A newspaper is of necessity something of a monopoly, and its first duty is to shun the temptations of monopoly. Its primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted. Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of presentation must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong. Comment is free, but facts are sacred.

C. P. Scott, 1921

Gathering news is still a newspaper’s primary office. Increasingly, however, Australian newspapers offer more – business forecasts, sharemarket advice, lifestyle sections, Budget specials, all manner of targeted supplements – and opinion. On the whole, newspapers appear to take the Press Council’s fifth principle – making fact and opinion clearly distinguishable – seriously. The labels ‘comment’, ‘analysis’ and ‘opinion’ appear beneath bylines. Opinion pieces are often placed on a clearly designated op/ed page. This is obviously desirable. Readers need to know what is established fact, and what is simply someone’s opinion. In defamation law, the defence of ‘fair comment’ depends on courts being able to distinguish opinion from fact. (Pearson, 1997: 130-31)

All the same, keeping fact and opinion truly separate seems difficult for newspapers, particularly in the case of prominent journalists.

The notion of the reporter as a media personality complicates the distinction between news and commentary. As reporters’ analysis is featured in bylined columns … audiences’ perceptions of them as a source of reliable analysis render their so-called ‘straight’ news reporting as problematic. (Sources of News and Current Affairs, 2001)

Sources of News and Current Affairs, a report recently commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority, casts doubt on whether labelling or segregation of opinion works in any case. Professor David Flint, launching the report, stated: ‘The signals or branding that journalists say indicate what is comment and what is news are either not understood or they are just not there ... over 60% have difficulty distinguishing fact, news, from comment’. (Flint, 2001: 33)

John Henningham, Professor of Journalism at the University of Queensland, believes that ‘comment has increasingly become entwined with reporting to the extent that it is often difficult to distinguish fact from opinion’. (2001) Former Prime Minister Paul Keating, speaking to the Sydney Institute last year, condemned such blurring. ‘I’m not just talking here about the obvious sloppiness of commentators, but the routine use of headlines and placement to imply comment and to denote weight’. (2000: 1) Janette Howard recently complained: ‘Commentary and fact are now so blurred in a lot of newspapers.’ (Linnell, 2001: 19) Professor Mark Pearson of Bond University believes that the problem is not ‘the existence of comment in news stories but a failure to flag the switch from reportage to comment’. (2001)
Surely this does not happen in news reporting, where ‘journalistic orthodoxy dictates that personal opinion should be set aside and objectivity is the grail’? (Simons, 2001b: 6) Apparently it does. The overwhelming view of journalists, news producers and presenters in *Sources of News and Current Affairs* seems to be that journalists are increasingly allowed or encouraged to insert their own opinions into pieces. This may well be damaging to the transfer of news, of verifiable facts to readers. If a paper is seen to be biased, or crusading, some readers may switch off. ‘Boldness of opinion … can close the minds of those who do not share it … journalists should be very cautious about stating opinion … in news stories, lest they alienate segments of the audience.’ (Fuller, 1996: 88)

Michael Warby sees the referendum on the republic as a clear example of newspapers seeking to lead the public to a definite conclusion, and not just within the confines of opinion pieces. ‘Coverage and commentary was overwhelmingly for a “Yes” vote.’ (2000: 14) Warby’s was not the only critical voice. Complaining that *The Age* and *The Australian* published three times as much pro- as anti-republic material leading up to the referendum, Dr Nancy Stone said that ‘while it was a newspaper’s right to express its own view in editorials … in opinion pieces, most readers would hope to see a roughly equal division for and against’. (quoted in Steketee, 2000: 1)

Many journalists, especially political commentators, not only report events nowadays, but ‘explain’ what they mean. Ian Ward, author of *Politics and the Media*, says: ‘Why do we read Michelle Grattan? For the judgments, the selective interpretations, she is making on events’. (2001) Flint sees this as a major change: ‘From being reporters of news, our political journalists in reporting news have become, for better or worse, unelected participants in the political arena’. (2001: 27) David Conley (1997: 285) believes:

> … readers do not care about a reporter’s opinions – they only want the facts …
> Some stories, however, require interpretation. The central questions are whether the reporter has separated fact from opinion, and whether sufficient information has been provided for readers to make up their own minds.

