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MEDIA FORUM MAKES WAVES AT BONDI BEACH

Can the media help reduce conflict or should it just report it? Indeed, should the media try to change society for the better or simply respond to what the public wants?

Sydney's famous Bondi beach seems an unlikely place to discuss such subjects. But on 15 and 16 March 1997, 42 journalists, publishers, editors and commentators from Australia and other countries spent the weekend at Bondi in a spacious hotel, looking out across the sand at the surfers, while making a few waves of their own.

The subject-matter was full of undercurrents such as 'what is truth anyway', as the participants got down to questions like how to report clashes of race and culture, let alone war; how to tell whether reporting is balanced; and what are the aims and aspirations of publishers.

The theme of the event was 'The Role and Responsibility of the Media'. It was convened by the Australian Press Council and the International Communications Forum. ICF Chairman William Porter, introducing this activity, spoke of his sudden realisation, shortly after retiring in 1990 from a successful publishing career, that the vast communications industry had to become aware of its responsibilities. His Yugoslav wife, who had narrowly escaped execution by both Nazis and Communists, had prodded him to take some action. So he had suggested to friends in publishing, journalism, broadcasting and advertising that the best way to look at responsibility was for media people to thrash the question out among themselves.

Professor David Flint, Chairman of the Press Council, quoted a 1996 International Press Institute report detailing perceptions of the media around the world, none of them flattering. 'I don't pay much attention to the media because I don't believe any of them,' said one critic in Paris, for instance. Or from Rome: 'When I buy a newspaper I am perfectly aware the information I get is biased.'

Today there were fewer newspapers and more highly educated journalists, said Prof Flint, and this might contribute to such mistrust. He emphasised that state intervention, often proposed, would not be a remedy but would only make things far worse, and quoted Mahatma Gandhi as saying, 'The sole aim of journalism should be service. The press is a great power. But just as an unchained torrent submerges the whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within.'

Richard Walsh, Chairman of Australian Consolidated Press International, was unworried by public criticism. 'The press should be an irritant: it will always have its critics,' he said, disagreeing with the view 'that there's a thing called truth and you go out with a polaroid camera, photograph it and reproduce it in whatever medium you belong to. I respect that philosophical belief. But some of us believe there's a battleground of disputing opinions and you can't photograph it. It's a very slippery thing, a chimera...'

Tolerance 'seems like a good thing', he said, but added that he had no time for its 'dark side', which translates as 'political conservatism, quietism, the status quo'. Much better 'to stir the mud' and 'maybe find great difficulty in coming to grips with its rights and wrongs. The truth is we don't stir as much as we want to' because of the fear that 'in exploring some issues we will arouse prejudice and paint a picture of ourselves which we don't like'.

He instanced the horrors of paedophilia, currently in Australian headlines, and drew attention to one 'extraordinarily interesting ethical question': the fact that some teachers, suspected 'on the say-so of children but not actually found guilty, can no longer get employment'. ■

SHAPING THE WAY A COUNTRY SEES ITSELF

Probably the toughest issue on which to assess rights and wrongs today is race and culture clash, and the Forum spent the first morning debating it. The UN estimates that there are about a thousand potential ethnic flashpoints around the world.



Dr Zaki Badawi and Ross Tzannes

The Deputy Ethnic Affairs Commissioner for the state of New South Wales, Ross Tzannes, a lawyer of Greek descent, chaired the session. The media, said Tzannes, must act as the community's conscience, as the shaper of its self-perception. Concepts of cultural diversity are so fragile, he added, and the power of the media so potent. So 'what is its proper role?'

The discussion was opened by two men with wide international knowledge of this scene: Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson and biographer of the Mahatma, and a noted Indian journalist and commentator; and Dr Zaki Badawi, Chairman of the Imams and Mosques Council of the UK, who is a leading interpreter of Islam and the West to each other.

Mr Gandhi gave two examples of where the Indian media had helped defuse potential violence and one where it had increased such dangers. On 31 October, 1984 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by Sikh members of her bodyguard. This caused tremendous public hostility towards the minority Sikh community, and some 5000 Sikhs were killed in reprisal. 'The newspapers of New Delhi organised relief and made demands for accountability and action and played quite a part in restoring some confidence between the Sikh community and the Indian nation,' he said.

