**La Trobe University**

**Ideas and Society – Is There a Future for Quality Newspapers?**

**6 March 2012**

**Robert Manne**

We’re here to discuss whether quality newspapers have a future or not, in Australia, but also, it’s obviously a question that goes much beyond that. It seems to me that this is a very suitable time to discuss this topic. It’s partly a suitable time because of the problems that have befallen the Murdoch newspapers in Britain, and the Leveson Enquiry then. It’s partly a suitable time because we’ve just had the Finkelstein Enquiry into the Australian media, ethics of media in Australia. It’s also, it seems to me, an interesting time because one of the richest women in the world, Gina Reinhart, has just bought a stake in Fairfax. But I think by far the most important issue is the question of whether or not something that is a very traditional institution of Western democracies, the newspaper, will or will not survive in printed form. And of course the question then is, if it doesn’t survive in printed form, whether our democracy will be shifted in serious ways, whether we can do without that kind of really serious journalism, within a culture of the sort that we’re familiar with.

And I think what I’d like to say is, just two things, before I introduce Eric and Mary and maybe Paul in absentia, yes, still in absentia, one is that we have two sort of models about what happens with technology and the shift in things. It was often thought that television would replace radio and that in turn the internet would replace television. And that simply hasn’t happened. What you’ve had is an accumulation of technologies, which don’t make earlier one redundant, but they just shift emphasis. On the other hand, apart from a recent winner of the Oscars, in general, silent films did not survive talking films, or the horse and buggy didn’t survive the coming of the motor car. So there are occasions in culture where things that are thought to be replacing other things, don’t do so, and occasions when new technology replaces something old. And I think it’s a really open question as to whether print newspapers will survive or not, and I was hoping for a debate today between Eric and Paul, and I’m still hoping that we’re going to have one on that question. But I’d also like to say that from my point of view, and from the audience’s point of view, there are lots of other questions than just the survival of newspapers – things I mentioned about the current enquiries and the Gina Reinhart question, so I would like you later to participate in any way you’d like with questions, as to the current state of newspapers, and journalism in this country.

So if I can just quickly introduce Eric Beecher, was I think, the youngest person ever to edit a major Australian newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, two hundred years ago, was Editor in Chief of the *Herald and Weekly Times* under Rupert Murdoch, in the eighties, and indeed he gave me a job as a columnist many years ago. He’s more recently created *Text Media* and then left it, but was the creator of it, but is now the proprietor of *Crikey*. He also it seems to me, to be one of the shrewdest minds concerning media in this country and I’m very pleased – I just discovered a few minutes ago that he also had a son who studied at La Trobe which I’m pleased to learn. Mary Debrett is one of the panellists, teaches in media and journalism at this university and she has a background mainly in television, but a contemporary interest in public affairs, television and broadcasting, and also is working at the moment on the adequacy of the reporting of climate change in the media in Australia, I think just in Australia. So, without further ado, I’ll call on Eric … now if, and this is partly facetious, but if Eric comes to the end of his talk and Paul Ramadge still hasn’t arrived, Eric is going to outline, he says, roughly what he thinks because he’s debated Paul on other occasions, roughly the things that Paul might have said, had he been here. But I hope it doesn’t come to that. So anyhow without further ado, Eric, if you could talk to us about your views on the future of quality newspapers.

**Eric Beecher**

Thanks Rob. I’d like to start by just making a sort of differentiating point between quality newspapers and quality journalism, because they aren’t necessarily obviously the same thing. And the challenges to the future of the newspaper and in particular, the quality newspaper, is actually to do with its business model – it’s a commercial challenge. And as a by-product of that, quality journalism in the commercial sphere, most of which is the result of journalism in quality newspapers, but not all of it, and I’ll talk about that in a minute, is under enormous pressure, because the funding for that journalism is obviously related to the commercial challenges that affect newspapers. So I think it’s important to just look at the, if you like, the economic organism of the newspaper, particularly the kind of newspaper we’re talking about, and the kind of newspaper that we’re talking about, in this country are loosely what we would call broadsheet newspapers, like the *Age* or the *Australian*, or the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Financial Review* and really, in my mind, those four constitute most of the universe of quality newspapers in this country. And that’s not unusual. In most other countries there’s a relatively small number of high quality newspapers like the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or the *Guardian.* Or the *London Telegraph* and that kind of thing. And the vast bulk of newspaper circulation and newspaper readers, are not part of the universe of quality newspapers, they’re part of the universe of what we’d loosely call popular newspapers, and they have a different business model and in my view they therefore have a different challenge, and it’s a challenge in its own right, but it’s not anywhere near, I think, as serious as the challenge to the quality newspapers.

