The Trade Unions and the Media
by Allan Ashbolt

We are living at a time when the Fraser government has virtually declared war on the unions — class war of a peculiarly vindictive kind. And in this war, the government is using every propaganda weapon, every propaganda outlet it can find. If it succeeds in taming or terrorising the union movement, then the boundaries of political democracy will shrink to negligible proportions. For the union movement, despite its backslidings, mistakes and intra-mural wrangling, remains the spearhead of democratic action in this country and the measure by which democratic progress must be judged. Only the union movement, with its mass base and participatory processes, can contain and combat the pervasive power of capital. For us, as unionists, the problem always starts with capital and specifically with ownership and control of the means of production.
There seem to me to be several basic questions here:

(1) who owns the media organisations?
(2) who controls the output in press, radio and television? (3) what are the consequences for the trade union movement particularly, and for the cause of social justice generally? (4) what strategy should be adopted to deal with this whole problem?

The fundamental pattern of media ownership in Australia is well enough known, and is indeed a matter of some notoriety. Disregarding a few maverick publications, it’s reasonable to say that, at present, three groups — John Fairfax Ltd of Sydney, The Herald and Weekly Times Ltd of Melbourne and the News Corporation Ltd (the Rupert Murdoch group) — own nearly all the print media: the metropolitan dailies, the weeklies, the specialist magazines, various sorts of periodicals, and a fair number of provincial and suburban newspapers.

In the 1960s, when the union movement first looked at this problem seriously, Sir Frank Packer’s Consolidated Press was still a force to be reckoned with, but today his flag-carrier, the Sydney Daily Telegraph, is in the hands of Rupert Murdoch. The Packer group, under Sir Frank’s son, Kerry (for ownership in Australia tends to be concentrated in families), has cut back drastically on its newspaper holdings. The main print products of the Packer group are The Bulletin and The Women’s Weekly — and just let me mention incidentally that, for nearly twenty years, it also had a half-share in what was purportedly an ABC publication — TV Times. But the group’s strongest effort now goes into television.

**Contraction of ownership**

This contraction of ownership over the past ten years is hardly surprising. The economic push is continually towards monopolisation of resources, in order to reduce production and distribution costs. In the newspaper industry there has been an ever-increasing contraction of ownership since around 1900, and if Murdoch’s 1979 share raid on the Melbourne Herald had been consummated, there would now have been only a Big Two (Fairfax and Murdoch), instead of a Big Three. It’s worth noting, too, that the Melbourne Herald survived, mainly because of intervention by the Fairfax group, which moved in to acquire a 14.7 percent holding. In the coming ownership war, Fairfax and the Melbourne Herald will probably form an alliance on one side, with Murdoch and Packer (who are already partners in Lotto), on the other side.

What must be realised about the Big Three or the Big Four (however you like to characterise the situation) is that each has an enormously wide spread of ownership. It’s wide geographically — the Melbourne Herald is in every state except New South Wales and has been in Papua-New Guinea for years; Murdoch’s empire stretches beyond Australia to New Zealand, Britain and the United States, and he has recently bought the London Times; the Fairfax group, with its fifty-three wholly-owned or partly-owned subsidiaries, takes in the Melbourne Age, the Macquarie radio network and all-state franchise for Muzak, the piped music used for pacification purposes in so many offices and factories.

The ownership is wide, too, in range of outlets, covering not only press, radio and television, but numerous associated activities. Murdoch’s company, for instance, is the sole owner of Festival records; Fairfax and the Melbourne Herald are in pulp and paper manufacturing; the Melbourne Herald has long-standing ties with Hoyts Theatres Ltd, which has monopolised film distribution and exhibition for more than half a century.

The media often tend to be thought of in terms of newspapers, and within newspapers, of editorial opinion, political analysis and the high-minded imparting of information. But the interests of the media owners also encompass most aspects of what is commonly called entertainment — pop music, films (Murdoch has recently launched a film production company), paperback books, sport (as Kerry Packer has so effectively demonstrated with his World Series cricket), and of course television shows. The media
companies have become, in fact, multi-media conglomerates.

It’s also vital to understand that the media monopolies are locked into non-media business and trade. Fairfax, for instance, is closely connected with the Bank of New South Wales and the AMP Society; and the AMP Society is, in turn, a major shareholder in (if we consider only the television stations), TCN Sydney, ATV Melbourne, ADS Adelaide, TVT Hobart, QTQ Brisbane, BTQ Brisbane and TVQ Brisbane. The AMP’s holding in TVQ Brisbane comes, I might add, by way of Brambles Industries Ltd, Pioneer Concrete Services Ltd, Ampol Petroleum and Ansett Transport Industries. To take another example, the Murdoch group owns F.S. Falkiner and Sons, the big pastoral company; and last year sold its investment in the Alwest bauxite venture for a surplus of 15 million dollars, bought a half share in Ansett Transport Industries, and through Ansett, picked up a 15 percent holding in Santos Ltd, the South Australian gas and oil producer.