In 1992 when a Hindu mob demolished a 16th Century mosque at Ahyodya near Lucknow, journalists were attacked and their cameras and equipment damaged. The Indian Press Council immediately convened an inquiry in New Delhi and Lucknow, and 'played a reassuring and courageous role. By and large, though there was tremendous popular pressure, Indian newspapers took the clear line that extremist Hindu opinion which wanted to go beyond all laws and seize this mosque could not be tolerated.'

By contrast, one of India's great newspapers, The Times of India, printed in its Mumbai (Bombay) edition in January 1997 an 8-page supplement eulogising a populist politician whose extreme sectarian attitudes had inflamed the bloody Hindu-Muslim riots in the city during 1993. The decision was taken by the publishers, who were paid 8 million rupees 'we are seeing the demise of the editor' and Gandhi regarded it as 'a very disturbing development. It shows what alleged popular opinion can do to the integrity of a very important newspaper with a tremendous tradition'.

It must be difficult in Australia, Gandhi went on, to visualise the pressures of the climate of frenzy and hatred under which many journalists operate. But 'as a responsible writer I have a duty not only to present what is being said fairly but also to do something to reduce the hatred and possibilities of violence; at least to promote dialogue.'

Dr Zaki Badawi began with a defence of journalists: 'If there was a rule that restaurants should only serve healthy food, how long would Mr McDonald last? Journalists, like such restaurants, serve what the public want. People buy a newspaper because it satisfies their prejudices. If you want to reform the press, start not with the symptom, the newspaper men, but with the disease. Prejudices are fed to the very young, and that's what keeps the relationships within the community so poor.'

Dr Badawi went on to describe the difficulties of living in the West as a Muslim, and therefore 'targeted, by the media in particular, in a kind of "Islamaphobia"'. After the Oklahoma bombing, for instance, people immediately presumed that

Muslims were responsible. 'The world press has come to associate Islam with violence, Muslims with terrorism, provoking an 'irrational hatred for "the Muslim world"'. Would anyone regard "the Christian world" as a unit? But 'you can pass judgment on "the Muslim world" by the action of one state, one group or even one individual.

'I am not worried if people say nasty things about Muslims if those nasty things are right. We are human beings like everybody else. We have our warts: we also have certain virtues. Islamophobia, indeed hatred towards any community, is preparing the world for many crises.'

Dr Badawi said that he had tried vainly to get publicity for his view that the fatwa against Salman Rushdie was completely baseless and aimed at a political objective, not a religious one. At the height of that crisis a young TV journalist asked him who among the Muslim community would comment. Dr Badawi gave him the name of a professor who he felt would give a reasoned response. But after contacting the professor, the journalist came back complaining: 'No, no. We don't want somebody sensible; we want somebody mad.'

Australia, noted Ross Tzannes, has the most culturally diverse population in the world. It has received since World War II the greatest influx of migrants per head of population of any nation in history apart from Israel. A Council for Reconciliation between Aboriginal and white Australians was working at creating genuine dialogue between the majority community and the original inhabitants. Both main political parties have made a genuine multicultural society a major aim for over 20 years.

Overseas speakers at the Forum were shown the facilities of SBS a national broadcaster which transmits a full program of radio and TV news, features and films in 60 languages, so that the 25 percent of Australians who were born outside the country can keep in touch with their homelands.

One European commentator complained that the scale of this initiative is little known. Before travelling south he had been told much about New Zealand's

spectacular scenery but nothing about the 'very significant social experiment' of Australia's attempt to make a home for the world.

Ross Tzannes pointed out that this experiment was still 'in the balance' and 'exceptionally delicate. It could go either way. We have as a country an extraordinary amount invested in a successful outcome', and the composition of the population means 'there's no turning back'.

One of the biggest threats to this fragile experiment surfaced in 1996, with the election to the Federal Parliament of Pauline Hanson, an independent from a rural centre in the state of Queensland. Her message is that the migrant intake particularly of Asians has been too high, that Aboriginals were getting too much help, and that 'mainstream Australia', for whom she was speaking, was fed up. Ms Hanson, said Tzannes, was a 'media creation'. Her biased views of race and immigration appealed to the so-called silent majority, so 'this most articulate woman was given the image of an inarticulate battler', in the mould of Australian outback heroes. The media had publicised her views on race and immigration, he said, because they promised to lead to a vigorous debate, but soft-pedalled her other views, for instance that Australia should withdraw from the UN and prepare for invasion from Asia.

