

# THE CHANGING FACE OF MEDIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Frank Baker  
Guest Co-Editor

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It has been a genuine pleasure to have collaborated with my colleague David Considine in editing this issue of *Telemidium*. We have sought out some of the brightest minds and writers in addressing issues of media, democracy and citizenship. This issue of *Telemidium* was produced with the classroom teacher in mind: please let us know what you think of it.

At lunch recently, my colleague, a columnist for the local newspaper, asked me: "what do you think is wrong with newspapers today?" My answer was "everything." From fabricated news stories to "new media" competition to hyped-up circulation figures, the newspaper business is in a crisis, I opined.

He went on to ask what I thought his paper should do to attract young people. (I'm guessing the Newspapers-In-Education initiative and the Sunday kids section aren't doing it!) I surmised that young people don't read the newspaper because it is not relevant to their lives, and that they are not the demographic so desirable by advertisers. If they're not reading, how can they possibly be involved or participate in public life?

That started a longer discussion about how young people can't possibly be getting a balanced view of their community, let alone their world, by just reading one newspaper.

We know that what young people understand about their world comes mostly from what they see, read and hear. The Sixth Annual Uhlich Teen Report Card confirmed this: more than half of American teens say that television

has the greatest influence on their opinions about world, national, and local events. "Roughly 56 percent of teenagers get their views of the world from television, and 11.5 percent from newspapers. The Internet influences 8.8 percent about the news, and magazines come in last, at 3 percent."<sup>1</sup>

But what are they paying attention to? And do they understand the changing role of the press/media in 2004? And what about their teachers: have they been properly prepared to integrate news into instruction?

A recent Pew Study revealed that habits of news consumers (adults and young people) are changing drastically. An excerpt: "The age gap in newspaper readership continues to widen. Six-in-ten Americans age 65 and older say they read a newspaper on a typical day, compared with just 23% of those under age 30."<sup>2</sup>

In this issue of *Telemidium*, we take note of the continuing trend by many young people who get their news from sources such as MTV, Comedy Central and late night talk show hosts: Jon Stewart, David Letterman and Jay Leno (just to name a few). These programs thus continue to attract political candidates (and others) with messages targeted to young people. (e.g. candidate Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on the now-defunct Arsenio Hall show.)



The emergence of “convergence” in media has also impacted journalism. Non-mainstream news sources, news criticism and web logs (“blogs”) are giving readers new places to get alternative points-of-view. Some mainstream newspapers had to be kicked into the digital age, creating web versions of their dailies and requiring reporters to file stories (and images) for online readers. The companies that own most of the media had to re-examine policies, practices and advertising for the new digital century.

The just completed political conventions garnered their lowest ratings in years. Not surprisingly, the main networks again abandoned gavel-to-gavel coverage, ceding that to cable and PBS. (Fox News Channel, CNN and PBS all reported higher than normal ratings for their convention coverage.) One major network, ABC, moved most of its coverage to the “new media” with complete coverage on digital television and its partner AOL. Many newspapers and Internet news sites report spikes in readership during the convention weeks.

As teachers (and students) of media, we also need to be cognizant of the fact that decisions about whether to broadcast gavel-to-gavel coverage (or ANY news story) are sometimes governed by whether it will secure the news operation higher ratings (larger audiences= more profits). Let us be reminded that one of the major principles of media literacy is that the media are primarily interested in power AND profits. So what happens when the bottom line becomes more important than journalism?

“Media literacy” and “media education” are today more important than ever. It should be some relief that increasingly more states are including media literacy in their teaching standards. But, at the same time, many aren’t providing teachers with the necessary training nor instructional support materials. Those of us in media education have much work still to do.

In the face of this, I was pleased when the president of the National Council for Social Studies, Denee Mattioli advocated for media education at the National Media Education Conference in 2003:

“Our Founding Fathers understood that a democratic republic could not survive without an informed and participatory citizenry...It is essential in our citizenship role to view critically, analyze, ask powerful questions and draw our own conclusions. Media literacy, then, is essential to the citizenship role.”

In conclusion, let me repeat a phrase first put forth by the original board of the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) when it drafted its own definition of media literacy. It ends with the phrase “making media literacy an essential life skill for the 21st century.”<sup>3</sup>

I could not agree more. •

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ucanchicago.org/reportcard/PressRelease.htm>

<sup>2</sup> June 8, 2004, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=215>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.amlainfo.org/medialit/index.php>

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## BEYOND OUR BORDERS

By David Considine  
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The 2004 presidential election has dominated headlines if not television ratings in the United States this year. At the same time the U.S. media have given scant attention to elections in other countries, despite the fact that the results of those elections sometimes impact this nation. A case in point from earlier this year was the defeat of the pro-Bush Spanish government and the withdrawal of Spanish soldiers from Iraq by the new Prime Minister. Only at the end did the U.S. media attempt to explain the mood of Spanish voters to the American public.

Throughout the year elections have also been scheduled for Venezuela, Afghanistan and Chechnya. National Public Radio and other outlets did belatedly cover the vote in Venezuela with a focus on the result the Bush administration hoped for (and did not get) and American oil interests that may well have been behind the attempt to recall that nation's president.

On August 29th, embattled Australian Prime Minister, (and Bush ally) John Howard called an election to be held on October 9th. Once again the announcement drew little attention from the U.S. media despite the fact that the U.S.-Australian alliance and Bush administration attempts to influence Australian voters, had been controversial front page news in that country for months.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, U.S. ambassador to Australia Tom Schieffer, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and the president himself had all made public comments about the result they wanted from the Australian election. Bush had said that a Labor victory would be “disastrous.”