You may recall that, when Ansett, during the reign of the now forgotten Sir Reginald Ansett, was given the licence for a Melbourne television channel, it prompted the question from curious observers: why is an airline operator in television? Now that Murdoch is the joint owner of Ansett, one might just as easily ask: why is a media magnate in airlines? To which the answer is, in polite capitalist jargon: he is diversifying his interests. Or to put it more realistically, he is extending his financial reach in the cut-throat world of monopoly capitalism. And so far he seems, by his own standards, not to be doing too badly: the two-airline policy looks like being abandoned, in favour of deregulation; and the Broadcasting and Television Act has been changed, so as to allow him the licence for the ex-Ansett television station in Melbourne, without forcing him to give up Channel 10 in Sydney.

That is the world, the world of monopoly capitalism, in which the media organisations function. That is the world to which the media owners belong and from which they derive their values. That is the world they have helped to make, the world they are determined to preserve. In that world, it’s hardly strange that a media magnate is in airlines, any more than that non-media companies like BHP, the jam manufacturers Henry Jones Ltd, the Swan Brewery, the Bell Group and the National Mutual Life Association are in radio and television, as either licence-holders or investors. To convey some idea of how crucial the media have become to the world of monopoly capitalism, I need only list the companies lining up with the Packer group in a bid for control of the projected domestic satellite system: IBM, Conzinc Rio Tinto, the Colonial Sugar Refinery, Myer’s, Ampol Petroleum, the AMP Society, Thomas Nationwide Transport (Murdoch’s partner in Ansett), James Hardie Industries, Australian Consolidated Industries, and the one corporation often ignored in considering Australia’s media giants — Amalgamated Wireless of Australasia (AWA). AWA has been a maker and supplier of electronic equipment since around 1920, and its powerful presence is still to be found in 16 television stations and 12 radio stations, metropolitan and provincial, throughout Australia. For the media industry is merely part of the much more massive communications industry, dominated by electrical engineering companies like the Radio Corporation of America and Bell Telephone in the USA, and by AWA, EMI, Email and Philips in Australia.

The role of advertising

The media industry is directly linked to the world of monopoly capitalism through advertising. One social critic (Humphrey McQueen: Australia’s Media Monopolies, p.10) has argued, and I think convincingly, that the commercial mass media are not “news and features backed up by advertising”, but are, on the contrary, “advertisements which carry news, features and entertainment in order to capture audiences for advertisers”. Advertisements, we must remember, are the main revenue support of newspapers and magazines, the sole revenue support of radio and television.
For me, the typical — almost proto-typical — newspaper is *The North Shore Times*, one of the products in Rupert Murdoch's suburban chain. A copy is thrown into my garden once a week, free of charge, because it's financed almost entirely by advertisements. Around 85-90 percent of the paper is given over to advertisements; the rest to gossip, municipal council reports, charities and sports results. If you take a benign view of *The North Shore Times*, it could be said to be publishing information on the availability of goods and services to consumers on Sydney's North Shore. But the operative word is "consumers". Readers of this paper are presumed to be not so much readers as potential units of purchasing power. That's on a benign view; on a more critical view, the purpose of the paper is neither to advance nor even to scrutinise the interests of the community which it professedly serves, but to protect the interests of those traders and business companies from whom it draws its income.

The revenue accruing to the *Sydney Morning Herald* on an average Saturday is, according to the Assistant General Manager of John Fairfax Ltd in evidence before the Norris Enquiry, one million dollars. In an average week, 55 percent of *The Bulletin* consists of advertisements, 45 percent of *The National Times*. On most weekdays the proportion in the *Sydney Morning Herald* is about 50 percent; on Wednesdays somewhat higher, on Saturdays, higher still. In almost any newspaper or magazine, the display advertising (as distinct from the classified advertising) surrounds, encases and virtually imprisons the main body of the news. On pages dealing with travel, food, wine and automobiles, the advertising often relates in kind to the type of material in the news columns. Most publications are laid out around the ads, built around the ads. The craft of sub-editing has declined to the point where it's now largely a matter of fitting news reports into spaces not taken up with ads. Now I'm not suggesting that advertisers control the news, either by command or by the expression of wishes, or by explicit threats and vetoes. What I'm saying is that advertising provides the economic and cultural setting, as well as the physical setting, for most newspapers and magazines. One of the results is that journalists come very quickly and clearly to recognise the connection between their earnings and the paper's advertising revenue.

