invention of journalism*, 1998) and Neveu (*Four generations of political journalism*, 2002) chose the capacity to exercise critical expertise as a signifier for the advent of political journalism.

And it is the free exercise of critical expertise that continues to be contested and resented in the interplay between politicians and journalists. It is manifested in controls imposed by the government of the day and their extent exposed during an address by US President George W Bush to a joint sitting of the Australian Parliament apparent in 2003. A camera crew from a US television station apparently unaware such rules, scooped the local press by filming an interjection by Opposition Greens Senator Bob Brown. The subsequent media and public outcry led to an inquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on Parliamentary Procedure, but its recommendations have not significantly modified the controlling nature of these regulations. (see Appendix 1)

### **The fourth estate as myth**

The centuries long press struggle to legitimately report from the inside surrounded the fourth estate with heroic (some would say sacred) overtones, but there was a fall from grace from the late 1970s. Public discourse in this period identified two core and mutually exclusive problems - that of simultaneous being a watchdog on behalf of the public interest as well as a quasi -institutional extension of government; and that of being honest brokers of information whilst employed by the ruling elites of commerce. (Boyce, 1978; Curran, 1978; Hall, 1978; Tuchman, 1978; Schudson, 1978).

Curran (1978:69) argued the dye was cast against the fourth estate when market pressures in the late Victorian era made advertising rather than subscription or cover price, the prime source of revenue. It was this period of press industrialisation that ‘decisively determined’ the structure of the media (Curran, 1978:73).

Boyce (1978) argued the societal advance of universal suffrage and increasingly literate populations had rendered the fourth estate an anachronism because ‘mass democracy... robbed the press of one of its most ambitious claims ...that of being part and parcel of the representation of the country when non-electors were more numerous than electors’ (Boyce, 1978:39). The journalists who once worked as proxies for the few, must now justify their role as proxies for the many.

Further, the fourth estate could only ever be as ‘real’ as commerce allowed it to be. In this view the early press’s pursuit of these ideals was a ruse to ‘gain a place in the political system’ ... (Boyce, 1978:25-26). Thus:

The paradox of the Fourth Estate, with its head in politics and its feet in commerce, can, however, only be understood as a myth...nowhere is this dualism...more apparent than in the examination of the British press at the height of its power and prestige between 1880 and 1918...influence and power were achieved, not by their newspapers acting as a check or restraint on politicians, but, on the contrary by their papers gaining access to the political elite whose decisions they intended to shape (Boyce, 1978:27 and 29)

A concept of ‘primary definers’ was central to this theorising. Hall (1978) used the term to argue that government control over sources of political information equated to control over the journalists as the mean of production:

The media are frequently not the ‘primary definers’ of news events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in *reproducing* the definitions

of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as ‘accredited sources’. (Hall et al 1978:58-59, emphasis in the original)

Tunstall (1970) and Franklin (1994) saw a similar process at work in Westminster amongst accredited political journalists known as ‘the lobby’. Franklin describes the lobby as ‘appropriated by government as a conduit for information’ and had metamorphosed journalists from active and critical observers of political affairs into passive purveyors of government messages’ (Franklin 1994:91).

This discourse a rich and lasting legacy and that has ebbed and flowed through debates about political communication and in the contest endemic to the politician-journalist relationship. It is apparent Prime Minister John Howard’s comments about the press gallery’s role in ‘our downfall’ in 1989 when he suggested political journalists in the parliamentary round can be parts of an insiders group who act as a ‘powerful stimulant to the corporate state sentiment’ because to challenge the corporate state would be to also challenge insider deal making between ‘lobbyists, the journalists, public service mandarins and politicians’. Citing the difficulty of labour market reform as an example, Howard wrote:

One of the reasons radical labour market reform has little media support is that it challenges the deal-making ethos of the corporate state’... Australia’s economic problems demand radical structural change ...[and] This will produce inevitable conflict and make cosy insiders’ deals impossible’ – (Howard, 1989)