And so the business mechanism of a quality newspaper like the *Age* or the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Australian* is that it actually has almost nothing to do with how many newspapers they sell or how much they sell those newspapers for. The major portion of the revenue and virtually all the profit from those kinds of newspapers, comes from the advertising revenue. So they are in the business of aggregating the right kind of readers on behalf of advertisers, and advertisers want to reach those readers, and in the case of quality newspapers, those readers are usually regarded as being in the upper demographic of society, and they’re quite desirable, it’s quite a desirable audience and advertisers traditionally have paid premium advertising rates. But newspapers like that, obviously they have to have a circulation, and it has to be the right kind of circulation and the right kind of audience. So that’s important, but it’s important in a commercial sense so that they can attract enough advertising revenue to fund and make a profit out of their business. And that’s where the challenge to quality newspapers now resides – that the advertising that provided the windfall profits for these newspapers over a large part, certainly the second half of the last century, and made them the term that’s used is ‘rivers of gold’, made them immensely profitable newspapers that had virtual monopolies of that audience, those revenues are disappearing. And in fact, I brought a little chart along, just to highlight this. If you can see it. This was produced last week in the United States, and this graph starts in 1950 down here, the bottom left, and ends in 2010, in the bottom right, and that is, the advertising revenue in adjusted dollar terms in American newspapers, between 1950 and 2010, and it started at twenty billion dollars, that’s all daily newspapers in America, and it’s now back to twenty billion dollars, and at its peak it was over sixty billion dollars, and that was as recently as 2000, or after 2000. And so what that graph shows you is the money that funds quality journalism, in this case in America, but my view would be that the trend is global. And it’s a devastating graph, and it’s … I mean, for people like Paul and I, who love newspapers, and believe passionately in quality journalism, it’s a devastating graph. And that’s really at the heart of the problem. It’s not about, do people want quality journalism, is quality journalism important to society, any of those issues. There’s no question about that. In fact the audience for it has grown. The problem is, the money that pays for it, and it is very expensive, comes primarily from advertising revenue, virtually all of it in fact from advertising revenue, and that has left newspapers at an alarming rate. And so the challenge for quality newspapers in the context of producing quality journalism, running hundreds of journalists, foreign bureaus, big Canberra bureaus, proper business staff, investigative journalism, public interest journalism across all the specialities like education and science, and health – it’s expensive, it’s really expensive. And that used to be paid, until the beginning of this century, by the advertising which often had not very much to do with the content of that journalism, but there was a kind of tacit understanding between the advertisers and the publishers, and the editors and the journalists, that the big ads, the classified pages of ads, or the ads for big department stores or whatever it was, they were targeted at the audience that quality newspapers delivered for them. They knew and they understood and they were probably quite happy about the fact that decent chunks of the money they spent on those ads, was deployed to produce quality journalism. And so the system worked. I guess my argument is that quality journalism now, separate from quality newspapers but intertwined with quality newspapers because they are the primary funder of quality journalism in the commercial sphere, outside the ABC, and in this country, outside the ABC and SBS and national broadcasting, that the pressure on the funding source of that journalism is acute. It is disastrous. And the concern I think that we all have is, what’s going to fund that journalism if the advertising that traditionally funded it has disappeared, or is disappearing. And there’ve been lots of discussions – it’s a subject of intense, almost frenzied, discussion now, in journalism schools, in all sorts of places where the importance of public interest journalism and the public discourse in the broader sense, takes place. What is going to fund investigative journalism? What is going to fund foreign coverage and political journalism, if the advertising in big quality newspapers that used to fund it, has actually left those newspapers? And no one has an answer yet. Everybody is grappling with that. But I would end by saying I think if there is no answer, and I think ultimately there will be an answer, but the answer might be a different kind of answer – it might include some government funding and philanthropic funding and that kind of journalism might become much more niche, because it will become much more expensive for consumers to pay for, because they will be forced to pay a much bigger price for it because the advertisers no longer subsidise it, so you know, everyone hopes there will be some kind of calibration to support it, but in the meantime, because there is no answer now, and most newspaper publishing companies, certainly in this country and elsewhere, are publicly listed companies who are answerable to their shareholders, and to their share price, and to their quarterly earnings, and so they are under enormous pressure to deliver bottom line results and as a result of that, the resources for quality journalism are being whittled away at the moment. There’s still enough there. I would argue the quality of journalism in this country is as high as it’s been ever, but … and that’s a relative judgment and you know, it’s very subjective, but if the trend on that graph I showed you continues, and if it’s replicated here in Australia, and it’s not quite as acute as that, but it is happening here, then there’s no doubt that a publicly listed newspaper publishing company can no longer invest in journalism in the way it did before. That’s just an economic fact of life. So, the desperate hope is that a mechanism will be found to fund commercial quality journalism of the kind that we’re used to in broadsheet newspapers, because if it doesn’t, I think society as well as people studying journalism, will be the losers.

**Robert Manne**

I’m extremely pleased that Paul has arrived and I’m very grateful that he’s come to the university. He doesn’t need much introduction. Paul, I think has been at the *Age* since 1996, a very seasoned journalist. He’s now Editor in Chief of the *Age*, which is one of the most important and responsible positions in both Melbourne and Victorian society, so thanks Paul very much, for coming here.

**Paul Ramadge**

Thank you very much Rob and it really is a pleasure to be here. I’m very sorry I did run a little bit late today. I had one of those taxi drivers who wasn’t quite sure about the streets of Melbourne and particularly the streets of Bundoora, even though I enjoyed my conversation with him. But I also ran late for another reason. I was in really the thick of a discussion in the office – will we publish an investigation we’ve been working on for weeks? Will we publish tomorrow? Or will we publish later in the week? What are the unanswered questions? How well have we covered off what I saw as the critical issues within the pieces? And then I’ve been in conferences this morning. How serious is this situation in China where they’ve pegged back their growth forecasts? Is it true that they sneeze and we catch a cold? How should we investigate this, or is it just a kite and don’t worry about it? If Bob Carr is the new Foreign Minister of Australia, what are the issues that create exposure for him? What was the dirtiest bit of laundry that he was working on when he was a lobbyist, and to what extent does that put him in conflict with his new government, which he’s now a member of, and a leading member of? I was busy asking questions. And every day, just so you know, in a similar way to what you do at university, in tutorials, particularly in debates with senior lecturers, particularly if you’re doing post graduate work, every day when you ask questions, is what we try to engender in a team at the *Age*. And it’s trite, I know, but we set out to do this in terms of the public interest.

I’d like to give, as a precursor to what I’m sure will be some very good questions, I’d like to give a mixture of professional and personal to you, in a short address. On the professional, I must say I think Eric’s given a very good summary. The business model for newspapers’ quality, independent newspapers in Australia, is being seriously challenged. This thing, this thing called the internet, not only has it arrived, but it’s arrived with enough force that it’s stealing all of your time. Screens dominate. And in this mishmash of lost time, and lost thoughts, somehow, and I might say some days I awake and I think somehow more miraculously than I ever thought newspapers used to be, it used to be that the miracle of newspapers was that we just produced another million words off a printing plant and off trucks and delivered by 6.30 – now I think the miracle is that we produce original thoughts, original context, in a world of churning 24/7 opinion and debate. And in that sense, it gets harder. But if I reflect on eighteen months in the Chair at the *Age*, eighteen months of covering Melbourne, the nation and the world, it’s been extraordinary. One of our reporters, covering the uprisings in Egypt, was kidnapped, blindfolded and taken into custody. Fortunately we were able to get him out. Being a newspaper man and a newspaper editor, when the Japan earthquake happened and the nuclear risk, I had John Garnaut on a plane in a flash to Tokyo. Shortly thereafter I had my knuckles rapped for perhaps inadvertently, and in my rush, not considering the nuclear fallout issue for a member of staff. But he covered Tokyo with distinction. If I think about just the past week, with Rudd and Gillard, and in a 24/7 news crush, what are the unanswered questions? How can you bring value to it in the newspaper? What does a quality, independent newspaper do? I think we did OK. On a quite complex, rapidly moving story. With truths and half truths, shadows and mysteries.