In commercial radio and television, where the bombardment from ads is intense and almost unceasing, many commentators, interviewers and actors are now directly involved as hucksters in the selling of goods and the promotion of big companies. Reputedly independent journalists and interviewers speak openly on behalf of corporations like Esso with a product to sell and prestige to maintain. In such circumstances, there can be no doubt about who tells whom what to say; and no doubt, either, that the vaunted independence of these journalists has been compromised and diminished. But since the President of the United States was for some years a television spruiker for General Electric, perhaps this kind of activity has now been sanctified.

Another alarming phenomenon is that advertising has affected the very style of news, drama, musical and talk presentation in both radio and television. Programs, including the news, are constructed around so-called advertising breaks, which are not really breaks at all. In fact, programs are for the most part designed to give a continuity of tone, image and pace, so that the advertising merges into the news and entertainment.

Advertising is what might be called the standard-bearer of the consumer culture, and as such it represents one important form of control over media content. In speaking of control, I'm not referring here to the fact that most advertising agencies in Australia are American-owned. That's another form of control; imperialist control, which I mention only in passing. I'm saying rather that, in the print media particularly, advertisers help to define the market at which a newspaper or magazine is aimed. And market considerations in turn mould the paper's style — for example, the sort of topics that are chosen, the level of understanding that is
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assumed, the sophistication or vulgarity of approach. In defence of monopoly, it's sometimes argued that the various publications within the one organisation differ from each other in style. To a small extent that's true; but in general there's only an appearance of diversity. The differences in style arise primarily from differences in market orientation. Remember, I'm not contending that advertisers alone decide on the market for a publication, I'm contending that advertisers help to define the market. And definition is a continuing process, carried out in conjunction with editors and proprietors.

But how, you might ask at this stage, does monopoly ownership bear down on the employees, particularly on the journalists who appear to be responsible for the news content in the media? Well, let's examine for a moment the structure, the operational structure, of media organisations. At the top of the pile stand the owners, few in number, immense in wealth and power, intent on safeguarding their interests. At the bottom are the media workers — a heterogeneous complex of reporters, printers, film directors, layout artists, scene designers, floor managers, film cutters, engineers, script assistants, photographers, technicians and various other operatives.

In the middle, a hierarchy of managers, editors and controllers hold the workers in place. The important factor is not who these people are, but at the top, what they own, at the bottom, what they produce, in the middle whose interests they serve. I might add that, at the bottom, among the workers, the division of labour is quite extreme, thus enabling the middle or executive level to exercise a considerable degree of control over the product. From our viewpoint, as unionists, the middle level is the key to the struggle.

I won't suggest that the proprietors, either separately or as a cabal, habitually issue orders, directions or instructions to the staff down below. I won't suggest that they deliberately set out to brainwash the public — except, say, when trying to get rid of a federal Labor government as in 1975, or to flatter the Premier of New South Wales when the licence for Lotto is up for grabs. But I will suggest that the proprietors, and the boards which they head, decide on the disposition of resources, formulate editorial policy in a general way and determine the value framework in which a newspaper, magazine or broadcasting station will operate. And I'll suggest, too, that the task of the managers, editors and controllers in the middle of the structure is to keep that value framework intact and untarnished. It's the middle managers, representing the interests of the proprietors, recruited to protect those interests, who comprise the control points over journalists and other workers.

What to write

Of course, I'm aware that journalists often deny that any explicit control exists. A journalist may contend that nobody tells him what to write; that nobody gives him orders; and that his editor asks only for consultation. Whereas he's usually conforming to a value framework already impacted in the style, policies and objectives of the paper; and he's usually trying, either consciously or unconsciously, to meet the expectations of his employer. In short, he's concerned with safeguarding and furthering his career in what happens to be a very insecure profession; a profession that lacks the status of law, medicine or even engineering, a profession that is tied to the organisational demands of the employer, a profession that exists in a kind of no-man's-land between academic discipline and story-telling.

For myself, I avoid the word "bias" because it infers that bias is applied deliberately, like a technique. And that isn't always the case. Bias is, if anything, built into journalistic practice, into day-by-day routines. It emerges in decisions about what events deserve to be covered, in concepts of what constitutes a news story or a news peg, in beliefs about how to write according to conventional news-value standards, in convictions about how the public benefit or the public interest might best be served. In my experience, I would not like
to try counting the number of times accuracy has been sacrificed for the sake of a “good” story or truth for the sake of “public” benefit.