Pearson believes that ‘journalists and their audiences need to be trained to distinguish fact from opinion so they can form their own judgments on the veracity of a story and the foundation of a comment’. (2001) But Keating doubts whether newspapers are willing to let readers decide. ‘Australian editors far less than the best of their American, European and, increasingly, Asian, counterparts, seem prepared to give readers room to make their own judgments’. (2000: 1) Hugh Brown, editor of the Australian e-journal, *Online Opinion*, agrees. ‘I’d rather be told that the government had announced policy XXX … than be told that the announcement was a “damaging backflip”. It’s up to the voters to decide whether it’s damaging or not.’ (2001) Flint believes that, increasingly, comment is pushing out fact.

Some months ago a federal minister was suspended briefly from Parliament. I wanted to read the facts … I could not find them. There was a lot of interpretation, comparisons. But what actually happened? (2001: 33)
If comment is taking up the space traditionally reserved for news, then this is dismaying. As Tom Koch (1991:3) states, ‘For democracy to have meaning, its members must be able to act responsibly, and their ability to do so depends, in turn, on the availability of accurate and reasonably complete information.’ News is one means by which they get it.

Cotton (2001: 3) believes that reporting on Parliament has declined, with Question Time the only event still extensively covered. Newspapers see themselves much less as ‘journals of record’ and no longer provide extensive coverage of parliamentary doings. Paul Kelly believes that ‘Committee reports don’t get the attention they deserve’. (quoted in Cotton, 2001: 3) Laurie Oakes agrees.

People aren’t less interested in parliamentary proceedings these days. If the stuff was in the paper, they’d read it. However, I don’t think newspapers will go back to that. They decided they had to go more with comment and interpretive analysis rather than just reporting what happened. (quoted in Cotton, 2001: 3)

So why would a newspaper sacrifice precious news space for comment? Alan Kohler, columnist for The Australian Financial Review, may provide one answer.

An editor could hire a group of investigative journalists who’d investigate companies for three months and come back with a [true] story the lawyers would butcher. But, if he hires a columnist who says he thinks someone is a crook, it’s defensible if it’s a fair comment. It’s a cheaper and more efficient way to go about the same process. (quoted in Stretton, 1990: 112)

Do commentators have more leeway with the facts? Alan Knight, Professor of Journalism at Central Queensland University thinks they do. ‘News seeks to establish facts through accurate, clear and concise reporting of identified sources,’ he says. ‘Columnists are journalists unburdened of any of these conventions and practices.’ (2001) Sally White asserts that ‘personal columns do not have to be balanced, fair or even accurate’. (1996: 29-30) Peter Craven, editor of the Best Australian Essays series, cites the recent debate about the ‘stolen generation’ as one that exposed some of the shortcomings of commentary. Describing much of P. P. McGuinness’s analysis as ‘shoddy’, Craven states: ‘...a whole area of talk … has been based on unreliable sources that have not been sifted.’ (2001: 13)

Business commentary is another huge growth area for newspapers. Yet the recent call for business journalists to be licensed reflects growing concern about what James Dunn calls the ‘mind-boggling diversity of opinion’ there. Not all of them can be right, he reasons. ‘While the information revolution has opened the entrails of the stockmarket ... what has not been democratized is the ability to interpret them.’ (Dunn, 2001: 34)

Kelly expressed a concern almost a decade ago that ‘the values of our own journalistic culture are too permissive about opinions and too cavalier about facts’. (1993:6) He states now: ‘Opinion is devalued if it doesn’t have authority. If you have, say, a 21-year-old writing comment, then you’ve got problems.’ He stressed the need for outside experts,
not journalists alone, to provide authority and balance. ‘A variety of opinion is very
important. If no-one is thinking outside the tram tracks or the political parameters, then
the debates won’t be very interesting.’ (2001) Opinions differ on whether Australian
debate is balanced and diverse enough. Warby complains that the ‘narrow-minded
provincialism of the Australian intelligentsia’ prevents their conceding ‘a place for
conservative ideas in the spectrum of public debate’. (2000: 14) Keating believes a ‘right-
wing punditocracy … dominates the opinion pages of the newspapers’. (2000: 1) Both
can’t be right. But if commentators from left and right both feel badly done by, then
perhaps debate is reasonably balanced.

What about factual errors in opinion pieces? Pearson believes these ‘are at least as
damaging as errors of fact in straight news stories, because they create a false basis to the
opinions presented.’ (2001)

The Canberra Times’s code of practice states that:

Editorials, analytical articles and commentaries are subject to the same
standards of factual accuracy as news reports … that where the words or actions
of people are subjected to critical comment these are fairly represented so that
readers can draw their own, possibly different, conclusions. (Waterford, 2001)

But such stringency does not apply at all newspapers, particularly at the sensational end
of the market. The Australian Press Council (2001b) case study, A Matter of Opinion, is
one example. A complainant called a reporter’s statement that police had been ‘itching’
to kill a long-time criminal ‘wild and irresponsible’. The editor of the newspaper did not
grapple with the issues raised in the complaint personally. The journalist was expected to
be self-regulating. Is this good enough?