Peter Charlton of Brisbane's Courier Mail pointed out that much of the controversy over Ms Hanson's prejudiced views was encouraged by 'red neck elements' over talk-back radio. Biased presentation and manipulated telephone polls had inflamed the situation. 'The mainstream media covered the debate in very strict ethical and sensible terms,' said Charlton.

The Press Council's Executive Secretary, Jack Herman, added that the Council had had an equal number of complaints from people who said that Ms Hanson was getting too much and too little publicity.

Ian Hicks told how the Sydney Morning Herald, of which he is assistant editor, published a rare front-page editorial confronting the distortions of her claims on the extent of immigration and special privileges for Aboriginals. 'The antiseptic of

disclosure was applied to the venomous and noxious nostrums she provoked,' said Hicks.

It was a debate the country had to have, suggested Warren Beeby, editorial director of News Limited and former editor of The Australian, the country's only national newspaper. Beeby said that many of the issues she raised continued to be crucial and 'at the end of it that debate will leave the country a better place'.

'But does the disproportionate power of the media distort the picture?' asked Tzannes. 'Does being an irritant unleash undesirable powers?'

The question was directed to Sir Zelman Cowen, one of Australia's most distinguished citizens in his time 19th Governor-General, law professor and Vice-Chancellor, Provost of Oriel College, Oxford, Chairman of the British Press Council and until recently Chairman of the board of the major Australian newspaper group, John Fairfax Holdings.

The media's power, said Sir Zelman, 'gives you the opportunity and the obligation to consider the mischief that may be done. The only thing I fear is the laying down of prescriptions and rules. That is antithetical to everything in our values.'

'But what is the media's response to the enormously diverse challenges we've been discussing?' Tzannes pursued. 'Is there a mechanism? Sir Zelman, you know what we shouldn't have. What should we have?'

'Judgment', Sir Zelman replied, summing up in one word, several later speakers agreed, the quality most needed. ■

WHEN CULTURES CLASH ESCALATES INTO WAR, DOES THE MEDIA HELP OR HINDER?

Polish journalist and author Jan Pieklo has written extensively about the tragedies in the former Yugoslavia.

'Under Communism', he told the Forum, 'the Yugoslav media was seen as more independent than those of the other Communist countries. There was no official censorship, and the Yugoslav media was considered relatively free and quite professional.' But journalists were nonetheless dependent on the authorities, and 'when Communist politicians changed their clothes and became nationalists, the majority of journalists did the same, wanting to keep their jobs.' So the media began to serve nationalist propaganda.



Jan Pieklo

'We got Serbian "truth", Croatian "truth", Bosnian "truth", Albanian "truth". All these "truths" excluded each other, of course', Pieklo continued. 'When war broke out, Croats in Serbia were labelled Ustashi, Muslims were Islamic Fundamentalists, Albanians were fascists, Serbs in the Croatian media became Chetniks. Partisan media designed borders, articulated territorial claims and raised the wave of ethnic hatred. TV is state-controlled and runs nationalist propaganda. Independent journalists are thrown out of a job, accused of spying, or drafted to the army and sent to the front.

'So long as the media continues to play the role of agitator,' said Pieklo, 'no-one will be able to find a peaceful solution to the Balkan conflict. Now it is just a cease-fire, not real peace.' During his journeys he had asked people in several republics, 'What is your nationality? Who are you?' Several times the reply was 'I used to think I was Yugoslav; now I don't know. I am a citizen of this town.'

The international media, Pieklo said, contributed greatly 'to the Balkan mess' in seven ways: sensationalism, simplification, focussing on politicians, ignorance, fragmentation, Sarajevo-centredness and political correctness. 'The journalist flies to Sarajevo which was under special UN protection wearing a bullet-proof jacket, but doesn't know the language or the history of the region'. In Pale, journalists offered money to Serbian soldiers, who 'agreed to shell selected buildings, which gave the reporters some great shots for the evening news.'

The discussion turned then to war reporting and the difficulty of getting authorities to give honest briefings in wars like Vietnam or avoid domestic political purposes as in early British coverage of the Falklands war. John Farquharson, onetime deputy editor of The Canberra Times and editor of The South Pacific Post in Port Moresby, said it had been a 'serious omission' that the Australian media had not given better coverage to the civil war in Bougainville, the effect of which on the island's citizens had been as bad on a smaller scale as that in Yugoslavia.