I don’t think we can ignore the fact, either, that the manipulation of news by sources of influence outside news-gathering institutions has become remarkably common during the past half-century. There are, for a start, all those captains of industry, commerce and finance, along with judges, archbishops, vice-chancellors and well-heeled conservative politicians who conduct in-club conversations with proprietors and editors, and whose views assist in framing what is sometimes called the conventional wisdom or the prevailing climate of opinion. Occasionally they’ll intervene quite crudely with proprietors and editors to suppress information, kill stories or canvass a favorable (sometimes unfavorable) interpretation of events.

Then there are the lobbyists and public relations men who plant stories, fly kites, pump in rumour and scandal, offer meals and overseas trips as bribes, and shower editorial desks with handouts. (The handout is now one of the main supports of journalism.) And in this account of outside influences we must never forget those public servants who offer reporters assistance, guidance and confidential documents, especially when trying to destroy a Labor government.

Indeed, the media are often thought of as a battleground for competing interests — the interests of those who own the means of production, the interests of those who man the productive machines and processes, the interests of those who buy space and time, the interests of those who run our governments, the interests of those who seek publicity, the interests of those who read and view. It makes a nice pluralistic picture, with all these contending forces arriving at some sort of balance, with truth eventually emerging triumphant. But as the historian Lord Acton once remarked: “Truth always prevails in the end, but only when it has ceased to be in someone’s interest to prevent it from doing so.”

As unionists, we know that the economic interests of the owners are paramount; and by economic interests I mean not just the accumulation of profits and investments but the maintenance of what they would regard as social stability, of conditions out of which they can draw both financial power and ideological authority. These interests converge with the interests of the advertisers, especially the corporate advertisers, and shape the career interests, in some cases the sheer survival interests of the journalists, printers and other workers.

But there’s a continuing tension between the owners and the workers, a tension that springs partly from wage quarrels and the efforts of proprietors to cut down on labour resources, but even more, I think, from the creative, investigative, interpretative nature of media work. This tension can be quite destructive — the incidence of cynicism is fairly high among journalists, for instance — but on the constructive side it has also led to a significant (though still scattered) resistance movement within the industry, a resistance movement aimed at giving reporters and program-makers more control over what they do and how they do it. We must never underrate the courage, honesty and skill of genuinely conscientious journalists.

The ABC and the state

Nevertheless, the political weighting of the entire media, including the ABC, is very much to the right. Words like “impartiality”, “objectivity”, “neutrality” and “balance” have little meaning when most information flows from centres of power and authority with financial and ideological interests to protect. One of our troubles in Australia is that we have been conditioned to think of politics within the narrow range of parochial party politics. So long as the Labor Party is allowed an occasional hearing in the press or on television, we console ourselves that standards of objectivity have been preserved. But achieving a balance of space or time between conservative and labor spokesmen is not the crux of the problem. The crux is how to alter the historical and social frame in which events are reported.
As for the ABC, which I suggested was as much to the right as any other media organisation, we have to recognise that it is not so much a creature of government, responsive only to ministerial pressure, as an ideological arm of the capitalist state machinery, disseminating values, ideas, opinions and attitudes which assume or in some way illustrate the basic benevolence of our social structure, our political processes, our foreign alliances, our economic priorities and our cultural aspirations. Not that the ABC should be regarded as a blunt propaganda instrument; its ideological purpose is woven much more subtly into Australian life. But its essential closeness to the capitalist state has been frankly recognised in the ABC submission to the Dix Committee of Review, a submission which calls for "corporate underwriting" of (so far as I can gather from the rather murky phraseology) costly high culture programs. Under this proposal, there would be no hard selling of products, only a discreet institutional method of advertising — perhaps a lead-in title like "This Week In Industry — presented by General Motors-Holden", or "The Esso-BHP Play of the Week", or "Utah Mining's Concert Classics", or "World Affairs — presented by Imperial Chemical Industries in conjunction with Conzinc Rio Tinto". One can hardly wait for the moment.

The ABC is not at present much use to us. The ABC's central task since its foundation in 1932 has been to provide Australia with high culture programs, especially in music and drama, and with so-called service programs — education, rural, sporting, religious and migrant programs — in other words, programs which would be rejected by the commercial electronic media as unprofitable, yet which the capitalist state considers necessary for social health and welfare. The ABC has been expected to bring an element of bourgeois cultural stability to a situation that would otherwise be culturally lopsided and chaotic. The ABC was never a countervailing power to the commercials; it is a supplementary power, almost a prop. And whenever the commercials find profit in what has traditionally been an ABC area of activity, they move in to appropriate it — as has occurred, for example, in so much televised sport, especially Packer cricket. Make no mistake: commercial broadcasting, not national broadcasting, is the dominant mode of production and, in terms of resources, represents the dominant power. In totality, the commercial operators have more stations and more access to money. All broadcasting in Australia functions, socially and culturally, in a commercial setting.