### **Beyond primary definers**

A central notion of these theories is the notion is that sustaining a belief in the value of the fourth estate is as much in governments’ interest as it is in the media’s powerful elites, as there is a mutual interest in fostering public sentiment and journalistic conceit in order to perpetuate the idea that free speech and open governance is one and the same thing:

...the rules under which the political system operates (by giving prominence, for instance, to general elections, by-elections, parliamentary debates and the representatives of accredited interest-group). It (sic) tends to construct reality as a series of more or less discrete events that encourages the belief that the social and political structure is ‘natural’ – the way things are – whilst blocking out alternative, radical perspectives (Curran, 1978: 69, 73 and 74).

This view does not see journalists as functionaries working a two-way information platform between the public and the government but rather as compliant ‘insiders’ in the corridors of power (Schlesinger, 1990; Parker, 1991; Neveu and Kuhn, 2002). In recent years the linear nature of this paradigm has been challenged and shown there is a remarkable gap in an otherwise vast body of literature. Whilst there is a voluminous discourse *about* political journalism there is also a significant shortfall in first hand information *from* journalists (Neveu and Kuhn: 1- 3).

Particular aspects of the earlier theories are also questioned - Schlesinger (1990) sees ‘no infallible logic’ in the primary definer proposition that content dispersed via official sources ‘*necessarily* secures strategic advantages’ and conversely that it is not conceivable that ‘counter definitions’ from non-government sources ‘*can never dislodge* the primary definition’ (Schlesinger, 1990:66, emphasis in the original). Morrison and Tumber (1988) and Deacon and Golding (1994) argued that the theorising did not take enough account of the effect of shifting balances in democratic structures, that by definition cannot be monolithic entities and subject to:

- internal and factional divisions and rivalries in governing political parties
- restless leadership contenders and other instabilities
- a mirroring of these tensions amongst policy makers

Carey (2002) notes that much research has been ‘conducted from the outside rather than from within’ and journalists are most often ‘seen through the lens of social science, not through the lens of journalism’. Bowman and McIllwaine (2004) conclude the theories were ‘insufficient to explain the apparent pluralism of approach to som (news) stories’ because of the absence of a ‘more searching examination of the constitution of journalism professional practice’, and further that:

Contemporary debates on the role of journalism in society are continuing the tradition of downplaying the role of proactive journalism – generally situated under the catchphrase of the Fourth Estate – in public policy making....[and] that critiques that downplay the potential of this form of journalism are flawed and overly deterministic’ (Bowman and McIllwaine 2004:121 and 123).

The European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR)<sup>ix</sup> articulates similar concerns in their 2002 compendium *Political journalism: new challenge, new practices*. Editors Neveu and Kuhn (2002) describe the absence of journalistic perspectives is a ‘blind-spot’

in the vast body of literature about political journalism because ‘the most researched of all journalisms’ is overwhelming about journalists with very little *from* journalists’ (my emphasis). They argue the imbalance draws analysis away from of the ‘overall power balance between journalists, politicians, spin-doctors and media owners’ and that to correct this ‘journalism and journalists need to be analysed back at the core of scholarship about of the political communication process’ (Neveu and Kuhn, 2002:2-5).

Australian literature in this field demonstrates Neveu and Kuhn’s argument for more integrated research approach. There have been only four major works that directly address parliamentary press gallery journalism<sup>x</sup> published since 1988 and only one contributes significant empirical data garnered directly from gallery journalists. The texts are Lloyd (1988) *Parliament and the press – The federal parliamentary press gallery*; Parker (1991) *The courtesans*; Payne (1999) *Canberra press gallery and the backbench of the 38<sup>th</sup> parliament 1996-98*; Simons (1999) *Fit to print - Inside the Canberra press gallery*. There are fifteen unpublished in-depth interviews with gallery journalists conducted by Martin Hirst in February 1998 at the time of the Constitutional Convention in old parliament house (Hirst, M 1998). Of these, Payne conducts the greatest number of interviews across the greatest range of mediums, and some data about journalists’ self-reflexive notions are garnered as this work explains backbenchers’ overall relationship (or not) with the gallery.