And the world of being a journalist is really, really changing. Fundamentally, quickly, and for all time, I think. Journalists now, whereas they used to just write for the paper, are writing for their online site. They’re writing for specialist online sites. Sometimes politics, sometimes broad opinion. They appear to camera in a TV studio on a main newsroom floor of the *Age.* They do what our hosts today do, sometimes with the Prime Minister, at Media House in the city. They blog, they tweet, Katherine Murphy covering the Rudd-Gillard contest, did a live blog that attracted 800,000 followers. It’s a bit like when you see Letika Burke, if you see her on Twitter and have a look at the followers, is it any wonder that Kevin Rudd actually has one million followers on Twitter. This is our world, and as our world changes, journalism has changed. And this brings into sharp relief what is quality journalism? When we say, will there still be quality newspapers in Australia in the future, it starts with what is quality? And one of the things that’s happening is, a lot of journalists like to reflect on those good old days. Amazing. We stayed back until three in the morning. The Prime Minister was still on the phone ‘till one. We got the exclusive angle on something. Reader response was fantastic. Did you see the letters to the editor? Those days are moving and shifting rapidly. And are almost not there any more. Now it’s a matter of, how does the day start on websites? What is it that’s available on your smart phones? How do we inform our readers in the middle of the day? How do we inform them in the middle of the afternoon? What are they seeking by dinner time, and what is it about evenings that has seen iPad usage go through the roof? Can I just ask in this room who has an iPad? How many people use their iPad a lot at night? How many people take their iPad to bed? What are you doing with your iPad? Is it long form journalism, or is it videos, or is it both? For me, it’s both. I’m looking for videos and I want rich contextual things I can learn videos, and long form journalism really appeals, because it’s the time of day when I can really think about it.

What’s the most valuable thing you get in any given day? In your life? And I’m assuming you’ve got smart phones, some of you have also got iPads. You also read the papers etc etc etc. But what’s the single most important thing you get in your day? I’ll go first. It’s usually an email attachment. It comes from somebody, a professional contact or a friend, out of the blue. It’s serendipitist. It’s a surprise. And this trusted source says, this is a really good piece. Or, this video is really worth watching. And it becomes, for my day, in a sea of information, one of the very best things that I got, one of the very best things that I did. Sometimes for me, of course, in the lucky position of those things containing some pretty rich information.

Some personal reflections. I want to talk about romanticism and realities. I want to talk about parenthetical clauses, whiches and that, and the world according to Fowler’s. And I’d like to talk about words, images and states of mind. At my home, I have white door jambs, and they’re ink smudges. I have a tucked away pile of famous newspapers in a cupboard. I have a collection of books on newspaper journalism that would rival most, and I have books that deal with aspects of newspapers, like Letters to the Editor in the *Times* of London. And some nights, as Editor of the *Age*, I finish late. Not as late as those glory days, but late enough to find it hard to get a taxi home. And I’ve been known, sometimes in the pouring rain, to get the last tram home. And I’m still racing with frenetic activity. Re-writing on the news desk, a late angle on the story, the late phone call, finessing the design, chasing the clock. And on such nights, when politicians or power-brokers have been working my ear, I am a caricature from one of my books. The exacting editor, the dreamer of ink and ideas, the wizard of words, the teller of truths – and it feels good. Direct a fifty million dollar plus newsroom, put the hard questions, go beyond the obvious, explain what things mean, how people are affected, and uncover wrongdoings. My word, there’s a society to protect. But romanticism meets reality every day. I notice that I am the only one on a packed number 19 tram the next morning, with newspapers tucked under my arm. Broadsheets too. How dare I? How I delight in pulling those papers out. I scan read for nuances, freshness, insights, surprises and originality. But no one notices. A skyscraper could fall over and no one would notice. It’s morning screen time. On the tram. Another day of screens. Small and big, portable and fixed, is underway. Technology is marching, relentlessly, numbingly, impersonally. And it is stealing time. And it’s in this context where it seems awkwardly anachronistic to even mention Fowler’s. My first editor’s copy of Fowler’s Modern English Usage sat dead centre on an old oak desk, alongside the Oxford, the Webster’s and the Macquarie. A latecomer. For would-be journalists, words and grammar structure and style, spelling and syntax were everything. Alliteration and rhyme, cadence and control followed. Words really mattered, words on a page. Simple, yet sentinel-like. Phrases and rules from Fowler’s were thrown at us, stories were rigidly reworked. But the times have changed. Education has changed. Words have changed. Colloquialisms are mainstream. Formal is passé. Grammar is found in graveyards. Journalism is beyond Fowler’s, beyond tradition. The new pulse does not require a heart. We are now fast, non-fussy, full of self-expression, giddy with text grabs. A parenthetical clause belongs to a bracket of time. Now information is a state of mind. How we learn is a state of mind, news of choice is everywhere. Twenty four seven. We click into a hedonistic haze of headlines. Newspapers are quaint. Newspapers actually take time. And that means putting the screens away. Stopping, thinking, relaxing, reflecting, serendipitistly learning.

On weekdays, on my view, this is hard. The screens scream at you if they are left alone too long. And the world that is free oozes temptations. Newspapers are friends but not everyone has time even for a friendship. On weekends, newspapers have a chance. Community elders lead the way, and generation screen stirs. Tired of closed circle clatter and chatter, tired of moment by moment updates, tired of going to bed with screens, tired of being tired. Over coffees, under trees, under cereal bowls across the city, romanticism re-emerges, just for a day or two. Just while the screens re-charge. And just long enough to remind everyone that words on paper, lots of words on paper, thoughtful words, clever words, worked-over words, can really matter. If we care. If we find time. If we value ideas and ultimately, in the crisis of modern journalism and serious quality newspapers, if we pay.

Thank you.

**Robert Manne**

I think we’ve been privileged to hear two extremely intelligent, and two very different accounts of a response to this question, and I’d love to know if somehow we can find a way of reconciling Paul’s idealism about the printed word in the newspaper, and Eric’s realism about the commercial problems that a newspaper lover like Eric, feels and fears for the future of newspapers.

What we’re now going to do is have some questions and we’ll all be able to be seated. I’ve got quite a lot of questions I’d like to ask about this, and then some of the more contemporary questions facing Australian newspapers and media. But if I could ask Mary to begin.

**Mary Debrett**

I just want to pick up on – you’ve both said that public interest journalism is obviously very important today and there are, because of the funding crisis obviously, threats to the ability of media organisations to produce public interest journalism, and I just had a question relating to that really. Public opinion polling of public attitudes to climate change have signalled declining public preparedness to pay for the cost of action on climate change, so it seems to me that public communication on the topic of climate change is really not cutting through. And it would seem to me that’s a really important role for public interest journalism, and I wondered if you could, both of you, perhaps share your thoughts on why that’s not happening. Why we have that disconnect between the reality and public opinion.

