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Title:

Speech at the 6th Annual Convention of Public Relations Institute of Australia

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SPEECH BY THE PREMIER, DON DUNSTAN, AT THE 6TH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF
PUBLIC RELATIONS INSTITUTE OF AUSTRALIA. 29.10.76.

Mr. Griffin, Mr. Malin, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen :

One of the skills in public relations - so I'm told - is never to let an opportunity to spread the message slip by ... so about my cook book

It's a great pleasure to be with you tonight and to take part in the sixth National Convention of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, and I would like to welcome interstate and overseas visitors to Adelaide.

Our city and the surrounding districts, particularly the wine producing areas to the north and the south, are, we think, about the most pleasant areas of Australia, and if that sounds like a bit of hard sell, it's meant to.

But you won't only hear that from me. South Australians are very proud of their State, so much so that most of them are unpaid public relations people for South Australia. I'm sure you'd agree that that form of persuasion is about the most effective.

Persuasion, of course, is the core of much of the communications industry which revolves around trying to influence people to buy something, think of certain topics in set ways and to approach political issues with particular ideas.

There are few areas of the communications industry which are not seen by sections of the community as being motivated to direct people's commercial, social and political actions.

Increasingly the methods and effects of the communications industry are being questioned within the community by people who are concerned at the effects of the whole range of persuasive influences on a person's ability or inclination to make an individual judgement of a product, issue or manifesto.

This questioning is properly concerned that the resources of the communications industry are largely available only to organisations with considerable economic and political power.

The facilities available to groups which wish to challenge social assumptions and offer alternative viewpoints or lifestyles are still nowhere comparable with the communications resources mobilised by what we could loosely call established social groups.

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This concern is an important part of the Global Challenge to Communicators - it is the Challenge of Accessibility.

Technically, communications have made enormous advances in the last ten to twenty years.

Television in Australia is only twenty years old, and the technical improvements have been very great, even if the content level prompted Phillip Adams to remark that Australia has not so much had twenty years of viewing, but rather the same year twenty times.

Radio has evolved both in its technical and programme scope, and newspapers have changed in their approach to news and in production process itself.

The changes have not occurred independently of other media, because the technical improvement of television in particular has forced radio and newspapers to change in ways which take account of the impact of television.

Looking at the changes in a technical sense, in television, in radio and newspapers there has been a parallel development of new technology which produces the same or better product with a much reduced labour force. The capital cost of new technology is high, but the economics of a steady reduction in the workforce make it possible and desirable, from a management point of view, to meet that cost.

Just to take newspapers: the effects of computer photo-setting, justifying and correcting have cut considerably the number of skilled printing tradesmen needed to produce a newspaper. The experience in America with fully computerised newsrooms and video-display terminals for reporters a pointer to what newspaper managements are aiming for in Australia.

The two distinguishing features of so much of the technological change in the communications industry - the reduction of people involved and the extremely high capital cost - have implications which go beyond the immediate problems of people who can see their skills being made redundant. These personal effects will be severe and, in their haste to implement cost saving technology, the managements of our media organisations should not forget the human results of their actions. Given the industrial relations records and attitudes to staff of many newspaper, radio and television organisations, they will need reminding fairly frequently.

For the community, the impact of this increasingly sophisticated technology is firstly that the decisions affecting how news, opinions and advertising will be communicated will be made by fewer people.

The effect of the second part of the process is that the facilities to put an opposite view with equal professionalism and quality are becoming more remote by reason of the cost of new technology.

This will be partly overcome in America by the nature of its more diversified communications industry which includes community owned or community accessible television and radio stations, and also by the fairness regulations which apply to the industry. The greater number of newspapers, and the willingness of some publishers to make machinery downtime available to community groups will alleviate again only partly, these effects.

Australia does not have the economic, intellectual or legislative conditions for that to occur in our communications industry.

Our small population, despite being the most urbanised in the world, is scattered in capital cities which are widely separated both geographically and culturally. We do not have individual community groups with sufficient funds to establish their own television or radio stations or newspapers, and it would be doubtful whether a market large enough to sustain such an operation could be found quickly enough to make any such venture viable.

There are a small number of Australian media outlets, mainly a few radio stations, which have some community ownership and are not economically structured purely as profit making ventures. They are very few and they still have to make a profit or course, and the pressures on them to profitable tempers any adventurous attempts in programming or making facilities available to community groups at a very low cost.

The result is that in general these stations tend to provide community services of a bland nature - there is no special connotation in that - and they follow orthodox commercial patterns in the rest of their operations.

Even stations such as 5UV in Adelaide can only give part of their time to community access, because they still have to service the prime purpose for their establishment, in this case the broadcasting of university material.

The challenge facing not only the communications industry, but the whole community is to find ways of allowing the entire range of opinions and beliefs in the community to be expressed in a way which informs as many people as possible.

The problem is largely economic, because quite simply a television station which presented such a range of programming, or a newspaper which did not follow conventional journalistic wisdom in its selection of stories would have a small audience, and almost certainly a large loss.

The community and your industry should be seeking to set up community and professionally owned media facilities, which would be available to various groups at a nominal cost.

A community owned and funded access television station or a similarly controlled bank of printing presses would encourage the exchange of ideas, and would make a greater flow of information available to the society.

These facilities would not take over the role of our established commercial information organisations, which would continue to work to formulas which have been proven successful, in their terms, in the past.

These community facilities would supplement and challenge - in an intellectual rather than a commercial sense - our existing communications organisations.

The community, through the Government, will have to take on this role simply because the commercial and political pressures which influence existing communications organisations to work against innovation or radical social approaches.

By making community funds available and subsidising the equipment, those influences would be removed and the level of discussion among the community on community issues improved.

As part of that process we must look at the way in which the community can gather, disseminate and discuss information and the way in which we can provide facilities to make those tasks more readily available to the whole of the community.

It is a challenge of accessibility and it is one of the most important challenges facing communicators today.

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