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The last of punchy current affairs: Profile interview: Mark Davis, Dateline, Special Broadcasting Service

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Abstract

Mark Davis, former presenter for the Special Broadcasting Service international current affairs program, Dateline, is about to go back on the road, returning to what he does best as a sole-camera investigative journalist. After two years presenting for the program he looks forward to again travelling and attending the whole production of sole camera journalism – research, interviewing, camera and editing.

Before becoming a television journalist Davis was a documentary filmmaker and before then, a lawyer. He is one of Australia's foremost sole operating camerajournalists, after significant stories with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation current affairs programs, Foreign Correspondent and Four Corners. He has won five Walkley's (Australian award for excellence in journalism), including the prestigious Gold Walkley for Blood Money - a sole camera 'brand-name' report on the funding of pro-Indonesian militias in East Timor.

In 1997 he won a World Medal at the New York Film and Television Festival for his television current affairs journalism in Afghanistan. His other Walkley Awards were for stories on the famine in North Korea, the aftermath of the tsunami in Papua New Guinea and Blood on the Cross, a remarkable investigation into the killing of West Papuan villagers by British SAS, with the complicity of the Red Cross.

Arriving into current affairs through an across profession osmosis, Davis has a range of perspectives and skills of use to journalism. Documentary filmmaker and journalism educator, David Blackall filed this report after an interview with Davis in a Sydney alfresco café on a sunny Tuesday November morning, as a nationally significant horse race in Melbourne was getting underway.

The Last of Punchy Current Affairs



Profile Interview:

Mark Davis

Dateline, Special Broadcasting Service

Mark Davis, former presenter for the *Special Broadcasting Service* international current affairs program, *Dateline*, is about to go back on the road, returning to what he does best as a sole-camera investigative journalist. After two years presenting for the program he looks forward to again travelling and attending the whole production of sole camera journalism – research, interviewing, camera and editing.

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Arriving into current affairs through an across profession osmosis, Davis has a range of perspectives and skills of use to journalism. Documentary filmmaker and journalism educator, **David Blackall** filed this report after an interview with Davis in a Sydney alfresco café on a sunny Tuesday November morning, as a nationally significant horse race in Melbourne was getting underway.

Blackall: Your story on the funding of militia in East Timor [*Blood Money*] was well sourced, to the extent that it adhered to ‘the three source rule’. I mean a journalist shouldn’t run the story unless they have a range of separate sources - interviews, substantiated documents, in *Blood Money* you found ledgers, and confessions. This is in keeping with strategies taught in journalism education as a way of maximising the veracity in the story.

The Neil report [after the Hutton report] in the UK, indicated that some critical stories had problems with accuracy in this way. For instance, Andrew Gilligan’s BBC radio story on WMD was flawed in this way, the late Dr David Kelly was the only source, and was an anonymous source, he was the only expert to the story. This was structurally flawed and yet the BBC ran it. Do you think that the sole operator video journalist mechanism with *Dateline*, and that many of you are filmmakers, has inherent problems with this singleness, in respect to sources and a singular perspective in the lone ranger video journalist?

Davis: No, the same rules and ethics apply whether you are working by yourself or with a team. In some ways those issues are heightened for a solo operator – who can’t hide behind a corporation or the shared responsibility of a group of producers. You have an individual responsibility that goes beyond merely adhering to the letter of the ‘guidelines’. The ‘levelling factor’ in all of this is not an adherence to the code of ethics of the Media Entertainment Arts Alliance, but the journalist’s reputation, their judgement by their peers and by their audiences. Your reputation is at stake every time you do a story, the success of which ensures, or otherwise, the making of the next story.

Blackall: And this ‘levelling factor’ is especially the case with contract employment with ‘shoe string’ or low budget current affairs like SBS?

Davis: Yes, reputation can be a legal and ethical stabiliser but that has nothing to do with the budget of the programme. *Dateline* reports are more personalised than most television reports. You are staking your reputation on your story and this becomes your ‘brand’ or signature in a similar way to a feature columnist in a newspaper. News can be bland and neutral in its role of informing the public, but current affairs should have levels of subjectivity and argument, a position that will take the story further with depth and colour.