**Paul Ramadge**

I think that’s a very good question. In some of the discussions I have, I think some leading politicians recognise the failure of narrative at a federal level. I think one of the great challenges, first of all of the public position for governments is, if you believe in something, if you’re putting the policy, then you also have to take responsibility for the public narrative, and the force of that narrative, and leadership really is about influencing others towards those outcomes, and there is a question mark, I think, about if our current government believes this passionately to be the issue that it says it is, where is the constant reinforcement, where is the explanation, etc and I see the *Age*’s role as holding the government accountable in and around that level of kind of disclosure on their narrative.

For the paper itself, and it should be recognised there has been a divisive national debate on this issue, and a division within mainstream media on this issue as well. I unashamedly explain to you that the *Age* has taken the view that climate change is something that deserves investment, deeper understanding, and to that extent, all of the economic modelling on outcomes, if carbon price or trading schemes are put in place, we have advocated that, based on … so we’ve been a paper that’s been closer to the international scientific evidence in and around climate change. Other media organisations, in part written up by Robert and others, have not taken that view, and in some measure, have really exploded the divisiveness of the political debate, by campaigning for the opposite and the opposite is, I think, a protectionist view, in and around industry, off shoring risks, and the right of entrepreneurs to control all of their cost inputs, if that’s the right phrase. A summary for me on this issue, is I did a rolling analysis of the *Age*’s cover of climate change in about the middle of last year, concerned that, in some measure, maybe we, in opinion, in reporting and everything that there were suggestions that we’d been a bit hard one way – that we’d been a bit *too* pro-climate change, and I didn’t really find that we had. But what I did do was, I broadened the voices in the paper as a result of what I’d looked at, and I ensured that there were other voices published and debated and listened to, within the pages of the *Age*. It’s always a very difficult thing, this, and you don’t … it’s impossible to strive for one hundred per cent balance. But I think the idea of the church of ideas is to ensure that everything gets an airing over time. The *Age* sees this as one of the big issues of our time, we’re prosecuting it, we’re staying on it, we’re one of the few organisations with an environment editor, an environment reporter, a senior writer with a brief to cover the scientific aspects of it, another person in Canberra with a brief to cover it, and a desire, a passion to invite external voices across the breadth of the debate. So we feel we’re doing OK. My biggest point is, we see our role as trying to hold the power brokers to account – to really explain what the national narratives are.

**Eric Beecher**

I mean I think it is a fascinating subject for study, particularly in the context of the way the media has covered it, and I agree with Paul, the way that the politicians have framed it, because you have a situation here where it’s incredibly polarised, obviously, but it’s all built on scientific interpretations, and none of us are scientists, and even if we were a single scientist, there are plenty of other scientists who have a different point of view. So to the extent that the media and the politicians have actually kind of cut through all of that and presented it in a way that de-polarised it, if that was possible, they haven’t. To me, it’s not a scientific issue, because it’s a risk issue. All you have to establish is, is there a big enough risk, is there a ten or fifteen per cent risk that climate change is real, and I think the body of evidence, even Andrew Bolt would probably concede there’s a ten or fifteen per cent risk, he would argue that it’s that low. My argument would be if there’s a ten or fifteen per cent risk of anything threatening the planet, if there’s a ten or fifteen per cent risk of Australia being invaded by another country, we would take all the precautionary steps we would need to take, even though there was, by definition, an eighty per cent risk it wasn’t going to happen, because the consequences were so high. It’s never framed like that. It gets back down to scientific interpretation, and you can never win with that. But that’s more a personal view.

**Paul Ramadge**

Can I just come in there. I think that’s a really sharp way to frame the debate about that ten to fifteen per cent risk. If you do take another example like bioterrorism, or international terrorism per se, a ten to fifteen per cent risk sees a lot of activity – a hell of a lot of activity.

**Eric Beecher**

Look at the defence budget. Why do we have a defence budget for a risk that’s probably lower than that?

**Robert Manne**

Can I slightly disagree. I mean, it’s not really the time to do this but I just want to slightly disagree with Eric. It seems to me, and this is based on surveys based amongst climate scientists, that the overwhelming majority agree with the following proposition – that by burning fossil fuels you are increasing the temperature of the earth. 97% agree with that. There’s lots of disagreement about the rate of change and so on, but it seems to me it’s one of the areas where those within the discipline, and I’ve read many of the scientists talking about this, the overwhelming majority agree that climate change is happening, so the figure of ten or fifteen per cent about it happening would be rejected as far, far too low.

**Eric Beecher**

I’m saying that that’s the minimum of risk.

**Robert Manne**

But I think that most scientists would think there is a risk. Where they would disagree is how catastrophic or how calamitous that risk is. And there there’s a huge amount of disagreement. Anyhow … Can I go back to the … if we could take it in turns, Mary. If I can ask my question. It seems to me that there’s a lot of agreement even though the perspectives that Paul and Eric have given are rather different. If I can say, the agreement seems to me to be this – that with print newspapers, the revenue that sustains quality journalism is lowering, and to some extent plummeting, as in the graph that Eric showed. On the other hand, it seems to me that almost everyone agrees that quality journalism is one of the key ingredients of a vital democracy. The big question is, I suppose the big question is whether there is a way, and Eric said he didn’t think we’d yet worked this out – whether there is a way in which, if newspapers, print newspapers, do decline, and if, let’s say, in twenty or thirty years there are hardly any print newspapers left, whether or not we can find ways in which that vital ingredient of democracy, which is quality journalism, analytical journalism, journalism that holds government to account and reflects what’s happening in society, can be as healthy as it was let’s say, after the Second World War for fifty years. So it’s a complicated question, but Eric, if I could just ask the question of you. You thought there is a role, but you didn’t spell it out much in the talk, for public investment in quality journalism, whereas we accept the ABC, there’s a big resistance in Australia and other English-speaking democracies, to the idea of governments investing in anything other than broadcast media. So can I get you to say something about that?

