

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY

PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
AUSTRALIAN SUBURBAN NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION
SYDNEY - 15 MARCH 1984

I thank the Australian Suburban Newspaper Association for providing me with this opportunity to join you today.

Your contribution is an important one. While you are part of the great tradition of the print media which makes such an essential contribution to the wellbeing of a democratic society, your specific role is only recently being appreciated for what it is.

The phrases 'freedom of the press', 'free flow of information', 'open Government' may strike some people as cliches, but let us not mistake the importance of these concepts in the maintenance of a politically healthy society.

They also go to the heart of what you are about. This seminar is about the future of your area of the print media. It is about the direction the suburban press is taking, and about how you will be 'piecing together' the future of your industry - helping it to evolve as a positive and permanent part of our society's information resources.

For the success of any enterprise I believe one of the key factors must be genuine understanding of the purpose of the enterprise - a firm commitment to what it is doing, where it is going, and an ability to communicate effectively.

A Government, for example, that is confident of the wisdom of what it is doing is keen that its aims, policies and programs are well understood. It is concerned that all citizens are aware of what the Government is about - and how its decisions will affect them, assist them - and it needs to know what they think of Government initiatives and decisions.

A participatory, reforming, open Government finds it vital to communicate.

This is my Government's approach - we want to have the confidence and support of the people and we want to keep them informed by all the means that are available.

For your part it appears that a fundamental question has to be answered if the purpose of your enterprise is to be understood. Why do people read the local press and what will see them continue to support it?

A clue to the answering of this question may be taken from a further analogy with Government.

The communication of policies is one important aspect of a Government's responsibilities - and I will refer to that again. There is, however, the other side of the coin; namely, the need for genuine public response to its programs and policies.

Major interest groups representing industry, labour and other well organised groups in our society have the ability to get their message across - to get access to the national media and to speak directly to Government.

What of course sometimes gets lost in the national debate is the voice of the man or woman in the street, the voice of the suburbs, of the outback and the remote areas. What are their views on what the Government is doing or should be doing? How do they feel about the implementation of new policies or proposed Government activities? Their opinions and activities will not often be newsworthy in a way that will attract interest in the metropolitan press or television. They will not be tightly organised - but on a community by community basis they will often have a coherent point of view; a view which the local suburban press, for instance, can reflect.

It is the ability to assimilate and reflect these community views which is part of the answer to the question of why people read the suburban press.

The community's political representatives - if they are doing their job well - will be aware of this, and will come to recognise that you are the press of the small community and an important link if the community's views are to be fully understood.

I would like to feel that the political representatives of the people, whether they be from Local, State or Federal spheres, could rely on your newspapers as a clear reflection of community views. Your newspapers present a means of communicating what is happening around us. This will be the sort of information and news that will not be reported by the metropolitan dailies or on television newscasts because it is thought to lack sufficient general interest, or cannot match up to some big national or international story.

This is of course to your advantage - an area has been left to you in which opinion can be aggregated, information on local issues provided and loyalty to the local paper formed. No doubt you will all recognise this as a major task, a major concern of your industry, a major responsibility. Your communities rely on you and recognise that, while your publications have to rub shoulders with the so-called 'junk mail', you have something valuable to supply.

In saying this, I recognise the catalyst to your industry is the interest advertisers have in a commercially attractive platform to merchandise their goods. I am convinced, nevertheless, that there remains plenty of room for your newspapers to establish distinctive voices for their individual communities. You have the opportunity which the metropolitans cannot match - to provide complete coverage of a small community. You have a sound, intimate knowledge of that community and by providing your readers with useful reliable information, well-formed opinion and the chance to interact through your paper with the community, you will consolidate your unique position.

May I give some examples where the Government wants to get its message through to the community at large, to the grass roots - to the level where people need to understand policy and administrative arrangements if they are to benefit in the full from the measures we as a Government have taken on their behalf. Your papers have a real role in this regard.

The introduction of Medicare was a decision taken by Government - an important decision which was based on a firm mandate given to the Government by Australians at the last election. While Australians may have a grasp of the general sense, humanity and equity of the scheme, the Government has a continuing responsibility to ensure people know how it will assist them and what they should do to benefit fully.

Now some of this information can be conveyed to the public by a national television campaign - by showing someone like me filling in his Medicare enrolment form for example; but we would all recognise that this only accomplishes part of the exercise. This general information must be repackaged and reprocessed to answer the questions and problems of many individuals and special communities throughout the country.

While there may be a Medicare Branch Office 'on the ground' in many suburbs - as there may also be CES or other Commonwealth and State welfare agency offices - there usually remains something of a gap between these agencies and the people they serve.

In this situation, the local press can play a very important role in helping to integrate and 'localise' these offices and the message they bring. You will both be serving the same community and your own expertise in communication by helping to make these agencies more a part of the community - not just the furthest extension of a distant bureaucracy.

You will be helping people get the specific answers and assistance they need - the sort of personal assistance that I would be the first to admit cannot be provided by guest appearances by well known personalities.