Contributions to Neveu and Kuhn’s ECPR compendium do reveal a multi-layered and complex ‘relational framework’ with a fluidity in what the editors say are important interdependencies - between parliamentary journalists and politicians; spin-doctors; the public service; their peer group (or ‘pack’) and media owners.

### **Changing interdependencies<sup>xi</sup>**

Empirical data from gallery journalists from 25 of the 30 mainstream bureaus in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) interviewed between 2003-and 2004 (Ester,2003-2004) show the combative nature of these interdependencies complicates rather than obviates, the notion of journalists as compliant insiders. After all in any intellectual combat, both sides need to share a strategic understanding of the ‘rules of the game’. The data also shows the impact of new media technologies on the changeable cyclical contest over access to political information has become ‘hard-edged and distrustful’...and there is a loss of mutual respect’ (Grattan, 2005:2).

It is an old message that the media and politicians are both natural adversaries and in a parasitic relationship. Their interests are often at odds. Sometimes they are openly at war, constantly they are engaged in a struggle of wits. What's interesting is how this traditional conflict and cooperation plays out in new circumstances (Grattan, 2005:2)

My FPPG data shows two types of interdependencies

- **vertical** – between journalist-politicians/media managers (spin-doctors), the public service and their 'head office' employer and
- **horizontal** - between peers in the same competitive daily round, and with political journalists in the small (but growing) elite 'commentariat'. To demonstrate contemporary trends, this paper has selected three of the most pervasive of the modern-day vertical pressures at work: the politician-journalist; public service-journalist and head-office-journalist staffing issues.

### **Journalist-politician and 21<sup>st</sup> century technology**

All interviewees alluded to the advent of new media technologies and in particular, their capacity to generate an avalanche of sources of information, usher in the 24-hour news cycle and escalate pressures on the politician-journalist relationship in two significant ways. First they have increased the rate at which news content must be garnered. Given that each news day generates a fixed amount of information, news is now spread more thinly over a greater multiplicity of information platforms. Second these technologies encourage and facilitate control mechanisms to 'manage' these flows. This is manifested in an aggressive response by government to an increasingly anarchic media-scape. **Van Onlsen and Errington** Digital technologies are harnessed 'by hired consultants and spin-doctors to strengthen and expand control of the news agenda by the executive arm of governments' (Van Onlsen and Errington, 2004 and 2005; Van Onlsen, 2005), and as noted by Tiffen (2004):

Strategies regularly deployed to manage the media have frequently been carried out 'casually and sporadically and slowly' but at present they are done 'professionally, systematically and immediately with huge amount of resources' and intensity and there 'has never in history been anything to parallel this effort' (Tiffen, 2004).

Geoff Kitney, a veteran of more than 20 years in the parliamentary round and in 2003, Head of Bureau of the *Sydney Morning Herald* concurs that governments fear of not being in control has been fuelled in the last decade 'increased efforts by governments to control

the political news agenda stem from a fear of the greater danger of not being in control are (Kitney, 2003).

In the FPPG interview data (Ester, 2003-2004) journalists robust responses to the on-going challenge for access show an active awareness of and resistance to, overt and covert controls to pressure journalists to conform to the role of compliant insider.

*'The Government is the most I've ever come across. Hawke ran a pretty tight ship and set up the National Media Liaison Service and PM Keating continued it - their job was to get the government's spin throughout the media. But the present government not only has totally unhelpful press secretaries, they have got people to watch press secretaries to make sure that the same message is being put out by everyone, every minister, every back bencher'* 2004, **Tony Wright**, National Affairs editor *Bulletin Magazine*

*'... the Gallery (must) work harder at getting access, getting the confidence of people who aren't part of the Government information control mechanism... to find out what's really going on'* 2003 **Geoff Kitney**, Head of Bureau *Sydney Morning Herald*