**Eric Beecher**

As I said when I started, to me, the difference between quality newspapers and quality journalism isn’t that important other than quality newspapers’ business model has provided the funding. In other words, if quality … as Paul said, he’s got a fifty million dollar newsroom, so that actually is the number. In terms of the *Age* and it would be the same for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and similar for the *Australian* and so on. And so fifty million dollars a year times three or four in commercial journalism, it happens to be newspapers and online now and it might end up being just online if the cost of printing and distributing gets too high. It’s that fifty million dollars that counts. It’s not whether it’s on newsprint. That’s really the issue. One point to remember in this country and one of the reasons that there has been … not that it’s ever got on the agenda in any major way … the concept of government funding of commercial quality journalism is that the budget of ABC news and current affairs, is about 160 million dollars a year, and I know that because I sat next to Kate Torney at the event we were at the other night, and she told me. So 160 million for the ABC, which is basically three ages, you know, and a lot of people – I would certainly argue the ABC does a terrific job. They can’t drill down city by city in the way a paper like the *Age* or the *Sydney Morning Herald* does, and there’s lot of other things they don’t do and that 160 million, a lot of that is superficial because it’s physical stuff and it’s sets and it’s makeup – things that you don’t have to worry about. But nevertheless it’s a substantial investment and it’s part of a billion dollars a year that the government puts into the ABC and a bit more than that … SBS is on top of that. So, in the scheme of things, it’s not that much money. I guess what Paul and his colleagues and commercial publishers are trying to do, and indeed in a small way the group that I’m involved in is trying to do, is to find a commercial solution to the problem, charging for content, which we do with *Crikey* obviously generating advertising, trying to run other things like events and other revenue streams, and everyone’s hoping that might work. I’m dubious that you’re going to get, you going to find fifty million to pay for that, if the newspaper advertising disappears, but it’s worth trying. If it doesn’t work, I can’t believe, in a country like this certainly, that the government would allow that kind of journalism to disappear. The problem’s gonna be there might be quite a bit of erosion before it gets to that point and then the question is, would they then rebuild it.

**Paul Ramadge**

On the dark side of survival or not, quality journalism for the future, the *New York Times* has cut costs by something like 35% over the past couple of years. That’s journalists’ jobs, the journalism that they can do, a narrowing of the breadth of their journalism, and I was reading just recently – there’s an excellent article out and they’re starting to talk about the size of the newsroom doesn’t really reflect the revenues that are going to come from the digital platforms that they have, and they still feel the pressure. Point one.

Point two. The past week I think, the beginning of last week, Alan Rusbridger, the editor of the *Guardian* in London, announces a re-branding of the *Guardian* and it’s a continuation of his philosophy that everything’s open and arguably free, and there’s a big campaign that’s just been launched.

The third example. These are all in the past few weeks. The *Washington Post* over the past years, or probably decades now, had built up a cash cow adjunct to the *Washington Post*, an education arm to their business, and it’s struck some trouble and as a result, the extent of the financial challenge faced by the *Washington Post* is now fully exposed, and there’s a lot of chatter and debate about that.

Here in Australia and at the *Age* most particularly, we’re the beneficiaries of a fairly massive kind of broadening of Fairfax. It’s been diversified over the past decade, so this company I work for owns a lot of things now, from regional newspapers to metro papers, to – on it goes. Partly the hope of the side for Fairfax, and I can’t talk for others, is that the diversification away from core journalism, will build new revenues of sufficient quantity to pay for the type of journalism we currently have. Do I believe that’s possible? I’m part of a team that’s putting the strategy together to do that and it’s happening, unfortunately, this is the really catch for us now – it’s happening at a time of not just structural transformation in media, atomisation caused by internet new sites, the works vertical, deep niches and everything else, not only that, but structural change in traditional advertising, a crappy economy, with not a two-speed but a patchwork economy causing severe grief to traditional manufacturing, retail, aviation and on it goes, and as a consequence, you know, this is a cyclical downturn plus a structural shift of proportions we’ve never had before and the contagion of Europe and the United States in the shift away from traditional mass media has hit us as well. So the perfect storm is here. The perfect storm is all at once, probably this year and next, I think. These are critical periods, absolutely critical periods, and just a little final bit there, my company has announced that, after calling in some people to audit our costs and where we spend our money, they said, you spend 70% of your money in areas that aren’t related to what you say you’re going to do, which is quality journalism, products and sales. And you’re spending 70% in other areas. So Fairfax has announced an aggressive cost reduction in the non-core areas of our business, which has to be part of the hope of the side.

**Mary Debrett**

Just moving off in a slightly different direction. In August 2011, the CEO of the Minerals Council and one of the nation’s most powerful lobbyists, Mitch Hooke, wrote to members – the Board recognises that over the period of the past four years there has been a profound shift in the manner of public policy development and implementation. The new paradigm is one of public contest through the popular media, more so than rational considered effective consultation and debate. How should the media respond to this new paradigm of cashed-up lobby groups advancing their interests via the media? And that’s a quote from a Monash researcher.

**Paul Ramadge**

I was in a … without breaching a confidence, but partially breaching it … I was in a suite that’s bigger than normal ministerial suites and it happened to be in Parliament House in Canberra, and the person in that office said to me, how the hell are we supposed to grapple with an anonymous person who puts something up on Twitter and garners a political following within twenty four hours that’s big enough to worry us? And this very issue, which is lovely in democracy terms, particularly if it’s well thought through and valid, but this is not just a political phenomenon but a corporate phenomenon – more and more companies are getting advice on how to use Twitter, more and more companies are getting advice on how to use Facebook, and the media is part of that as well, because we’re thinking, there’s audience reach and growth in there, so we’re in there as well, and it’s in this churning mass where companies and minerals organisations and others are actually re-directing their whole communication and public affairs campaigns. I am hearing increasingly of public affairs and communications people directing campaigns first through social media, first. So it’s just absolutely fascinating.

**Eric Beecher**

It’s a trend that’s been going on probably at a lower level for several decades and I don’t think either of us have the number, but we know that there’s a ratio that’s bandied about of the number of PRs and corporate affairs and all those people versus journalists, and it’s something like four or five to one. And that ratio’s been growing dramatically in the past decade. But my answer would be in the context of what we’re talking about here, quality journalism, but in fact applies even more pressure on quality journalism to sift through that. Now that won’t necessarily be consumed by most of the population, but for those who are interested, and that number’s increasing I think, it’s even more important to get through the forest.

**Mary Debrett**

Right, because the statement indicates that the media’s captive to this group, but you dispute that?

**Eric Beecher**

When you say “the media”, I mean that implies … the news media, but the news media is a very wide spectrum. And the reality is that the biggest circulating or biggest rating news media, print, electronic, online, etc is the popular media – it’s not what we’re talking about here, the public interest journalism media. And it always will be, and politicians play to that audience. I mean, that’s the reality. Well, I think different parts of the media actually have different functions. In some ways they have the same function, but then it divides up.

**Paul Ramadge**

Yes, we should be under no illusions about when information is put into the public sphere, which day, what time, to which audience, on which device, on which channel, that’s all pre-determined. It is getting harder. There are more barriers. There are more spin doctors. We’re trying, at the *Age*, to actually say just no to anything until we understand it a bit better, but that’s also somewhat problematic if things gets into the public domain that demand an analytical approach, and it’s not always that easy. If you think about it, sometimes it does feel like you’re just running and smashing into a brick wall. Nobody will talk to you. Everybody goes to ground. We’ve put out a press release. We’re not talking. This is very common.