A further example of a decision made at the Federal Government level which has had a real effect on the lives of many people in the suburbs of our large cities is the First Home Owners Scheme. This was a major decision benefiting a great number of needy Australians and is a significant element in the Government's national strategy of economic recovery. Apart from the initial coverage of the decision in the metropolitan press and television, there is a further need to ensure that those who most need this assistance are aware of its availability.

The First Home Owners Scheme has been remarkably well received and I believe the Government has done a good job of communicating the essentials of the Scheme.

There has been a national advertising campaign, and the Department of Housing and Construction provided explanatory material to groups contacting first home buyers - real estate agents, builders, lending institutions - and set up special offices in the capital cities.

Nevertheless it is the step to the local level - relating the general principles of the scheme to the particular case - that is the most difficult. This will often have to be done on a one-to-one basis. A workable local communications system, of which the local press can be a focal point, can greatly assist in facilitating this final step.

The free flow of information at all levels is a commitment of the Government. Since coming to office we have taken a number of important steps in this area:

- in the electronic communications arena, we have given the green light for the launch of Australia's domestic satellite system. A major aspect of this will be the ability to provide a greater variety of broadcasting for people throughout Australia. Part of this facility will be used by the ABC to put in place a second regional radio network;

- we have introduced a Supplementary Licence Scheme to allow commercial television operators outside the five mainland capitals to provide their viewers and listeners with additional commercial radio and television services;
- we have continued the work initiated by the previous Labor Government in Freedom of Information. Amendments were passed last year to improve access provisions still further. The Government is currently reviewing and expanding its publicity program in this area; and
- the Government has taken steps to encourage innovative small businesses working in the communications technology area by ensuring the eligibility of software development for industrial research and development incentives. We have also expanded the AIDC's capital base to provide it with the option of investing in this and other technologically advanced areas of industry. As well, the Government has taken action to encourage the development of a venture capital market in Australia which should assist computer hardware and software producers.

Nevertheless, in a society that is essentially pluralist and open, the Government is only responsible for facilitating the flow of information and ideas - to assist those who wish to use or enlarge these facilities and techniques. Government is not in the business of attempting to direct what information, entertainment or data should have currency. This, as you would be the first to remind me, is particularly the case in the area of newspapers, which have a proud history of freedom with responsibility.

The Commonwealth, however, has a responsibility to monitor the health of another important area of the media - broadcasting. It is very conscious of the need to ensure that the flow of information in this area works freely and is not restricted by the process of media monopoly.

This is a particularly important issue when the public facility that is being used - the broadcast spectrum - is finite, and so provides an inherent limitation to competition. It is this issue - the preservation of genuine variety and competition in broadcasting - that my colleague the Minister for Communications has under review at present.

Government information is also provided by way of media advertisement. These advertisements are often directed at the major press and television outlets. This is particularly the case where the advertisements are aimed at a national audience and carry a broad message - voter enrolments, census publicity, small boat and road safety, and quarantine matters, for example. On these occasions, the campaign is like a major commercial advertiser selling a brand name.

There will be other occasions when the Government may wish to take a different approach. A case could be made out for extending coverage to the suburban press to ensure as complete a coverage as possible.

There may also be a case for the Commonwealth placing some local advertising - as opposed to national advertising.

I understand, in fact, that various Government bodies and agencies, such as the Commonwealth Employment Service, Telecom, Australia Post and the Army Reserve, have taken advertising in the suburban press.

The question of wider Commonwealth advertising in local newspapers is under consideration by the Department of the Special Minister of State.

I am sure that you, as an industry, will be doing your best to convince Mick Young that you have something that he should be buying. That something worth buying is a high readership as well as a good numerical coverage of your area. The latter is an administrative, technical problem - the former will be achieved by becoming further integrated into your community's activities. In other words by becoming its indispensable friend and ally.

You became its friend and ally by serving it and seeking opportunities to give a lead where the community as a whole might become involved.

A particular example of such an opportunity is our nation's Bicentenary celebrations. There will be national activities and national programs, but there will also of course be community activities. The Australian Bicentennial Authority is developing a network of Community Committees. I am sure there will be plenty of room for the local press to become involved.

I note your program is quite realistically focusing on the contribution technology can make to doing your job better. The question could also be raised as to how far modern communications technology has the potential to bypass altogether your operations and those of the print media more generally.

We are told that the new technology would be capable of allowing bill paying, banking, shopping, access to information and entertainment, and even fulltime work to be done without leaving the home. The very essence of the community - personal interaction and shared activities between people in a defined geographical area - could be threatened.

I would hope not. Indeed I would expect not. The face of the metropolitan press may be radically altered by technological innovation, but I suspect it will be highly resilient. National data banks are never likely to be a substitute for local interest and a reading public.

Now is the time to bear down hard with your commitment to your unique enterprise to nurture and serve the small community.

The questions you are asking at this seminar are legitimate. But through them all, I am convinced you have a role. It is an important one. Carried forward with sensitivity, it is a role from which all in the community stand to benefit. I hope this Conference will serve to refine and develop further general appreciation of that role.