By their nature, *Dateline* stories are clearly more personalised. It is an observational format and the specific journalist is clearly the observer – he or she isn’t there just to do a voice over. They are in the middle of the action...and so is the audience. This style has a documentary heritage but it is not unprecedented in current affairs. This was the style of the ABC’s *Four Corners* in the mid 1960s. Stylistically, it was a groundbreaking programme then. Australian documentary at that time was fairly turgid, even in the so-called ‘experimental’ sector. Oddly enough it was *Four Corners* that enthusiastically adopted the new *cinéma vérité* style coming out of more radical film movements in France and the USA. The cameras and sound gear were lighter. Crews were freed from the studio and the sit down interview and *Four Corners* pounced on that technical opportunity. The camera could move, it could be on the street, it could be in your face. It could reveal real events and subjects’ reactions to them. That spirit died in the 1970’s. But it is a style we often apply on *Dateline*. The small DV cameras we use lend themselves to this approach.

Background: The issues worth discussing here are well illustrated by William Rountt in his paper, *The Truth of the Documentary*. Rountt proposes that television journalism tells the story, the facts and details, while documentary film and current affairs, with longer durations, use creative film techniques of fiction, and attempt to answer more open-ended questions. There are two types of truths applying to these sorts of filmic texts - moving-image camera-journalism and documentary. The first, *reference*, largely in video based news texts, is practical and journalistic. If this was adopted as the sole source of information, then it may prevent people from discovering a truth that news journalism by its short nature usually fails to completely reveal. Journalism, a precursor to history, with its implied objectivity, cannot always lead to the informing of deeper and hidden truths that Rountt proposes as the more complex - *sense*.

Blackall: Current affairs then, does it take journalism stories further than news and so a more complex truth emerges?

Davis: News is different to current-affairs. Current-affairs conveys a different voice - it shouldn't be afraid to put a case or an argument, to be assertive and forthright - the sorts of things that horrify news people. In television news, 'balance and objectivity' is now the Holy Grail. But in a major investigative report the complexity of what is unfolding can't be illustrated just by 'he said, she said' reporting. A position can be taken and analysis given to make sense of a mountain of facts.

And good television also has a truth that comes through the visuals – what you are seeing, what you are experiencing. It's not just in the words, it's in the eyes. Often, more people have read my current-affairs scripts online (www.sbs.com.au/dateline) than having watched the *Dateline* piece itself. These scripts race around the internet to an international audience but the readers are missing the experience and depth of the film. When I read my own scripts the words and interviews are fairly sparse... the real meaning of being there, seeing it for yourself, has gone.

Background: From SBS TV On-line script, *Archives* – broadcast October 13, 2004, 20th Anniversary for *Dateline* [<http://www.sbs.com.au/dateline/>]

His first story for *Dateline*, entitled *Blood Money*, Davis simultaneously shamed the Indonesian government and showed that international aid money was used to fund the militia's killing in East Timor and that the source of the funds, the World Bank, did nothing to stop it.

EXTRACTS FROM 'BLOOD MONEY' (2000):

MARK DAVIS: The handiwork of the Indonesian army is fairly plain to see and their involvement has been the focus of most inquiries to date. But were Indonesia's generals acting as rogue elements in East Timor or under orders? Were the war criminals in the government itself? . . .

MARK DAVIS: In a forest west of Dili, Filomena's husband is unearthed. His wife and children now know how he was killed with his ears cut off and his head caved in. But in a ledger in the Department of Finance, this is not a grave, it's a road project or a canal. Not a murder, but a public service.

MARK DAVIS: Who did you imagine was paying them?

ALI ALATAS, FORMER INDONESIAN FOREIGN MINISTER: I don't know.

MARK DAVIS: Well, you must have had some suspicion. Who did you imagine was paying...

ALI ALATAS: Why should I have suspicions? We are - the government...

MARK DAVIS: Because people are dying there...

ALI ALATAS: No.

MARK DAVIS: You've made pledges to the...

ALI ALATAS: People are dying and we were against it.

ALI ALATAS: Let's put the blame where the blame should reside.

MARK DAVIS: Well, where should the blame reside?

ALI ALATAS: Probably with those who are wielding the machetes and who are wielding the guns and so on.

Blackall: When you make current affairs programs in a direct cinema way, it is a hard act to follow, I mean it makes news programming look rather bland in comparison.