**Robert Manne**

Can I get on to one of my favourite topics – News Limited. There’s dispute as to whether News Limited in terms of newspapers owns 65 or 70% of the statewide and national press, but in the Finkelstein Enquiry report they did a systematic study of this and they came to the conclusion that nowhere in the developed or Western world is there any country with one company owning such a large proportion of newspapers and the online part of presence of newspapers. So my question is a very simple one. I don’t know how you’ll answer it. It has two prongs. One is, do you think it matters that we have allowed that situation to develop? And secondly, allied to that, what role do newspapers do you think, play in influencing new media, but also radio and television? And as it were, the ancillary effects of their opinion forming capacity through other branches of media. So Paul can I ask you …

**Paul Ramadge**

Well, first of all does it matter that News Limited owns so much?

**Robert Manne**

And secondly, what effects newspapers can have on the sort of political perceptions of society because not only their readership but the way in which it, as it were …

**Paul Ramadge**

Look, in fairness, first on the News Limited one. Fairfax is a pretty big player too. And so in fairness what I would say is, what ultimately has become a duopoly is unhealthy. I think the broader the voices the better, healthier, different views and approaches to journalism, particularly when it comes to editors and newspapers sort of campaigning on issues etc etc. So I think the narrowing over time, over decades, has been unhealthy for Australia. We’re only a small country, so if we have control in too few hands, I think it always raises eyebrows. So in fairness I’d put Fairfax in there as well, because we own a lot of papers, a lot of reach, a lot of you know, kind of control and influence. If I was to answer more specifically on News, the question is the make-up of their group is really interesting. A lot of tabloids, a lot of kind of mainstream mass media tabloids, and then the *Australian* which is used to do something else. And I think it’s in and around that, the kind of … it’s trying to understand what the corporate strategy with is with News with their products, and I think … there’s been a lot of public discourse about this, so it’s for others really rather than me, to continue that debate. I have said a few things.

On the broader issue, I notice that when I go to the ABC or I’m on radio or whatever else, you know, and as a consequence I may be listening in on that radio station right through the morning, I’m *amazed*, dumbfounded, sometimes angry with the lack of attribution about how many stories are really just out of the papers that morning, because that’s what there is. We’re talking of a newsroom with 300 with me and I don’t know what ABC radio Melbourne has but it looks like 20 to 25, maybe 30, right, so where are they going to get their stories from? Imagine a world without the *Australian*, the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* just to start with, those newsrooms don’t exist. Where are the stories going to come from? Who’s going to have time to do them? How will they be caught in the kind of rush of press releases and spin? You do need resources. You do need, you know, real focus here. If you haven’t got the newsrooms putting it out, and don’t forget putting it out, it’s not what you’re being told is the news, it’s the other questions you need to ask. It’s one of the things I like about journalism. It’s not what we’re being told, it’s what aren’t we being told. What did they just announce? What didn’t they announce? Who said that? What are their motivations? If people aren’t asking these questions, they’re fairly basic, but if somebody’s not doing it and providing it, not only will you have narrow ownership but you’ll have a narrow debate of an echo chamber of nothingness. Everybody kind of … and this is the risk of the new world. Everybody just kind of logging on to what they want to hear and what they want to be told – not wanting to be challenged. An echo chamber of nothingness. If you don’t have the big newsrooms, there’s a bit of a worldwide risk in this.

**Eric Beecher**

So, just to put it in reverse, I don’t think there’s any doubt that the print media and big newspapers set the news agenda for the rest of the media, for the reason that Paul said – they have vastly more resources. So that’s been the case for decades, and remains the case, and that’s just the fact. On the News Limited … Rob and I have lots of discussions, have had lots of discussions about this over the years. And I’ve kind of … there’s no question it’s bad. I mean, Paul summarised it and included Fairfax and whether you do or you don’t. The idea that virtually all the daily metro newspapers except one in Perth are owned by two companies in this country and national newspapers, is not a healthy thing for democracy. You know, you can hand wring about that until you’re blue in the face, and Rob often does, actually. Um, but, the question is, what can you do about it? As the horse has well and truly bolted … in fact because of all the changes to the media landscape, technology, business models, etc, I think it’s unlikely anyone’s going to do anything about it. But to me, the question is, well, who’s responsible? I don’t actually think Rupert Murdoch’s responsible. He’s playing his role. He’s playing the role of the person that worked within the law. He doesn’t break the law. He certainly helps frame the laws, but that’s part of his role as well. I think it’s the politicians and governments who are just cowered by him, as we’ve discovered in the UK. We all knew it, but now it’s public. And the same in Australia. Blame the politicians. They’ve allowed this to happen. It’s a public policy failure.

**Robert Manne**

Mary can have one more question if I can have one more, and then I promise to throw it open.

**Mary Debrett**

Lindsay Tanner coined the term “sideshow syndrome” for the predominance of entertainment in news today. And I think, to me, that applies to the coverage that was given the day the carbon tax was passed, when all the mainstream metropolitan dailies had Kissgate, as one of our students dubbed it, on the front page. And I just wondered, would the *Age* have lost readers if it had sort of led with historic bill passed after how many years, was it five years? A new direction for a greener economy?

**Paul Ramadge**

Well, I’d actually start by saying Kissgate turned out to be quite a story. I think we were on the money. It was like …

**Robert Manne**

You’d better tell everyone was Kissgate was.

**Paul Ramadge**

It was a kiss that Julia Gillard gave Kevin Rudd after the great freeze, and it was seen to be, not by every media I might add, we certainly saw it as potentially the beginning of some weird, unexplained détente, but also it had a real quirkiness to it. The actual kiss … and it led to a public debate. Quite frankly, we probably led the debate.

One of the things at this time, from the editor’s chair, about decisions and what’s on page 1 and what do you lead with and everything else. The very big thing, and Eric and I came through this period in Australian journalism when what’s on TV, on the top of the TV news, can’t be the top of the paper, because, you know, we’ve got to be fresh. What’s our own exclusive story? What have we developed? We’re not going to be a regurgitative paper. We came through that. But now we come through all of the other things. A full day of online reporting, plus the TV, plus the radio, plus updates on iPads, and relevance is actually important. And so I grapple sometimes with what I know is a big story and a big story that may lack a fresh insight. It’s a story about … make it page 1 because that will be a put away page 1 the day that that happened, versus, no you know what, we’ve got to be relevant every day. And we’ve got to be kind of fresh and interesting every day, while still being serious and quality and independent. So on this particular day, I know both arguments well and I grapple not only with that day, but many days like that. You know, the arrival of Julia Gillard as Prime Minister saw the *Age* do some back to back covers of page 1 with it, but at the end of the day, in any twenty four hour period is, what are the stories we’ve got, how important are they, and as a consequence, what do we think is the lead? What do we think is page 1? What’s the best picture? And on it goes. You know, so, believe me, and I’ll honestly say to you, some days it’s hard. Some days there’s not a great cracker of a story and some days it does feel a bit like a scratch around, even with 300 staff in the newsroom. Eric would probably say, boy, you’re not driving them hard enough, but you know what I mean. I’m just saying to you, news can’t be just constantly manufactured. You’ve got to have things lined up and you’ve been working on things and they fall due. I said to you today, we’re working on something, it might fall due tomorrow. I haven’t made a call on it yet. It’s quite a major story. But, so, there is a tension within the newsroom which I think is healthy, on the issue of papers of historical importance versus the moving nature of news and really, the validity of actually mixing it up a bit and getting beyond some obvious things, sometimes.

