

## Murdoch's Flagship



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The First Twenty-five Years of the  
*Australian* Newspaper

Denis Cryle

with assistance from Christina Hunt



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## Preface

This overdue project maps the uneven and uncharted formation of the *Australian* newspaper over three decades as an innovative national broadsheet in an industry traditionally dominated by state-based publications. While the Fairfax and Packer media groups have received detailed historical coverage,<sup>1</sup> Murdoch's News Limited and the *Australian* have not been given the same systematic attention. This is not to say that the *Australian* has not been consulted by historians, political scientists and media scholars on a range of issues. Both Gavin Souter<sup>2</sup> and Bridget Griffen-Foley,<sup>3</sup> for example, have highlighted critical moments in the paper's history, while dramatic changes in national thinking after the government of Sir Robert Menzies have assured the *Australian* a place in recent accounts of the Vietnam War<sup>4</sup> and the Dismissal.<sup>5</sup> Among the general accounts of the 1960s and 70s, that by Donald Horne,<sup>6</sup> in particular, devotes some space to the media and to more sophisticated patterns of consumption related to the new social awareness, without providing detailed analysis of particular media outlets such as the *Australian*. More specifically, studies of the press<sup>7</sup> involving the *Australian* tend to be comparative and operate on the assumption that Murdoch's national daily differed little from its state-based competitors. Such an assumption obviates the need for more specific academic analysis of its history and performance and explains the need for the current study.

There remains a strong case for regarding the establishment of the *Australian* in 1964 as more than a stroke of opportunism on the part of its ambitious proprietor. Neither tabloid nor 'taken over' (like so many of the titles Murdoch acquired), it can be viewed as an exception, in both a personal and a market sense. Ken Inglis,<sup>8</sup> in a prescient analysis borne out by Murdoch's early directives to *Australian* staff, indicates the extent to which the decision to go national would affect the aspiring paper's reportage, ranging across politics, finance, the arts and sport. To invoke Benedict Anderson,<sup>9</sup> the *Australian* and its outlook offered both its readers and journalists a fundamental change in the way the print community constituted the nation. Chapter 1 demonstrates that its journalism, however uneven, helped to redefine the nation in social and cultural as well as

more conventional political terms, accelerating a transfer in responsibility from state-based policies and administrations towards greater federal involvement. No less important was the paper's increased attention to international affairs, documented in Chapter 4, at a time when the White Australia policy and British legacy were still paramount. During the eventful 1960s and 70s, the advent of national commentary, pioneered by George Munster and Tom Fitzgerald's *Nation*,<sup>10</sup> offered journalism new and more critical possibilities. In attempting an overdue academic analysis, this study eschews a chronological narrative in favour of thematically organised chapters, in part because of the sheer density of issues and developments.<sup>11</sup>

The 25-year time frame adopted for the study is important for several reasons, not least because of the paper's protracted struggle for economic viability. That the *Australian* ran at a loss for several decades is not widely known and justifies a longer time frame than the paper's remarkable volte-face during the 1975 political crisis. By 1989, the end of the period covered by this book, there was ample evidence that the *Australian's* long march to viability rated as one of the group's significant achievements—celebrated at the time of its twentieth-fifth anniversary as News Limited's Australian flagship. As for the vastly different period from 1989 to the present, any worthwhile coverage could only be achieved by the publication of another book.

In retrospect, the newspaper's foundational narrative and the initial decision to locate the paper in Canberra were reinterpreted within the News group as a triumph of will on the part of its underdog proprietor rather than a misguided business decision by the 'boy publisher'. This ongoing task of self-definition and self-justification, aided by a series of editors and influential columnists, was more marked in the uncertain world of the *Australian* than among its established competitors. In the process, the paper engaged in active revisionism for commemorative and political purposes, reviewing and reinterpreting earlier events like Vietnam and the Dismissal. Such critical reflections, which confirm a steady shift from nationalism to internationalism by the late 1980s, anticipate, in most respects, the crusading *Australian* of the present day, for which freedom of the press is equated with opposition to government and individual political leaders rather than to large corporate interests.

The extensive literature devoted to the politics of the period and the 1975 constitutional crisis<sup>12</sup> confirms Murdoch's interventionism in both the affairs of the *Australian* and matters of state, and it goes some way to explaining the paper's dramatic reinvention from the outspoken liberal paper it became under Adrian Deamer to the crusading right-wing paper edited under Leslie Hollings. Yet the rapidity and extent of this transformation, attributed to Murdoch's own disillusionment with 'bleeding heart' liberal causes, require closer examination beyond the events of 1975. The issue of Murdoch's proprietorial influence is not in doubt, but the extent and nature of that influence during the transitional decade of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, at the time of News Limited's unprecedented overseas expansion, should not be automatically assumed. The 1987 election, analysed in Chapter 6, complements the analysis of the 1975 drama and confirms the rise of radical right-wing ideologues and the influence of conservative think tanks on the paper while maintaining a liberal counter-voice in Paul Kelly and the Canberra bureau.

In documenting the making and remaking of the *Australian* over these three eventful decades, the book sets out to provide much more than a biographical study of one man's changing views and extensive business acquisitions. Instead, it adopts an organisational framework in which personalities and power play a dynamic and at times destabilising role. The *Australian's* content and its at times erratic development are perceived as the complex outcomes of managerial, editorial and production decisions, involving Murdoch, his executives, editors, journalists and printing staff; a variety of these players feature at any one time. The relationship between Murdoch and Newton is a case in point. Even in the long period of Hollings's editorial control, animated discussion and debate continued over editorial policy. If Murdoch himself fostered 'creative tension' within the organisation, through rival appointments within and across the group, tensions were also generated 'from below', as the national strikes of 1975–76 and 1979–82, discussed in Chapter 3, confirm. To understand these complex forces, one has to look beyond their proprietor to the experiences of the journalists, editors and executives, at times united in the desire to get the paper out, at other times deeply divided over editorial policy as well as workplace change. To this end, the present project not only synthesises a vast amount of secondary

material but has also drawn on extensive interviews with former and present staff in conjunction with a detailed reading of the *Australian's* voluminous newspaper files.

Murdoch's verbal instructions to his executives and editors acted as a set of unwritten directives, to be filtered by editors and executives on location, leaving the historian little in the way of written evidence. Yet despite the absence of substantial archives, there remains a powerful oral culture to be tapped for research purposes in order to articulate the voices that helped make the *Australian*—namely, the journalists, editors and readers who created and sustained it over a prolonged period. Similarly, the published reminiscences of senior Australian writers like Mungo MacCallum<sup>13</sup> and Hugh Lunn<sup>14</sup> act at certain points as a necessary corrective to uncritical narratives within the organisation. This is especially crucial in periods of industrial or editorial tension, where the paper is likely to promote a version of events at variance with the experience of some of the main actors. Such tensions were not simply industrial but structural in so far as the journalists working away from its main operations in Sydney struggled to have their stories included or their voices heard. In this respect, the *Australian* enterprise continued to operate as a network in the modern sense, albeit a centralised one in which coverage was perceived by staff interstate as slanted in favour of its Sydney or Canberra offices. But in 1964, such an idea seemed 'wild' indeed.

## Notes

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- 4 Trish Payne, *The Australian Press and the Vietnam War. An analysis of policy and controversy 1962–1969*, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, October 1995.
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- 6 Donald Horne, *Time of Hope: Australia 1966–72*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1980.

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