

# **11<sup>th</sup> Manning Clark Lecture**

## **Journalism - a career post mortem**

**Delivered by Chris Masters**

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Thank you for being here.

Thank you to the Clark family for the honour and my acknowledgment to the traditional owners and respect to elders past and present of all the tribes that converge on Australia's 'meeting place'.

Professor Clark remains a grand figure in this nation. We never spoke but I do recall nodding to him at the shops near here at Manuka and recognising the grand moment that I was in the presence of someone whose name and ideas would be familiar to my grandchildren.

A great teacher such as Manning Clark would advise me to speak of what I know. This as you know is counsel journalists don't always keep. I am from an industry of low regard, an industry in decline. I have long thought the main reason journalists poll so poorly on the reputation index is because of a widespread belief we appropriate the public's stories and reprocess them first of all for our own benefit. The public can attend and even enjoy the spectacle but that does not mean they will accord value and respect.

I will shock you now with a bold confession and admit that I like and for the most part admire journalists. I will further go where journalists are often told not to tread and challenge public opinion. Most journalists I see at work every day put public interest before personal gain. Most see their occupation as a vocation more than a job. Most become hardened to the reality that if we do our job properly our subjects will never approve of what we say. We attend to what the American author and journalist James Agee's described 'as the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is'. We know more than most that no one owns these stories nor do we have and should we have power over our own reputation. So we live with the opprobrium but the time has come I feel to sell ourselves just a little.

I am not going to talk so much about the politics of journalism as the psychology, of the mind of the industry, to leak something of the internal dialogue. I was always more attracted to storytelling that eschewed the soap opera of skirmishes for power and attended more to the classic question – why? What happened is important but for me, why it happened was always the more intriguing challenge.

We have trouble explaining the worth of what we do because so much of it is hidden in the abstract. Over a lot of years of looking into people's eyes you do get better at working out what is important, how to locate the truth, how to form the narrative and how to make it interesting.

My mother Olga Masters, a great reporter content to work in the provincial press and whose words continue to be translated into Russian, Italian and the like, would say the best stories are found in the human heart. I am sure she was saying not only in the heart of the subject but in the heart of the storyteller.

Some reporters operate to the good get principle. That is they see the game as largely driven by luck. If you wait long enough you will be there at the right time when the phone rings, and six months later you will mount the steps to receive that award. There is an argument that the Internet now delivers the opportunity to democratise newsgathering so that editors and reporters are no longer needed to make that judgment about what the public can know.

You can tell a lot about a reporter in the way they go about selecting a subject. Do you pick the story that puts you centre stage, that tells itself or do you take on something that might hurt a bit, but somewhere in the future assist public enlightenment?

The best approach I believe is the lawyers' cab off the rank system, which gives providence the choice. Of course the selection has to pass a basic test of being important and newsworthy and there will be practical considerations about whether you have the time and resources to give it a go. And if no one else knows you will know when you start assembling excuses to duck it.

The value of the approach is that we are more likely steered on a course of public interest. At first it might be, probably will be difficult, as you work through the conventional 48 hours news cycle, make the same phone calls as everyone else and get the same knock-backs. But then after time, as I so often found, you are into no man's land negotiating carefully a path connecting public interest with what the public find interesting, and soon you are in new territory and the story begins to come alive. The work can be exciting, and what is most exciting about news is its unpredictability. The most important round in any news organization, that does not as far as I know exist in any news organization, is the round devoted to what has not yet happened.

I often say to young reporters take on the jobs that advance your skills ahead of the jobs that advance your profile. Just as opinions are dangerous without an underpinning of fact, the spotlight is an equal hazard if you have nothing to say. The skills you develop along the way make every story you choose that much better. Patience will be required. These are skills that are not summonsed via Google.

Another virtue of the full immersion principle is it makes your work not just richer in content but fairer. Professor Manning Clark was better than a good researcher. Like every good teacher, lawyer, politician and so on, he knew how to form the narrative, how to tell the story. I think you do it by getting out there. By asking everyone you can find, by looking beyond the words to the way people live and behave. This is not work best practised in an office or forever before the computer. Our job is to put material on the net, rather take it off the net. When you become more confident about narrative you are less inclined to sideline competing information. You are not so frightened of complexity; indeed you may welcome the thickened weave of the story.