Agnes Warren, of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's 'Media Report' program, reported from the former Yugoslavia for three months in 1991 and 1992 and said how difficult it was 'to get your head around the history of the place. Right and wrong truth, good and bad news, it's all in front of you there.' A Croatian woman taxi driver told her that Serbian soldiers 'take a pregnant woman, slice her belly open and remove the child.' Then she took a taxi in Serbia 'and heard the same story from the Serbian taxi-driver', who said that 'Croats take a puppy and put it in instead. So what is truth?'

Rajmohan Gandhi said that he had found Pieklo's presentation moving. And that the seven sins he had outlined were all too human. The journalists were unprepared for the role they had been forced into. 'But since we can concede the human-ness of the journalist we can also concede the citizen in the journalist. And I don't think as citizens or as media people we can avoid our limited but

important responsibility to see how something can be done about the unsolved hates which result in such terrible tragedies.'

The Forum heard insights from two other East European commentators, and a leading Indonesian media figure:

Bernard Margueritte reports from Warsaw for the radio, TV and print media of his native France, and also appears regularly on Polish TV. He has twice been a Fellow of the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy in the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and so can compare Eastern Europe with both the US and Western Europe.

There has been much improvement in East European media, said Margueritte: 'No taboos, censorship or "wooden tongue", as in the Communist time.' The Western press is available everywhere, there is private TV and radio and all kinds of publications. After the changes in Poland there were 2500 new titles. Half of these disappeared very quickly, as did two-thirds of the new Hungarian titles.

But 'it would be strange if the media was to improve rapidly, since half the journalists worked previously either with the government or the underground press. They were not in my judgment journalists but propagandists and ideologists'. Young writers lack training and professionalism: the habit of confirming sources, verifying information, doing your homework. Instead 'sensationalism comes before the truth' and there is a tendency to please the public and the owner before seeking credibility. 'A lack of professionalism and a lack of ethics go together.'

Poland, Margueritte said, had a strange political situation, with the former Communists back in power, but controlling two-thirds of the banks and new business, so not very concerned about social matters. The GNP was improving by 5 6% a year, but 40% of families were below the poverty level.

Anyway, 'why should a free market economy ensure not only a free but also responsible media?' asked Margueritte, quoting the economist Lester Tureau in the Boston Globe: 'In some fundamental dimension, democracy and capitalism are inconsistent. Democracy believes in equality, capitalism believes in unequal outcomes.'

A new mechanism, he said, could be seen at work, which is also worrying serious journalists in the USA: 'the supermarket tabloid brings the so-called news, CNN mentions it and then the serious media think they have to address the topic.' What the TV anchorman Dan Rather called 'showbizification' of news was 'the inevitable consequence of the market-place bringing its economic forces to bear on journalism.'

There was a vicious circle, said Margueritte: 'no good media without democracy; no democracy without good media.' The call of Solidarity was always a call for a new society, a society respecting human beings. 'If we don't start to work for a new civilisation, we will not improve society and we will not improve the media either. Ultimately the media in East Europe and the West will only be as good and responsible as every one of us.'

Dr Jara David-Moserova is a member of the international board of UNESCO, a playwright, burns surgeon, the first Czech Ambassador to Australia and New Zealand after the 'velvet revolution' and now Vice-President of the Czech Senate.

Czechoslovakia, she said, was the harshest regime in Communist Europe with the exception of the Soviet Union. All the newspapers printed the same view, and in the latter years Czechs only heard of glasnost in smuggled Soviet papers. In 1988-9, just before the end of Communism, all the employees of the University, including the cleaning women, had to fill out a form declaring how they had behaved in 1968 during the Soviet invasion. The only way of getting to the public was on the radio because 'the word evaporates in the air and it is gone'. The sudden freedom of 1989 brought a totally free press, from which 'a number of

excellent journalists have emerged. But still the public finds it difficult to cope with this reporting' because in the Western tradition, it concentrates on what is going wrong.



Dr Janner Sinaga

'We have a fragile democracy, though with a long democratic tradition.' But people are 'disturbed, nervous, uneasy because they think every politician is a cheat. Social documentaries with no solution whatever make you aware of a problem and create a feeling that there is no way to deal with it.' Such programs 'should make people think and at least hope that a solution can be reached.'