Keating, who contends that ‘fact-checking is not only foreign to the journalistic culture,
but antithetical to it’, believes that the ‘quick and graceful correction of error is a rare
event’. He calls for a ‘speedy and prominent right of reply’. (2000: 1) Many people resort
to letters to the editor to correct mistakes that would otherwise stand as fact in the public
record. Richard Walsh concedes that newspapers ‘obsessively correct absurdly trivial
errors … but often fail to correct major mistakes, except under threat of litigation’.
(quoted in Keating, 2000: 1) It should be so simple. ‘If it is wrong, correct it. Promptly.
And where those who read the error, heard the error or saw the error are most likely to
receive it.’ (Flint, 1999: 12-13) But this is unlikely, as Keating complains:

The likes of [Alan] Ramsey can impute and misinform in cinemascope on the
opinion page on Saturday; the correction will be in a small box generally at the
bottom of the page on Page 2 on Tuesday; with none of the positioning and a
fraction of the readership. (2000: 1)

Journalistic egos may be part of the problem. Margaret Simons recently castigated
political journalists for not coming clean about past mistakes.
A basic requirement is the ability to admit error – not only factual error, but also errors of judgment and prediction. But this isn’t how political journalism works. When the political journalist has been surprised or alarmed, ignorance cannot and must not be exposed. History is quickly rewritten ...The journalist is always all-knowing. (Simons, 2001a:15)

Kelly finds that easy to accept. ‘Nobody wants to admit they’re wrong. Nobody.’ (2001)

In many cases, there may be a lack of agreement of what the ‘facts’ really are. Chris Nash, Director of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, believes that the ‘definition of fact is strongly influenced by the social experience and perspectives of the journalists, and target demographics of the publications’. (2001) Ward believes that, increasingly, ‘facts’ are presented by spin doctors, ‘a huge industry out there to put their version across’. He goes on to say: ‘Much in political discourse is couched as fact because the statements can be attributed, but really it’s just someone’s interpretation.’ (2001) Koch would agree.

The assertion, for example, that ‘drugs are evil’, and that only more monies will combat their spread is not truth, but a premise, albeit one accepted daily by reporters who write and editors who run stories based on its validity... news requires a system and technology that will allow it to examine and verify the assumptions that subjects state as ‘fact’ and are typically reported without comment as ‘truth’. (Koch, 1991: 50)

But can any such system liberate journalists, even those with the best intentions, from the imperative of ‘hype’? Richard Glover (1992: 31) doubts it. ‘... a commitment to the truth, in the wider sense of the word, is the one thing most obviously lacking in Australian journalism... The reporter’s commitment ... is to boosting the significance of the story.’

So the problem lies not in comment alone, nor in comment’s increasing seepage into ‘straight’ news, but rather in a journalistic culture facing the pressures of commercialisation, sensationalism and dumbing down. It may also be hard for journalists to hold on to their ethics when faced with the temptations of celebrity journalism. However, Pearson warns that ‘with the cult of personality you can’t forget there’s a cult of accountability’. He encourages journalists to develop ‘media literacy’ to assist them to become self-regulating. External regulation does not seem to be an answer. Flint describes that as ‘a solution which is worse than the problem’. (Media Report, 2001)

Given that opinion is here to stay, what other steps need to be taken to improve it and disentangle it from factual reporting? Craven suggests giving ‘writers the space to articulate their arguments fully and to present the evidence for their views’. (2001: 13) Kelly calls for diversity of opinion and the use of outside authorities and experts to provide it. (2001) More emphasis on fact-checking would also be a start. Pearson calls for ‘a lot more public literacy about the media’ and cites a need for ‘the school system to teach people better at an early age, how to read and interpret the media’. (Media Report, 2001)
Why is this issue so important? Brown believes the ‘media have an aura of authority that most consumers don't question – they just accept that “it was in the paper”.’ (2001) Warby contends that ‘the printed word has the ring of authority to it. The authority of the printed word is magnified if it comes from someone considered reputable.’ (1999: 6) Newspapers need to get it right the first time, in news reports and in comment. Simons states:

We live in complex times, and these days, most important news stories need explanation of the facts, as well as straight reporting. Good journalistic commentary should act as a kind of information brokerage, translating the facts into knowledge – something we can think and argue about. (2001a:15)

Provided they are the facts, of course.
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