When the media criticises government for failing to communicate complex policy such as the emissions trading scheme you might wonder why the media does not spare a little criticism for itself. I thought it was our job to tell the story. I can think

of no more conspicuous failure of contemporary media than in the treatment of global warming. Time again you see the objective is to cast heat rather than light. It is another subject that is to be exploited rather than explained.

When you do a lot of years at Four Corners you recognise the world as complicated. The World Wide Web helps us access news from former forbidden territory and advances the public an opportunity to bypass the gatekeeper – to try to work it out for themselves. I am not sure many are keen to do so. In the United States there is recognition among my colleagues of the need for what they call explanatory journalism.

It emerges as reporters, who are every day asked to do more with less, begin the surrender of a sacred objective – the telling of the story. Reporters remain busy – even busier, as they assemble for picture opportunities, hunt for headlines and collect quotes. By my observation not many see there is the time to explain, because there is not the time to research.

Good research is at the heart of every good story. When I look back on a program I made in 1987 *The Moonlight State*, which helped a serious reform of policing and the transforming of Queensland I can see many elements contributing to what ultimately made a difference. But there is nothing like a fact. In this case it was revealed through one document, a record of a property transaction that linked the criminal cartel to the Police Commissioner. In those days it took weeks to access that document. In these days it would take minutes.

So it is a little hard to figure why more people aren't doing it – research that is. While it is certainly no magic cure, far from it, the Internet does make it easier. But instead of taking advantage of the web to improve primary research we more often use it to recycle and more thinly spread the little we know.

I can see a strong case for a collaboration of the news industry, most particularly the ABC with the universities to find a way to drive research back into mainstream journalism. I see a need for a resource centre that captures and marries skills, that shows people how to conduct primary research, that generates web-based tools to assist, that encourages greater and simpler access of public information.

I am a little embarrassed to admit how surprised I was after resigning from the ABC at how much I missed basic research tools and more general institutional support. It was suddenly easy to see why investigative reporting needs support, and not just the expensive support of legal assistance. When reporters operating independently are paid by the word there is an immediate disincentive to research. The more phone calls the less profit. The notion that the Internet liberates the citizen journalist to unlock the nation's secrets is certainly challenged by my experience. These stories aren't out there lightly concealed like Easter Eggs, they are mostly in plain sight. As I said it is the figuring that matters more than the finding.

So who is doing it? Who is undertaking this work? I have never been ready to kill off investigative journalism. It is still alive on the pages of our newspapers and in programs like Four Corners. The big changes are in the mind – in the way the industry thinks.

News is much more a business than a public service. Stories are more like commodities. Television is more the medium of choice. Television news like talk radio has a poor research base. While it is a good information medium the dominant personality is more and more the entertainer. As one reporter who covered the

Shapelle Corby trial told me, the job is becoming more about event management than reporting. The objective there in Bali was not so much to find out what happened as be there when a Corby burst into tears.

News editors are not always the first to decide where to send the camera. Media advisors in government and business do more of the stage management. Even the subjects are more like actors. When I worked on Jonestown, my book on media demagoguery, I saw media minders bypassing the press gallery and heading for the talkback demagogues to cut through with their key message. Now they head for the television studio via makeup in a quest to generate a magic moment where they come across as someone with whom you could share a beer.

When I look to see the breaking of the big stories, I see more the hand of government. When I started in investigative journalism in the 1980s there was no Independent Commission against Corruption, Corruption and Crime Commission, Police Integrity Commission, Crime and Misconduct Commission, Office of Police Integrity and so on. It was also a time when policing, in particular, needed a revolution and governments for too long had looked the other way. All across Australia influential police officers had torn up their contract with the public and gone to work for the people they were supposed to lock up. They had franchised the drugs trade. They were organizing armed holdups. They partook of in the summary execution of their collaborators when it was time to shut them up.

In 25 years policing has changed but we would be silly to imagine corruption has been extinguished. When I look for the big stories now you will often see they have been broken more often by government agencies. The Wollongong Council bribes affair is one of many examples. While I am hardly complaining about government accepting proper regulatory responsibility, I abhor the thought that this advances an opportunity for journalism to step back.