Dr Janner Sinaga was Director-General of Indonesian press and graphics from 1987-90, and is now publisher and chief editor of the country's first English-language news weekly, Economic and Business Review Indonesia. He surveyed for the Forum the role of the press in Indonesia's history. The official doctrine for publications, he said, is freedom and responsibility. 'From time to time there is a warning from the government if the press exerts too much freedom, but the corridor has been wider and wider, ' he said.■

HOW (SOME) PUBLISHERS SEE THEMSELVES

Rumours of major changes to media regulation in Australia have been causing uncertainty and controversy: particularly a possible weakening of diversity by allowing individuals to own a newspaper and TV station in the same city. Kerry Packer, owner of the nationwide Channel 9 TV network and Australian Consolidated Press, of which Richard Walsh is board chairman, has made no secret of his wish to control the three quality Fairfax papers as well.

So the Forum session on the 'aims and aspirations of publishers' was close to the bone. The discussion was led by John B Fairfax, a direct descendant of Australia's first great media pioneer, also called John Fairfax, who founded The Sydney Morning Herald in 1831, and Paul Chadwick, Melbourne co-ordinator of a media think-tank, The Communications Law Centre.

John B Fairfax was Deputy Chairman of the Board of the original Fairfax organisation when it broke up in 1987 after a disastrous family takeover bid which coincided with a global financial crisis. He now publishes 98 regional newspapers and 23 agricultural magazines. His regional dailies have the third-largest share of circulation, 15.6%.

The principles of publishing newspapers would continue to apply in the electronic age, said Fairfax, but 'the size of the Internet, its lack of intimacy and, in many cases, its uncertainty of where material is sourced, will never quite give it the credibility and comfort zone that newspapers should have.'

Fairfax reporters once got their overseas news from ships at dockside. Radio and TV now give 'almost instant detail' from anywhere in the world. But 'the newspaper will only be eliminated when there is something better to take its place'. And there is no reason 'that we should have a proprietor who is less responsible in his relationship with his media.'

The Board of John Fairfax Ltd had once asked his father to resign as a director, he said, because he had accepted a bank directorship without consulting them, and they felt that readers would perceive his bank interest as influencing editorials. 'In those days the Fairfax family took an active, daily interest in their newspapers to the virtual exclusion of everything else. The same can be said of the Packer family. Those were the days when publishers were publishers.'

So should proprietors be 'divorced of other commercial interests?' Yes: 'Australia is so small that our media is capable of getting into the hands of very few.'

'There is no part of the media other than newspapers capable of acting as the fourth estate. They must keep governments focussed and politicians honest.' So it was vital for media not to be politically compromised by non-media interests involving government licences.

And taking the issue wider: 'With instant TV news coverage by such sources as CNN there is a new media responsibility. Responsibility to our local community is one thing but responsibility to a new community, to every government in the world, is something else. A journalism professor in California has said that CNN has not only changed the nature of broadcasting and journalism but also the nature of war and diplomacy.'

'Only through diligence, independence and integrity can the credibility of newspapers be maintained and perhaps regained. The freely printed word should be the one thing that preserves our democratic society. And that can only be achieved by people dedicated to the higher principles of journalism and without the contamination of certain outside commercial interests.'

Paul Chadwick quoted the American press critic A J Leibling as saying: 'freedom of the press belongs to those who own one'. Nowadays, with the convergence of print, broadcasting, film, telecommunications and computing, press freedom 'belongs to those to whom the power of property is delegated'. So 'the core of the

issue' for today's owners is by what processes and for what purposes the power is delegated, to whom the delegates are accountable and 'how can accountability be extracted, without threatening liberty through government intervention?'

Chadwick quoted the 1981 Kent Royal Commission on Newspapers in Canada:

'A conglomerate controlling many newspapers may never use them politically to serve the other interests or prejudices of its principal officers. But it can. Who knows when and how it may?... The basic issue here is legitimacy... The large proprietors... say only that they do not use their power. But those who work for them, who gather the news and select and edit it, know that the power is there, setting the parameters of policy. That knowledge shapes the cynicism of the press. It is the journalists' sense of the lack of legitimacy that saps away the concentration that newspapers could and should make to the validity of the country.'