*'..Governments (not just the present one) cottoned on to the way you can drown people with information to make it hard to sort out what is real information and what is just rubbish. That's certainly done quite deliberately and strategically. Not all the time, but when we are likely to be distracted by dealing with some big issue ...the more means the are for transmitting information, the more they enjoy using that to try to pull the wool over our eyes..'* 2003, **Karen Middleton** Head of Bureau *the West Australian*

*'... access is pretty much just the press conferences... Under previous governments you would get briefings by senior staff members who would tell you, off the record information'* 2003 **Dennis Atkins**, Head of Bureau *The Courier Mail*

*'The major issue is lack of access, lack of good useable access, ranging from insufficient press conferences to difficulty getting access to good information from the public service or even ministerial advisers....'* 2003, **Louise Dodson**, Head of Bureau *the Age*

*'..a (major) issue is deliberate disinformation such as the 'children overboard' incident. We had to totally re-examine what officials say to us and put it through a different filter'* 2003 **Ross Peake** Head of Bureau, *the Canberra Times*

### **Avoiding the Gallery**

Techniques to talk directly to the general public and avoid journalists' mediation are as old as the houses of parliaments themselves: (Sparrow, 2003:7). In modern democracies the weapon of avoidance is talkback radio and Canberra journalists regard Prime Minister John Howard with a mixture of respect and frustration as a maestro of this medium:

*'Howard and other leaders believe that by using talkback they can go over the heads of the gallery...talk back can be a three-in-one as far as the politicians are concerned. They can do early morning talkback (a pool crew) of the television cameras are invited in and then a transcript of the audio interview is issued. Howard can control the television, print*

*and radio - all feed off the one interview and it goes live to air so there is no editing'*  
2003 **Denis Shanahan**, Chief political reporter, the *Australian*

*'One of the most significant developments over the last decade is press conference by radio – the Prime Minister or Minister will go on talk back radio and the transcript then delivered to gallery journalists. When you ring up for clarification you are told to read the transcript [and] every time there is an interview on talk back there is a camera there ...it is all to do with media management'* 2003 **Ross Peake** Head of Bureau *Canberra Times*

[media management though talkback radio '*...was certainly a strategy developed by (Labor Prime Ministers) Hawke and Keating and fine-tuned by Prime Minister Howard'*  
2003 **Jim Middleton** ABCT V

*'talkback has taken off in the last decade – and I think the person who has to take the credit for that is Prime Minister John Howard. It used to be a big deal for (former Labor Prime Ministers) Hawke or Keating to conduct talk back interviews...these days the Prime Minister may give several in one week...'* 2004 **Alison Carabine** Head of Bureau, *Southern Cross Radio*

### **Journalist-public service**

Parliamentary executive control of an anarchic information flows within the houses of parliament is relatively easy compared with the many-faceted and physical sprawl of the public service. Government crackdowns and surveillance of public servants and their relations with the media has placed this major source-journalist interdependency are under siege. For instance a leaked cabinet document about government policies regarding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) led to an Australian Federal Police (AFP) raid on the office of the *National Indigenous Times* where police 'spent around two hours at the paper's office, and also searched the editor's car and removed six documents including a Cabinet submission (*AM, ABC Radio, 12 November 2004*). There is also a legislative proposal that will continue to threaten public servants with open-ended or catchall regulations about what they should not do (Ester, 2005). Government efforts are reflected in resources allocated to it. Opposition Senator Kim Carr revealed in June 2005, there have been 'close to 120 separate references to the Federal Police' for unauthorised disclosures by public servants and that 'the leak squad' spent 32,000 staff hours costing 'nearly \$200,000 (Carr, 2005). A 2005 Senate Estimates committee was told that when confidential information about the proposed baby-bonus payments leaked into the public arena during the 2004 election it appears no effort was spared. The top spy agencies were called in to review security at the Department of Finance and Administration and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) called in to hunt down the perpetrator. The cost of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and

the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) is an estimated cost of \$150,000 (Senate Estimates, 2005).