There have too many occasions when without a fourth estate check on power, government will continue to look the other way. When I was investigating corruption in the Queensland Police, I came upon the story of an aboriginal man serving a lengthy sentence for the murder of his girlfriend. The man, Kelvin Condren had confessed. The trouble was so too had another man after committing another murder in a different jurisdiction. What shocked me most about what was uncovered was how far the cover up had spread. A great many people in many areas of government knew Condren was innocent but rather than act on their conscience chose instead to protect the status quo.

While government was engaged in a cover up that allowed an innocent man to wither in gaol it is also true that the story came to my attention because of people in the system, on a government payroll. That is also the way of it. It is a funny system and thankfully truth is an escape artist. Investigative journalists most regular sources work in this same system that can be so devoted to keeping these secrets.

Getting the power balance right is critical. Reporters have to constantly work at maintaining management rights over information. No matter how many sources you develop over the years there is no doubt the best resource is your own capacity to judge information. As my contacts book grew I continued to work bottom up, that is undertaking the painstaking climb until I found the stronger branches.

Reporters can mistakenly believe that when they reach the point where they can speed dial the minister's advisor that the climbing becomes unnecessary. In my own experience, as sources go, the top level ones are rarely the best. They will more

likely tell you only what they want you to know, and perhaps without you realising it step by step, leak by leak, a take over of management rights occurs.

Low-level sources might be helpful but another risk emerges that their knowledge and perspective is limited. Journalists tend to love whistleblowers because they can fast track important information, but there is a similar risk at play. Over the years I developed an operating principle of preferring to find the whistleblower rather than have them find me.

The best sources by far are the mid level ones. They are more likely to tell you what their boss would prefer you did not know, and they are more likely to know what they are talking about. And for what it is worth there are plenty of excellent ones right here in Canberra. There might be a few more of the Godwin Gretch types too, but for what it is worth if this nation has a natural home for investigative reporters it is here.

While as an industry, journalism is slow to develop the investigative potential of communications technology by facilitating primary research rather than so eagerly peering into Lara's shower cubicle, government has embraced technology to a point where the public could begin to worry. The capacity of government to spy on its people, to share intelligence and keep secrets has grown massively in the last decade.

Again I am not complaining about government accepting responsibility to match and defeat the skills of suicide bombers, drugs traffickers and money launderers. I worry about an imbalance where the strength of independent reporting fades to a point where no one has the time, the space and the skills to confront the important stories.

As I have said, journalists do a very poor job communicating their worth. As an industry we do our best to resist the habit of government to continue to limit press freedom and prosecute reporters for taking important risks. We have a strong conflict of interest when it comes to advocating the rights of privacy. We are a quarrelsome lot and often absurdly competitive. But still I maintain my affection.

Like the government, we are supposed to work first of all for the public so that at least unites us. So does mutual recognition of the power in an important story and the need for that story to be told.

We are already quietly uniting in resisting the race to the bottom. Journalists are already keeping newsbreaks from their editors in order to defy the push for a splash. I know of competitors who sometimes secretly collaborate in order to give the public something better. We know the rise of commentary is not driven by public demand. Under researched over opinionated columnists are not employed because they are bright and bold. They are employed because even with their high salaries they are cheaper, far less expensive than investigative journalists, who can't so reliably deliver because they live in a real world rather than one of contrived certainty.

The pundits do have an influence, perhaps less on the public as their own industry. I hate to think of an outcome where young journalists lose sight of true reporting, that is identifying, researching and telling the story. I worry about the 'what to think' becoming more important than the 'how to think', that young reporters believe they will be honoured more for original analysis than an ability to uncover a fact.

Every day you hear the talk. In ten years' time there may be no local daily, no 'Australian' and a further shrunken one-newspaper market. Presumably we will still have the ABC, but the ABC will not be fortified by weakened competition. With the clear exception of programs like Four Corners the ABC is not as strong an investigate reporter as print media.

I hope more journalists collaborate to defend good journalism and I hope the public rallies with us.

*Chris Masters 4/3/2010*