'Of all the possible aspirations of publishers,' said Chadwick, 'to restore and maintain that sense of legitimacy is surely the finest.'

Asked about the value of charters of editorial independence John Fairfax said frankly, 'If you own a newspaper, you ought to be able to do what you like with it.' In his company, Rural Press, however, a lot of autonomy is given to the editors in their country towns: 'they then become the owners, they are the community, they have a responsibility. It would be very difficult for them to walk out their front door and confront their own community unless they have been fair within the newspaper. They'd get a pretty rough time'. But 'owners should have the right to interfere if they want to. If they make a muck of it, the readers will let them know.'

Richard Walsh said that in his lifetime newspapers had become 'less important in the political process'. Now there were influential magazines, talk-back radio, even graffiti and t-shirts and the Internet. Journalists, too, used never to be identified; now most have by-lines and thus are more powerful.

'To talk about a proprietor exercising the sort of power a Beaverbrook or Frank Packer did is just ridiculous. There are so many other ways of getting information and entertainment. And now, because newspapers are fighting for their economic life, there is the power of the readers and the power of the advertisers.

Capitalism, whether we like it or not, is mercantile democracy. It's the way people vote by buying things. The real straightjacket that keeps publishers and journalists on track is that if they do not produce a newspaper that makes decent money, they get hurled out. It's a very complex business, but it's a business, a discipline under which we all publish.'

Sir Zelman Cowen intervened: 'But it's a very special sort of discipline because of the sort of things that are canvassed and argued in a newspaper. Issues of a very wide range: moral questions, political questions.'

And Rajmohan Gandhi added: 'Newspapers have to survive and be profitable. But I can't for the life of me accept that making money is the sole aim of a newspaper just as I cannot accept that making money is the sole aim of a physician or a lawyer or an architect.'

Paul Chadwick said to Richard Walsh: 'If we are to be seized by the notion of fragmentation and to relax about the idea of responsibility and editorial independence, why is it that the controller of the largest group of magazines and the most popular TV network and various other things wants also to have three of the leading papers in the country?'

Walsh replied, 'You're catching me between my beliefs as a citizen and my daytime job! The [Packer] public company, PBL, says that insofar as it's interested in acquiring shares in Fairfax, it wants them for economic reasons. It claims that it can run the business better and achieve synergies which in fact will enrich its equity holders. It's not saying that it's attempting to do that in order to exert greater power than it needs to.'

Fairfax summed up, 'We can never forget as publishers, journalists or whatever, whether you're making money or not, you still have a social responsibility.'

William Porter added, 'We may be at the beginning of an era of responsibility, having passed through eras of power and money.' ■

STORIES WHICH KEEP THEIR BALANCE

The session which caused the biggest waves and the most controversy was one on balanced reporting, chaired by William Porter and Richard Walsh. Porter began by introducing a videotaped speech by Martyn Lewis, a prominent BBC news presenter. Lewis, he said, was taking every opportunity to call for 'a shift in the news agenda so that explaining and analysing mankind's achievements becomes just as important as investigating its failures. Alongside the reporting of problems should come on a much more regular basis the airing of possible solutions.'

Richard Walsh took up Lewis's complaint that good ratings were treated as more important than good journalism. 'But if it's good ratings, that's what people want. Lewis is actually not complaining about the media, but about the society in which he lives. He wants society to have a different kind of agenda.'

But the Forum, he said, was basically focussed on the print media, so he turned to the 'legitimate need of print readers to be informed and entertained. As each new medium has evolved, it has never eradicated the medium that went before it.' TV was 'a major setback' for radio and cinema, but sent the people engaged in them back to first principles, to ask, "What do we need to lose, what to enhance?"

'Print', he said, 'is a great medium for analysis and argument. Each of us wants to read that argument at our own pace. Broadcast is a tyrant there is only one pace.' So a newspaper should 'be full of argument. The only time we should cavil is when it is not transparent whether it is giving fact or opinion. We shouldn't be surprised that print no longer wants to run round taking polaroid photographs of the truth.'

A portrait in oils, said Walsh, referring to Australia's major annual art competition, can represent a deeper kind of truth. 'By arguing about it, by seeing Truth not as

one fixed thing but as an ever-evolutionary process out of argument, we can see that Print is particularly good at being the compere for argument, and the pain we get from the problems Martyn Lewis has talked about isn't quite so acute.'