Little or no access to ‘background briefing’ from policy makers shrinks the knowledge base and weakens levels of critical expertise in political journalism.

*‘The difficulty is that once you could just ring up a public servant on an interdepartmental committee for instance, to make sure [you’ve] go it right ...You ring someone now and they say you’ve got to go through the Minister’s office. ...The public service is less open ...senior people lose incentive pays if there are leaks [and the boss] the departmental head is going to lose \$40,000’ - 2003 Denis Shanahan Chief political reporter The Australian.*

*‘No longer can you ring up public servants and expect that you will find someone who will talk to you. The change [in] dealing with the public service has changed the way we work [and] it’s changed the way our democracy works because ..there are edicts from the Prime Minister on the language public servants can use in their paper work and increasingly the line between what is political and what is public policy is blurred and that is a huge frustration for journalists’ - 2003 Karen Middleton Head of Bureau the West Australian (2003)<sup>xii</sup>*

*‘One of the problems with young reporters [is] all the electronic surveillance and penalties that are visited on people who leak and the ability to trace materials mean it’s not a sympathetic environment [for developing critical expertise]’ 2003 Tony Walker. Head of Bureau Australian Financial Review*

### **Staffing - Hollowing out**

All but two interviewees saw the changing age demographic of the gallery as a two-fold concern – the ‘churn factor that occurs because the status of the gallery has dropped and it is no longer seen as the pinnacle of a journalistic career, creates a hollowing out, leaving a significant gap between the very new and young and long-time gallery journalists with more than 10-20(and up to 50) years’ experience: In a negative FoI environment this intensifies hierarchy - leak-dependent journalism relies on trust so the longest serving are the most trusted journalists in the parliamentary round and will have a natural monopoly on break-through leaks (Lidberg and Alec McHoul, 2002:19; Ester, 2005).

*‘When I first came here in 1989 it was probably the end of that era where journalists would have killed to come to Canberra to report the big picture - to report federal politics. These days there are a small group of people who have been here for a very long time. They have the corporate memory that was once held by quite a lot more people, or a higher proportion of people. This is followed by a slightly smaller group, who have been here as long as I have, or a bit longer- then there is a great gap to the majority of people who come here as young journalists...They will spend a year or two or even less, here and then head off and be replaced’ 2004 Tony Wright National Political Reporter, the Bulletin magazine.*

*'A lot of young kids come in with little or no corporate knowledge and experience and they'll leap upon an issue as if it's the first time it's ever been raised, give it enormous importance and use their beliefs to push ideas about the issue. ... But there is still a hardcore group of very good journalists who do their best to inform the public. Nonetheless there are over 200 journalists up here, and a lot of them come for a year or two and they don't realise their responsibilities (as political journalists) and they don't fully understand accountability'* – 2004 **Amanda Cavill**, - SBS Radio

*'There seems to me to be greater pressure on resources, less resources, and a bigger turnover of people going through the Canberra Press Gallery. The sort of commitment to staying in Canberra and becoming a political reporter and making a career of it seems to be much diminished these days'* 2003 **Geoff Kitney**, Sydney Morning Herald

*'...apart from some of the more prominent such as Laurie Oakes or Alan Ramsey who have been here a long time, many of the journalists are used up by their media organisations at a fairly rapid rate and to stay more than three or four years is unusual. The result is those journalists do not get much time to develop expertise in particular areas....they also get ducked by the public service and the politicians'* 2003 **Richard Griffiths** Head of Bureau Capital Monitor

## **Implications**

Key implications of this 2004-2004 interview data include:

- that new media technologies have greatly increased pressures in the political news gathering environment and have been embraced by governments as a golden opportunity to control the journalist-source relationship as well as the coverage of politics
- that is the combined effect of this, and staffing policies is hollowing out the critical expertise of gallery journalists