**Eric Beecher**

Mary, I’d answer the question in a different way. There is a market in Australia for the kind of newspaper that you’ve alluded to which is a paper that takes those issues seriously, that doesn’t do Kissgate, that really focuses in that way, and the market size is quite clear to anyone that’s in this business. So the *Economist* sells about 20 – 25,000 in Australia, *The Monthly* sells about the same, *Crikey* has 15,000 paying subscribers …

**Robert Manne**

It’s all the same market …

**Eric Beecher**

Well, it’s not necessarily *exactly* the same people, but there’s a market of maybe 100,000 in the country, maybe. I don’t know how much they pay. That’s not commercial. So that’s the answer.

**Mary Debrett**

So we need the ABC and SBS?

**Eric Beecher**

Well, thank God we’ve got them.

**Robert Manne**

And my final question before I throw it open. We’re just a few days past the publication of the Finkelstein Enquiry and just to summarise for those who haven’t been following – the enquiry suggests a general new media council or whatever they want to call it, funded not by the media itself but supported by government but independent of government, which looks at newspapers, other forms of media and online publications, and really vamps up the possibility for citizens or groups to have complaints about what the media has done, looked at quickly and a capacity to publish apologies and so on, with much more rapidity. I’m extremely interested, both from the point of view of the *Age* and the view of *Crikey*, as to how you’ve responded and what you think about the suggestions of Finkelstein.

**Paul Ramadge**

For the *Age*, we ran an editorial this morning on this – we see three major issues. One is whether or not it’s right to have an all-encompassing body, because they’re talking about newspapers, television, new media, internet, all in one, is one issue. The second is the manner in which the body is funded. And the third one is its powers. If I go to the first one, we wrote this morning and we have an open mind on the notion of a new body. And by the way, that’s a distinctive voice in newspapers just at the moment. I think on all three points there has been universal opposition to it. The *Age* has taken a slightly different view …

**Robert Manne**

Even from the *Sydney Morning Herald*?

**Paul Ramadge**

Yes indeed. Our view is that the nature of change in the media industry … newspapers are not just newspapers now. When newspapers, TV, radio, online, iPad etc, Eric’s businesses are not just online – they do other things as well, you know. So what started as an atomisation of media is mass media atomised with the internet, has now kind of created a re-convergence, as new models of media are formed. Television station, Channel 7, it runs its own website. You know, it tweets, it does all of this stuff. So in some measure, the *Age* is very open to a discussion about an all-encompassing body. Where we’re troubled is on the next two points. Our historical perspective on government funding, no matter what the indirect methods of funding, raises our concerns about control. We’ve seen governments of different political persuasions force change in media. What would stop them doing this again? Governments and media often clash. It’s often a huge clash of ideology. That concerns me. And the last one is, over recent decades, the media has had to grapple with a myriad of new bodies that sit in judgment on what we do. So, it used to be, you know, your defamation writs and your lawyers and off to court and kind of mediations. But there are so many others now. Just to mention, you know, VCAT and maybe the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission is a couple – I get a lot more of those sorts of things coming along, so I already have an explosion of judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms that I must adhere to. I’ve already got a Press Council. Any attempt to introduce kind of fixed, semi judicial or judicial processes in addition to all of that, I’m quite troubled about in terms of the ability to do our job well, and not to spend all of our time responding in what can be, in my experience, cases that shouldn’t have started.

**Eric Beecher**

Well, I take a slightly different point of view. I, and I said this to the enquiry, I think that media, particularly bigger media, needs to understand how much they’re on the nose, how much people distrust them, how low their reputation is, how little people think of most journalism, not all journalism, but they lump it all together – but if I was in that position, and confronting the avalanche on the business model and all of the other fronts that are attacking me, and the fact that the barriers to entry have collapsed, so other people can come in – I’d be saying, we need to address this, and we need to address it in a serious way. The Press Council does not do that – it is tame – we all know that. They’ll do an enquiry, some tame private enquiry and the results will be published on page 47, six months later. No one will ever read it. And so, I would be saying, let’s get on the front foot here. I think there is a conflict of interest when the newspaper publishers fund their own regulation, and that has happened in the past – News Limited have disagreed with the Press Council and they’ve withdrawn their funding. So unless they’re prepared to put the money in the bank for 25 years and then replenish it every decade, and that would be one way of doing it, by the way, I think government funding is probably the only source. And I think I’d be going to the government and I’d be saying, we have to have this separation. We can’t have any government interference, let’s sit down and work out whether we can get a mechanism between us, because it’s so important that the public have the right of reply, the complaints mechanism, the immediacy of reply, because the internet exists to do that, and that we’re seen to be preserving our reputation, trying to preserve our reputation, rather than seeing to be just sitting there as the newspaper companies are now, saying, we know everything, we’ll regulate ourselves, piss off.

**Robert Manne**

But don’t piss off yet because now is the time for questions. Are there roving mikes? There are roving mikes, so I’m hoping that there are media students here, and I’m hoping that they or others have questions that they’d like to put to either Eric or Paul.

**Question**

My question’s for Eric Beecher. On the topic of whether papers have been captive to say, vested interests, and the PR elements within them, you suggested it’s just the popular media that might be guilty of that. But the broadsheets … are you saying that the broadsheets have never been guilty of that sort of thing, either?