The ABC and the commercials

Between the ABC and the commercial operators, there's a somewhat uneasy alliance based on the understanding that the ABC will accept the responsibility for high culture and so-called service programming. It's only when the ABC steps out of line or out of character, either by pulling audiences away from the commercials (as in the early days of 2JJ), or by disturbing the populace with radical thoughts and raffish language that agitation begins among newspaper editorialists and media lobbyists against the wasteful expenditure of taxpayers' money. The commercials resent the intrusion of the ABC into what they regard as their bailiwick of popular entertainment; they are afraid of the ABC's occasional (very occasional these days) adventurousness in news and political commentary; and since the advent of the Fraser government, they have been determined that the ABC shall no longer take the lead in innovative programming. Under these conditions, and with commissioners who reflect the ideological intentions of the Fraser government (the former chairman, after all, was for most of his working life, a top executive of BHP), it's not at all surprising that the ABC should have lately sunk back into political orthodoxy, cultural gentility, social conformity and intellectual timidity.

So the next time an ABC reporter asks you, during a strike: "Aren't you holding the public up to ransom?" or "Isn't this victimisation of the public?" or "Why do you persist in this contempt of arbitral procedures?" — don't be
surprised. Although the ABC has always broadcast specialist or minority culture for such disparate sections of the community as schoolchildren, farmers, churchgoers, migrants, music-lovers and adult education enthusiasts, it has never considered the working class, or the trade union movement in particular, as a section of the community. The ABC has seldom made any programs which consistently and openly acknowledged the existence of the working class or which examined in a thorough-going way the social relations of production. Is it any wonder that young ABC reporters come to you with hoary questions like “Aren’t you holding the public up to ransom?” or “Can the nation afford a 35-hour week?” — when they, as ABC staff, have for years worked a basic 36 hour 45 minute week, without asking themselves whether the nation could afford it.

Alternative media

This sort of circumstance, where union leaders get bailed up with loaded questions, might be taken as a model in miniature of our problem. How do we ensure, for example, that strikes are reported in the context not of employer interests but of the struggle for social justice? How do we ensure that union views are published not just as fragments of an interview but as coherent ideas carrying social and historical validity? We could, I suppose, launch a daily newspaper — although according to an estimate by the Assistant General Manager of John Fairfax Ltd, the setting up of a newspaper would require a capital investment of $50 million. But whether 50 million, 5 million or 1 million, the point is that we would have to acquire tremendous financial and technological resources. That’s what ownership is largely about — the ownership of financial and technological resources, material resources, and exploiting those material resources for profit by the use of labour resources. Again, if we applied for a television licence in, say, Sydney — and by some weird miracle got it by outsting one of the existing commercial licensees — how would we gather together enough financial and technological resources in order to run a station? Would we ask John Fairfax Ltd for a loan of the Channel 7 tower, transmitting equipment and studios? Or Packer for the loan of Channel 9? Or Murdoch for Channel 10?

Moreover, if we were dependent on advertising to keep a newspaper or television station going, then we would be just another adjunct of monopoly capitalism. And this, I think, is what has happened to the labor movement’s radio stations around Australia. However valuable they might be for revenue-raising, and despite the occasional labor-oriented commentary which is broadcast, these stations are trapped in the consumer-oriented whirl as much as any conventional station. They follow the predominant programming patterns of the commercials and have effected little change or innovation. I’m not saying that they are incompetently managed; on the contrary, their efficiency in competing with the commercial outfits is, in a quite important sense, compounding our whole problem with the media. We can’t change ways of thinking among the people at large, and among journalists in particular, we can’t change the ruling class frame of political reference, by accepting and adhering to the values of capitalist commodity culture.

I don’t want to end negatively, so let me propose a modest method of tackling the problem that faces us as a movement. The ACTU should, I think, form a media-monitoring-and-teaching unit which would have these basic tasks: to monitor newspaper, radio and television reporting of political affairs generally and union affairs in particular; to analyse the content of this coverage in terms of style, approach and political weighting; to publish the results on a regular basis and to have the meaning of the results discussed at union meetings; to liaise with the Australian Journalists Association in preparing a more comprehensive and more stringent code of ethics, and in seeking more autonomy for journalists; to work with union members, delegates and officials towards a closer, more imaginative understanding of the difficulties and challenges facing fellow workers employed by the media; to assist union spokesmen in media performance and presentation.