All interviewees detected a contemporary trend in gallery journalism of a drift towards more and more wire service style short 'spot' reporting with little or no backgrounding or political analysis. They claim application of new technologies mean journalists have less face to face interaction with policy makers and the executive, they are more 'desk-bound' and chained to their computer monitors by an 'avalanche' of information and decreasing staff resources. This is contrasted with successful government strategies to block access to parliamentary sources of information and broader sources and advice from the public sector. It's cold comfort the Head of Bureau of the *Australian Financial Review* Tony Walker said in 2003 that 'compared with 10 years reporting in China, Canberra was 'a piece of cake' (Walker, 2003) - an ironic observation given Prime Minister John Howard's strong ideological opposition quoted earlier in this paper, to the corporate state

(Howard, 1989). Overlaying these factors is the additional problem that parliamentary political journalism has slumped in status and importance and a churn factor<sup>xiii</sup> amongst new gallery journalists diminishes the experience-base necessary for the development of critical expertise a core component of the parliamentary round [as it is of any round].

The historical snapshot in this paper shows that modern parliamentary journalism is facing a startling ‘back to the future’ scenario where this 21<sup>st</sup> century news round when governments every step necessary to force political journalists on to a diet of verbatim reports of the words chosen by themselves. And so it goes on today, whether a transcript from talkback radio, a government controlled stream of visual footage from parliament or a continual stream of ‘breaking news’ grabs sourced from government media units.

Whilst there are increasing concerns about marginalisation as expressed by gallery stalwart and elder Laurie Oakes (Network 9 TV)

*...relatively speaking, political journalism is diminishing in importance in [Australia] and other countries as the Internet develops and talkback radio becomes even more influential. The space occupied by political journalists in the political communication process will get smaller’ ...and ‘traditional standards we associate with political journalism will play a declining role as well’ (Oakes, 1999)*

The fact democratic governments not only find it necessary to uphold the appearance of a free press but also they have a need to know what is going on in powerful elites. This pulls the see-saw away from the fable of a free press, towards its necessity. Interestingly, the corralling of robust journalism away from the mainstream readers and broadcast and online and audiences *does not necessarily* nobble it from having *some* impact. This is evidenced in a significant outcome of the first national survey of sources of news and current affairs commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority and completed by Pearson and Brand et al in 2001:

#### **Metropolitan newspapers**

Several of the interviewees spoke of the strong influence of newspapers in the news agenda. Effectively, the day’s news starts with the newspaper and all other media are essentially picking up the agenda from that point. Even though some media services operate on a 24-hour clock, the news cycle seems to restart only when the first headlines of the next day’s papers are released on the wire services. Newspapers were the only medium which all 100 of the surveyed journalists said they used as a source in their work.

#### **Electronic**

Of the 100 journalists surveyed, 91 said they used radio in their work, with the most common single program cited being the *AM* program on ABC radio, mentioned by 41 per cent of the 91. This

result was supported by the comments of the 20 in-depth interviewees, however what became clear was that the two kinds of ‘influence’ media have upon other media are particularly apparent in radio. Much of radio is used as a news gathering “safety net”, with interviewees reporting that radio news was monitored by other media to ensure they were not missing out on breaking news happenings. Two radio services were seen as having a deeper level of influence upon news agenda-setting for the day: the *AM* program on ABC radio and, to some extent, talkback radio. (Pearson M and Brand, J 2001:78)

The physical manifestation of a trend away from exercising critical expertise and asking ‘not just the What? But the How? and Why?’ (Ramsey, 2005) could be seen in the growth in wire services and media monitors outlets in the gallery - so much so that there is now an area dubbed ‘Wire-service Alley’ (Wright, 2004). And graphically expressed by Rob Chalmers in these words:

*Well the biggest change by a mile [is] the move to the new Parliament in 1988 also coincided with new technology which enabled Parliament House to be turned into a taxpayer provided television studio for the government of the day. That’s what Parliament House actually is.. .. these days when Question Time has finished in the House there is one person, one journalist left in the House and that’s the AAP guy. AAP covers for everyone so if AAP misses something in the Gallery well the world misses it because there is only one person there ..But you hardly see any debates reported in the House nor in the Senate unless it’s a controversial thing that’s coming up, like the GST or Telstra or something 2003’ - **Rob Chalmers** Head of Bureau Inside Canberra*

## **Conclusion**

Theorising about political journalism show in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century generated wide and voluminous debate, however it was limited by an absence of empirical information about the perceptions of political journalists. A more integrated approach that takes account of first-hand perspectives provides a clearer picture of the more complex interdependencies at work in the parliamentary round.

The empirical interview data selected for discussion in this paper shows the issues, trends and challenges facing political journalists in the parliamentary round in Canberra, suggest that 21<sup>st</sup> political journalism is currently at the losing end of a cycle and new technologies that have tipped in favour of less transparency and towards the ‘fable’ the free press.

Critical analysis and the application of this expertise appears to be in retreat (in contrast to

polemical columnists) to the margins of late night weekly television – for example the ABC’s *Lateline* or early Sunday morning slots (*Insiders*, ABC; *Sunday Network 9*); to a non-populist audience demographic in radio and print - for example ABC AM and PM current affairs programs and the *Australian Financial Review*. Nonetheless news junkies and power junkies remain well served. The need for powerful elites to get expert analysis of who’s doing what, and how power is being exercised to some extent keeps the fourth estate ideals alive. This is apparent from a recent major national survey commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority and conducted by Pearson and Brand (2001). The findings suggest that elite areas of the media have the capacity to influence the broader agenda.

Thus the see-saw between the fable and necessity of a free press is kept in motion. However the degree to which it swings one way or the other depends on a complex and adversarial interdependence between political journalists and politicians - the calibre of which is determined and driven by the politics of the day.

It is an old story and in a sense, there has never been ‘new journalism’:

*In 1886* ‘new journalism’ editor WT Stead defended his work from accusations of sensationalism (including sometimes having to print in capitals)

If you print in ordinary type, it is as if you had never printed at all’ ...  
 ‘it is the thing that you should shout, that will command attention after you have first aroused it, but you must arouse it first; and therein lies the necessity of presenting it in such a fashion as to strike the eye and compel the public to ask “What is it all about?” (Stead, 1886, cited in Boyce, 1978).

*In 2001* Mungo MacCallum explained he used techniques many called ‘new journalism’ in the 1960-70s because he too wanted to foster a popular understanding of the parliamentary and public policy making processes - ‘at least some readers might get to understand the value of politics, and with a bit of luck get involved themselves’ – and like Stead, he knew it was necessary to arouse their interest:

But there was a catch: first I had to get them to read about politics, ... the pill would have to be sugared. Politics must be made entertaining; it should look not just important, but fun. This required an unconventional approach to writing about it (MacCallum 2001:168-170).

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## APPENDIX 1

### ~ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure ~

#### Media coverage of House proceedings–Final October 2005

(full recommendations at)

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc/reports.htm>

#### *General*

*The guidelines restrict video filming to parliamentary staff who work for the Broadcasting Section of the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS). The section was previously known as the Sound and Vision Office and the department was formerly the Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff (DPS)*

#### *Changes from inquiry recommendations:*

- **Delete “and motor driven cameras” from still photography guideline [*the rule could be applied to digital photography*].**

#### Still photography

- **Extend automatic permission to Ministerial Statements, Matters of Public Importance, divisions and adjournment debates**

#### Television

- **Additional cameras for Question time question (for DPS)**
- **Press gallery get the use of isolated feeds produced by Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) broadcasting staff, on request**

**Boxed Text 1****AVOIDING THE GALLERY  
(From Ester, 2004 Unpublished interviews)****10 June 2004**

**Alison Carabine** - Chief political correspondent and head of bureau, radio Southern Cross broadcasting network which incorporates 2UE, 3AW, 4BC, 6PR, - the largest commercial radio network in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery.