**Eric Beecher**

Look, I’m not saying everyone, no one’s ever been guilty of it, and one of the great dangers that’s happening as the pressure on the funding of journalism is under way and the resources in journalism, and I see this for example on the *Financial Review*, where there’s an enormous battery of corporate PRs working on the journalists there, is, you know, twenty years ago a journalist on the *Financial Review* might have only written one story a day and therefore had a whole day to research it, now they might have to write two or three stories, because the resources are fewer and the output is higher, particularly with online, the output’s even higher. And so they depend more on PR support. So in a sense I think the PR industry is exploiting this weakness in journalism. But I think good newspapers, and the four I mentioned, the *Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Australian*, the *Financial Review*, I think they’re very, very alert to that. Sometimes it happens, but it’s the other mass media, not just print media by the way, television and whatever, I think are extremely vulnerable to the influence of PR and there’s been quite a bit of work done on that to show how the influence works.

**Question**

My question is for Paul, please. I’m just curious about … everyone’s said the advertising is the really important thing to pay for all this but I’m curious about the cost of your subscriptions, because I pay $10 a month for the paper and I pay $100 a month for cable TV. And the paper, to me, is as valuable as the cable TV, if not more so. So why are your subscriptions so cheap? And will no one pay more than that for getting your newspaper?

**Paul Ramadge**

I’d just like to say that I didn’t put her up to that at all. But I think it’s a very good point. You’re quite right of course that a cup of coffee is generally a lot more expensive than the newspaper and then, but there’s this world of things to learn in the newspaper. I don’t think the cost of our product has kept up with people and their ability to pay, is a good point. We are in the process of reducing a lot of our cut price subscription deals basically because of that. I think for too long, for far too long, not just the *Age* but papers in general, got caught on this bug that circulation was the be-all and end-all – that you put out a figure, and look how good we are. And thankfully Fairfax has woken up to this. We were paying basically, for people to take the paper rather than getting them to pay for it, so where, as you would appreciate in running a business, it gets to a bit of a sticky point is, where are the levels of price sensitivity? What will people pay for? What we’re currently modelling for the iPad, may become indicative in a reverse sense for the paper. We’re now spending months and months working our price sensitivity issues about the iPad – what should people pay for, what shouldn’t they pay for? What’s free, what’s a relationship we should have? Tell us what you like and don’t like and we can provide stuff, and what should be outright paid for? And you’re seeing some enormous shifts here. Rupert Murdoch is on the pay side of the dichotomy of the world, and Alan Rusbridger is on the free side. And Fairfax, in our view, we’re somewhere in the middle, trying to tenderly find the right steps and set a path that’s probably a bit of both. So I think over time you’ll see us kind of get higher yields from our print subscriptions and probably there’ll be higher rates to pay for the paper. And I think you’ll see us introduce forms of subscription to our digital products, probably this year, but in a considered way. And I do like your question.

**Robert Manne**

We’ve certainly got time for one more question.

**Question**

Sure, just briefly. I would like to highlight the concerns or sort of … in the online nature of particularly the *Age* and the difference between that and the paper version. It almost seems that the online website’s a tabloidization or a *Herald Sun* version of the *Age*, which is why I subscribe to the *Age* to get the print version, or the online digital edition of it. So that’s particularly to Paul but I suppose the panel.

**Paul Ramadge**

In the history of Fairfax, and in previous periods of CEOs, they decided for better or worse, to set up another arm of Fairfax, to create websites and to analyse what they should be and they did that away from Editors in Chief and so the theage.com.au, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the vast Australasian network has been set up in that vein. And what they found was that the propensity of younger people to go to websites versus older readers for a start, they’ve discovered a male bias in websites, they have broadened the reach of the *Age*’s voice in its totality. The *Age* has a 45+ evenly divided male/female skew, and our websites are ranging in the 35-38 year old stronger male positioning, and as a consequence, and as we’ve seen how they use the site and everything else, content is a bit more geared to the audience. How much sport do you want? How much business do you want? How much breaking news, versus how many longer pieces? How much commentary? The fundamental issue of tone however, between the website and the paper is in sharp focus right now. I’m actually looking at that now. Fairfax is just announced that the newsrooms of the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* will be fully integrated under one Editor in Chief in both cities by June 30 this year, so we’re kind of … what we’re doing is taking the opportunity to do all-of-newsroom look at what sort of journalism should be on each platform, what are the brand and tonal issues that we’re going to address, and in a way, very fundamentally, how many journalists should be on fast journalism, breaking news, snacking news, online, smart phones – and how many should be in deep armchair journalism that requires time and that requires the reader to actually spend time at it as well. So your point’s a good one. One final point on it is that Fairfax has I think in a sort of a per capita sense, one of the most monetised web networks in the world, compared with other major news organisations. Part of that’s been partly a braveness to extend the reach and the content of the offering. My personal view is that I think the paper and the online site will probably get closer in the near future.

**Robert Manne**

We have one final question, which will have to be pretty brief, and the answer as well.

**Question**

I’d like to say I’m one of those online during the week, and gorgeous newsprint and broadsheet on the weekends, so thanks for that analogy – it’s really nice. The question’s actually to Eric. You mentioned before the diversification of funding for journalism in particular, that’s obviously something we’re all looking at from all organisations. But you mentioned philanthropic support. I would be really interested to hear what your ideas are, very briefly, about how that would actually work, given that you wouldn’t want to set up any sort of process that would look like cash for opinions.

**Eric Beecher**

Well, there are some examples, very briefly, around the world including one here that’s just started recently, the *Global Mail* is funded by Graeme Wood, who’s a philanthropist, and he’s put fifteen million dollars over five years into an online, free online quality publication called the *Global Mail*. There was a twenty million dollar donation in the US to set up a kind of investigative journalism website called *ProPublica*. So there are a few examples, but I don’t think … and Paul might have a different view … I don’t think anyone imagines that the scale of funding that’s needed for daily quality journalist will ever be … will ever come from the philanthropic bucket, but it might contribute a bit.

… maybe Gina …

We might accept her.

**Paul Ramadge**

It might be a nice way to round out today is that if it’s accepted that mass media, once dominant, went through an atomisation process as the internet emerged and the power of the internet was unveiled, atomisation meaning niches were broken off and it just divided up a bit – if that’s accepted I think it’s reasonable to see that there’s a new level of convergence that’s also started to happen – a redefinition of what the new media is like, and I think it follows too that we may see some rationalisation of mainstream media this decade. I think significant opportunities for that – I don’t see it coming through a change in a share register, I see it more in terms of just an increasing awareness about viability. And I think that’s the emerging reality in Australia.

**Robert Manne**

Well, we thank you for those questions. We’d better fold up here. Can I say, thanks very much Mary for joining the panel. It’s nice to have a colleague with me on these occasions. But also thank you very much to Paul Ramadge and Eric Beecher on what I think has been a remarkably sophisticated and enlightening and generous occasion. I’ve learned a great deal, and I think the students and others here will also have learned a great deal about the reality and the hopes for newspapers and quality journalism.