Thanking Walsh for a 'most enlightening' presentation, William Porter said that BBC news had in fact begun to put more emphasis on constructive solutions to the problems in the news. And that anyway 'Lewis was not talking about a good news only policy such as "all planes landed safely today" but a balanced news policy'.

Sir Zelman Cowen spoke with some urgency ('while it's still hot') about 'a real difficulty' he saw, of saying confidently about something, 'that's truth'. The perception of something by a variety of people even something that looks objective is 'not like that'.

Walsh said he shared that view. 'I don't see how moral ideas can be true, and there are unfortunately only a limited number of physical ideas of which we can use that word. It doesn't have use in the world of ideas, which is really what we're talking about. We should cultivate the cult of scepticism about our own ideas most of all. Only a society that is prepared to keep allowing the challenge of its most entrenched shibboleths will progress.'

Bernard Margueritte responded, to laughter, 'I've been waiting for Richard to use his admirable talent to give the opposite view. You said, Richard, that what Lewis wants is to change society, not only the media. Yes, of course! And so what? What is wrong with that? Many of us are hoping to change society. Why should we keep this materialistic, hedonistic, consumerist and violent society and not try to move to a society where moral and spiritual values are at the centre? That's a legitimate thing to attempt, and the media should play a role.

'Secondly, you said that if people buy newspapers, they must be satisfied with them. That that's democracy and if you don't agree, you're not respecting

democracy. Well, Richard, again I cannot accept that when you have 17% or 18% approval rate of journalists around the world, that shows there is something wrong and people are not too happy about the way we are presenting news.'

Margueritte then gave examples of newspapers, TV stations and film-makers who decided to portray family values and ratings and sales went up.

'Thirdly', he went on, 'the mission of journalists is to serve the people. How can democracy function if we don't have well-informed citizens? I would agree with Lewis that there is a great deal of laziness. It is much easier to write about bad things, about conflict, than about well, not only positive events, but what is happening in society: the environment, the cities... We have to do that in an interesting way and show our readers why it is relevant to them. I don't share your view that by accepting things as they are we are serving democracy.'

Walsh replied, 'We have to distinguish between ourselves as citizens and as participants in the media. Yes: as an individual I'm unhappy with society, I want change. I've spent most of my adult life trying to precipitate change. But I don't transpose my desire for change into a critique of the media. Because I believe it is right and proper to reflect the society it operates in.'

Dr Janner Sinaga began: 'I'll paint you a picture...' and Rajmohan Gandhi interposed, 'And that will be the truth!' When the room had settled down, Sinaga continued, 'In the final analysis, whatever is reported depends on the quality of the person who does it his views of the world, his ideology, his economic understanding, his norms of what truth is.'

Margaret Jones, former Foreign Editor of The Sydney Morning Herald and one of the first journalists to be allowed in the 1970s to base in Communist China, said that despite Lewis's 'impressive presentation', she was 'uneasy with the policy of balanced news, because this can in adverse circumstances lead to managed news. Any journalist who has worked in a country where the media is controlled

by the government has seen very gross examples of this'. For example, when she asked the editor of the People's Daily why no natural disasters were reported, 'he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Events of that sort do not happen in China." I'm a bit playing the devil's advocate but there are dangers in managing news and not letting it flow as it comes.'

Pamela Bone of the Melbourne Age pointed out that 'the media does self-censor to protect the public from some of the worst horrors that actually happen' for instance things she saw in Rwanda in 1996 which she 'wouldn't write about and the photographer wouldn't photograph because it was just too horrible to present.'

Jack Herman of the Press Council said he felt Lewis missed the point in complaining that coverage of the Dunblane massacre had been too sensationalist. There and in the Port Arthur killings, 'the end result of what appeared to be a negative coverage was a positive outcome: a ban on hand-guns. And in crisis situations like South Africa and Central Europe, 'the war reporter is called out to cover another war but then the peace reporter goes in.'

John Farquharson recalled Sir Zelman's point about the need for judgment. 'I don't think we in the media are always given credit for what we do do, the self-discipline that goes on all the time in every newspaper.'

Again, Sir Zelman summed up: 'I think there are things wrong with Martyn Lewis's statement, but there is in it a core of truth.' ■