



PROFILE

Derryn Hinch

I hate moralistic diatribes, but for Derryn Hinch I'm almost prepared to make an exception. With years of experience behind him in print, radio and television, he has now become a grotesque parody of all that is disturbing about journalism at its most manipulative and cynical.

Hinch at Seven is unashamedly 'infotainment'. His national producer has described it as "hit and run journalism" and "tabloid TV" (*SMH, Good Weekend* 1989). The hairy face of Big Brother fills up the screen and starts barking at us in a grating and relentless voice. Stumbling and mumbling, the Human Headline spews forth a stream of punchy one-liners which make the *60 Minutes* house style of presentation seem lyrical and personal by comparison.

The stories are short. Three to four minutes on average. Punctuated by the hairy face. It's all about gut-wrenching human drama and moral indignation. There's no analysis and precious little information. A number of items appear to be abruptly truncated colour pieces designed to be wedged between the ads. It all adds up to formula journalism taken to its logical conclusion - bold headline, human hook, tear jerker, good pictures, aggressive editorial. It's gripping and it's irresponsible. His journalists ask questions that make you wince with shame. Surely no one can want to get ahead and pay the mortgage that much?

But so what? Criticising Hinch is like shooting a sitting duck. It's obvious. The only question worth asking is, does it matter?

When it comes to law and order I would argue that it does matter. It matters because Hinch is just an extreme example of a widespread problem - the problem of the symbiotic relationship between the media and politicians, and the way this relationship influences public policy. And public policy, of course, affects the lives of ordinary people in drastic and far-reaching ways.

An analysis of Hinch's crusading stance on issues like child abuse and drug trafficking provides a nasty illustration of how journalists can devastate the lives of individuals and promote attitudes and policies which can cause suffering to countless others. The plight of alleged drug traffickers in Malaysian prisons is a classic case in point.



Senior Malaysian government officials have made it clear that they are highly sensitive to the coverage of Malaysian affairs in the Australian media, particularly when Australian nationals are in custody in their prisons. Yet Hinch took an aggressive and blood-curdling stance in the Barlow and Chambers case prior to their hanging. He then repeated the performance during the crucial stages of Lorraine Cohen's trial for drug trafficking with her son, putting material detrimental to her case to air at the time her sentence was being considered.

Hinch is such an extreme case it is easy to be outraged and critical of his doubtful ethics. But let's face it, Hinch is hardly the only journalist who reiterates lazy-minded clichés with scant regard for their repercussions on the lives of powerless people. The culture of mass media journalism is fostering the 'Hinch' within us all.

NSW recently provided a glaring example of how 'media cliché' is read for 'public opinion' by politicians. The superintendent of Sydney's Minda Juvenile Detention Centre, Terry Halloran, was forced to take leave pending an inquiry into the escape of a boy who was allowed out jogging with the superintendent's dog. Now that's a story!

The Minister for Family and Community Services, Virginia Chadwick, was interviewed on Mike Carlton's show on Sydney radio 2GB. Mike was in full flight. Minda was "the government holiday camp". The escape was a "situation comedy" and "high farce". The staff must think they are running "Outward Bound". According to Mike, a lot of "bleeding heart social workers and wimps ... think they know best" and "heads should roll".

How does the minister react? "I know how you feel, Mike, and how the people in the community must feel because that is precisely what happened to me when I got the phone call to tell me," says Virginia. The minister eagerly asserts that she is aware of community feeling and that is why the superintendent and another staff member involved "are no longer here ... despite their long years of service". If the superintendent can't justify his actions "he'll be down to the CES I presume." Both Mike and Virginia were reinforcing popular misconceptions which, presumably, they both know to be incorrect.

Hinch's messianic sermons about crime and punishment are just an acute symptom of a widespread media problem.

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