**AC:** I'd like to give you this example of how savvy the Prime Minister is about the way the media works in this country. He will use a half-hour interview with Neil Mitchell (3AW), as his opportunity to fulfill his media obligations for the whole day. Mitchell will hit him with all the big issues and Howard will have his say on all these issues and

once he's done, the interview - that's it - he doesn't have to worry about it for the rest the day (because this provides the media with audio, vision and transcripts).

One day when I was setting the PM up in the studio for the interview something exploded in the panel and smoke wafted up. Now it was my immediate reaction that we wouldn't do the interview in the studio and we should do it on the phone. But the Prime Minister disagreed, he wanted to go ahead and do it in the studio - and he's the PM, so of course we had to go ahead with it. The reason why he was so determined is because these interviews are always filmed by *Channel 9* and gets beamed out to the rest of the gallery, the Prime Minister's press office produces a transcript so everyone in the gallery gets it - not just Southern Cross, and from there everyone in the entire country access this interview. The Prime Minister knew that if he didn't do it on camera that day, he would have to hold a press conference so the television bureaus would be able to cover it. This way (using studio talk-back radio) gallery radio gets the audio they need, newspapers get the transcript and television get the in-studio vision. In other circumstances to get television cover you would have to do a press conference or a door-stop

## END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Described as so prolific that ‘just to read the articles and books published on this topic since the 1960s would in itself be a full-time job for a newcomer’ (Neveu and Kuhn, 2002:1-2).

<sup>ii</sup> All interviews were conducted with clearance and consent forms according to Central Queensland Universities Human Ethics requirements.

<sup>iii</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of democracy and democratic systems is based on that used by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) as ‘A system of political governance whose decision-making power is subject to the controlling influence of citizens who are considered political equals. A democratic political system is inclusive, participatory, representative, accountable, transparent and responsive to citizens’ aspirations and expectations’. Accessed November 2005 at : <http://www.idea.int/democracy/index.cfm>

<sup>iv</sup> Cobbett, William (1763-1835) See end Note viii below

<sup>v</sup> Unique to Australia is the way this privilege has been extended to the privilege was extended to rent-free office accommodation within the precincts of Parliament House

<sup>vi</sup> This was not the antecedent of the present day *Australian* published by News Limited founded by Rupert Murdoch in the 1960’s

<sup>vii</sup> Handwritten and published in English and dictated by three Aboriginal clerks, employed by the government.

Firs

<sup>viii</sup> Journalists were restricted to stenography for verbatim reports of debates and this element of political journalism did not end until Westminster nationalised debate reporting through the publication of ‘Hansards’ in 1909. Debate reporting had been pioneered by entrepreneurial printers operating outside the boundaries of parliamentary legality and printed by Thomas Carson Hansard (Sparrow, 2003:69). When the parliament took over in Hansard the name was already synonymous with parliamentary record-keeping

<sup>ix</sup> The European Consortium for Political Research describes itself as ‘an independent, scholarly association, of approximately 8,000 political scientists in over 300 institutions throughout Europe and beyond’.

<sup>x</sup> Complementary but less targeted, interviews and surveys of Australian journalists in general, conducted and published by four media scholars: complementary but less targeted, interviews and surveys of Australian journalists in general, conducted; and published by four media scholars: Tiffen, R 1989; Henningham, J 1993, 1995, 1996; 1988; Schultz, J 1998)

<sup>xi</sup> Neveu and Kuhn deliberately use the term ‘interdependence’ rather than ‘interrelationship’ to reflect this because ‘the notion of interdependency incorporates the idea of dependence foregrounding the objective reality of power balances ‘limiting journalists’ autonomy (Neveu and Kuhn, 2002:6).

<sup>xii</sup> 2005 Head of Bureau SBS TV and president of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery

<sup>xiii</sup> With the aid of a small grant from CQU PhD candidate and journalist Jane MacDonald is commenced a project to gather demographic data to test this significant body of anecdotal evidence.