Central to the controversy was the fact that new Labor leader Mark Latham, had declared his intention to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq if Labor was elected. The U.S. reaction was provoked in part by the vehemently anti-Bush rhetoric of the Leader of the Federal Opposition (Latham) who had at one point described George W. Bush as “the most dangerous and incompetent president in living memory.” One might think that would get the attention of the American news media.

Responding to U.S. criticism of Labor policy, Latham had said, "I'd ask these commentators overseas to respect Australia's democratic processes just as we respect theirs, and basically stick to their own election campaign and arrangements."

Adding fuel to the fire, some of the most distinguished leaders in the region, including former conservative (Liberal Party) Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, also saw fit to comment on the situation. New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said that "Australians have to debate themselves about who is best to lead them... other people should stand back." Victorian Premier, Steve Bracks said, "I thought our relationship was more advanced, more mature and more well-developed."

Former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating accused the Bush administration of "unwarranted and untimely partisan intervention in the Australian political debate" adding that, "beating up on friendly foreign political parties is not only unsightly it is also dumb and counter productive."

Keating may have had a point. A June poll suggested that the "Bush attack on Labor turns off voters." 56% of voters thought the President was wrong to comment on the Australian election. Younger voters were inclined to report that Australia was too close to the U.S.

Young people in Australia have been turning away from the traditional parties and tilting towards the Green Party. Many of them opposed the war in Iraq and protested during the Bush visit to Australia and his address to the parliament in Canberra.

Australian youth do tend to vote because voting is compulsory. But does the current government actually want them to vote? *The Age* reported earlier in 2004 that the conservative Liberal government intended to close the electoral roll as soon as the election was called. "Young people," they said, "are the great unwashed of the electorate—ignored, rarely spoken about, and never, ever spoken to."

David Buckingham's essay, *Children as Citizens*, included in this issue addresses the possible consequences when politicians and the media fail to position young people as political entities meaningfully engaged in the decisions of their nation.

Growing up in Australia, at a time when people my age were being conscripted to serve with the U.S. in Vietnam, I savored my first vote. For 23 years Labor had been out of power. Two nights before that fateful election (December 2, 1972), I attended a political rally and shook hands with Edward Gough Whitlam. 48 hours later Whitlam's revitalized Labor Party would sweep to power. By midnight Whitlam had commenced the process of releasing the conscientious objectors from the nation's prisons.

Australia was on a new path. But the status quo did not approve. Space does not allow me to chronicle the events of those tumultuous times. Note simply that on November 11, 1975 Australians woke up and went to work with a Labor government they had twice elected. That same night, without the electorate casting a single vote, Labor had been removed from office in what amounted to a constitutional coup d'état.

Although the media did not technically bring down that government they created the climate in which it could take place. Graham Freudenberg's, *A Certain Grandeur* and Paul Strangio's, *Keeper of the Faith*, both refer to "intimidation" from "the Murdoch papers" including the "most unscrupulous practices" of the *Daily Telegraph*.

Almost 30 years later, Citizen Murdoch's empire has expanded well beyond its base in my homeland. The manipulation and misrepresentation of news in this nation is well chronicled in *Outfoxed*, the new documentary from Robert Greenwald.

And it's not just the Murdoch media. Cable News Network talk show host, Larry King, like many other American media commentators, repeatedly referred to Australia's support for the war when his guest was Prime Minister John Howard. Little reference was made to the sizeable anti war movement in Australia or more importantly to the formal opposition to the war in the Australian Senate which the government did not control.

In Australia, journalist Max Suich has identified a disturbing trend in journalism. In August of this year he wrote that "Radio and tv news and the news pages of our newspapers are now mostly an unobstructed conduit of news events and official statements from both government and opposition." The decline of critical inquiry and analysis, he added, has "assisted... thoughtlessly rather than conspiratorially... a successful American intervention to manipulate a change in Labor policy on Iraq."

Back in the States, the American news media almost entirely failed to inform the public of a significant development in Australia earlier this year. Before Australian troops actually arrived in Iraq they were told in an official briefing that Iraq did not have the capability to use weapons of mass destruction. Why were American troops and the U.S. public deprived of this information?

In September of this year polls showed Labor's vote up in every state, in every age group, among both males and females. But six weeks is a long time in politics especially in a political system where voting is both compulsory and preferential, with 2nd preferences being very influential. It was also proving to be a volatile campaign in the rough and tumble tradition of that nation. In a highly publicized, signed statutory declaration, for example, a member of the Prime Minister's own party referred to him as a "lying rodent" and complained that "we've got to go off and cover his arse again." When the Australian Embassy in Jakarta was bombed in September, polls began to record a shift in public attitudes and a swing back to the conservative government. It would not be the first time fear of "the enemy without" had been exploited for political purposes.

Should Labor be elected on Oct 9. It could be interpreted as an anti-America or more accurately anti-Bush vote. As such it might well become injected into the presidential debates and the final weeks of the U.S. campaign.

Once again Americans will be left trying to catch up and put together the pieces of the news puzzle, lurching with the limited attention span of the news media, from one incident and crisis to the next with little in the way of the coherent commentary, analysis or context, so crucial to informed and responsible participation in a democratic system.

For more on Australian politics visit [www.alp.org.au](http://www.alp.org.au) and [www.liberal.org.au](http://www.liberal.org.au)