Davis: A lot of TV News is bland – often a diary-like account of the activities of government leaders. This is a news style that used to be evident in much of Asia and various minor dictatorships. Not so much hard Soviet style propaganda, more of commercial and developmental journalism. We used to sneer at it and now it's come to Australia. And it is likely to get worse. Only current affairs programmes are allowed to have a voice and the tolerance for that voice may not continue.

The tide is running against good punchy current affairs. There has to be enormous will on behalf of network management to justify investigative current affairs. It's expensive, and marketing departments would rather sell soapies and if [good punchy current affairs] is good it makes trouble. Networks, private or public, don't want trouble. They want ratings. They don't want phone calls from angry Ministers, bomb threats and ABA [*Australian Broadcasting Authority*] complaints. It's much easier to fill the requirements of the network's charter by simply doing news.

A strong current affairs programme used to be the cornerstone of every network. Channel 10 discovered they could drop it completely...cartoons were cheaper and rated quite well. Current affairs became a joke at Channel 7 after their last hurrah with *Witness*. Good luck to them I guess, they are private networks. If they don't see commercial value in making intelligent programmes, if the public don't have an expectation that they should do so, then they will continue to wither. But more disturbingly even the public sector is contracting. SBS plugs along making the best of what is has, and it's unlikely we'll see any growth at the ABC.

Blackall: Depressing. So where does, where will good journalism and dissent occur?

Davis: In newspapers there may be conservative agendas inherent to the owners, but a strong dissenting view can still be allowed. The *Australian* has Philip Adams and

the SMH (*Sydney Morning Herald*) has columnists like Alan Ramsey, and on-line Margo Kingston. This is unknown in TV current affairs. There is no parallel to that newspaper culture which gives a voice to the eccentricities of individual journalists. There are very few signs of authorship, of branding, with each signature-journalist inscribing their 'voice' into the piece. [Meaning] Voice in the literal sense and also as an identifiable camera and editing style. SBS *Dateline* has this real signature, or branding. We are the only ones consistently doing that.

Background: Blog review from Crikey.com.au

Meanwhile, over at *Four Corners* on Monday, Chris Masters made headlines for exposing a few minor ATO crooks.

The contrast between the two shows is direct: on *Four Corners*, Masters employs extras from Central Casting to prance around in SARS masks - meant, apparently, to illustrate "phantom" taxpayers - and, inexplicably, shoots much of his program in a pub.

Dateline sends its journalists, armed with light, hand-held cameras, into real trouble spots. The result is minimalist and powerful journalism.

With *Four Corners* descending into melodrama, and the terrible twins, ACA and Today Tonight, long ago having given up on real journalism, SBS and Channel Nine's Sunday stand as beacons of TV reporting excellence.

It's a lesson *Four Corners* should learn. There's good reporting going on in there somewhere in the ABC's investigative reporting flagship. But, for a start, Masters' story should have been cut to 25 minutes and there would have been plenty of room for the kind of panel discussion that *Dateline*'s Davis conducted last night on the Australia's self-assigned role as US Deputy Sheriff in the South Pacific.

Dateline is setting the pace, with Jennie Brockie's *Insight* not far behind, and *Four Corners* labouring for relevance.

Blackall: How does SBS maintain this seemingly healthy independence when both the commercials and the ABC (television) seem to be so compromised?

Davis: SBS is in a unique position amongst public broadcasters. It has never had to appeal to a mass audience. It may choose to do so now but that has never been its job. And it also has a unique mix of funding. SBS dodges both the agendas of private owners and the total financial control of governments. Commercial income has ironically provided it with more opportunities for independence - theoretically it shouldn't be so easy to bully. In many ways it is the freest of any broadcaster in Australia, it should choose it's own destiny. It will only ever homogenize if management decides to do so.

Endnotes

- 1 Routt, W. 1991, "Introduction: The Truth of the Documentary in Continuum", in Alec McHoul (ed) *The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, Vol.5 No.1. Delivered originally as part of "The Line Between Documentary and Fiction", an event organized in 1987 by the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in Melbourne, p. 1.
- 2 Kelly, H. 2003, Never worked in TV (Crikey's media critic Hugo Kelly may never have worked in TV - but he knows what he likes in current affairs), 03 July 2003. [Accessed 3 November 2004. <http://crikey.com.au/media/2004/10/14-0003.html>]