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## **Piranhas in the Parliament Politicians, the Press ... and Who's Really Devouring Whom?\***

*Karen Middleton*

I have never been to South America and I haven't seen a piranha ... as it were ... in the flesh.

A friend of mine, here in Canberra, does, however, have a stuffed one on top of her toilet. It's about the size of your clenched fist—a taxidermy masterpiece with the most horrendously enormous teeth—and it sort of smiles at you like it might launch itself at your jugular as soon as you've turned your back and dropped your knickers.

The experience must be even more disconcerting for those whose ablutions require them to look it in the eye. It is one scary fish.

Portraying journalists as piranhas is, I admit, a bit of a cliché. But the fishbowl analogy seemed too hard to go past when the good people of the Senate asked me to offer some thoughts on the strange parliamentary co-existence of the polities with the Press.

I will, of course, be conceding that one of these two species is voracious, flesh-eating and insatiable—yes, that's us—and the other, traditionally (to pursue the analogy) its

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prey. But I'll also point out that in this particular fish tank, the hunted have developed ways to dramatically minimise the risk of being eaten.

It's a bigger tank than it used to be and they have more room to hide but that's not all that's behind it.

By hand-feeding, over-feeding and selective starvation rations, they've managed to tame our aggressive instincts, limit our breeding grounds and significantly reduce our habitat. Without some effort to fight back, our traditional role may become endangered, if not extinct.

### **The fish with the bad press**

As I said, the piranha tag isn't new. It's a favourite descriptor of those who don't like us all that much.

Having led with my chin on the title of this lecture, I went searching for some background on piranhas using that trusty tool so beloved of a journalist with a long speech to write and a looming deadline—Google. I found a blogger who goes by the name of Joey Skaggs<sup>1</sup> and who's published some very amusing guidelines for baiting, catching and 'cooking' journalists. He compares us to sharks, barracuda and, yes, piranhas.

'They are extremely territorial and defensive,' he advises, 'and will repeatedly attack, either singly or in large groups. You can usually find them behind hidden agendas.' He outlines a series of recommended hooks and lures—sex, controversy, incompetence, power, revenge, little guy against the system, anything with an animal or a child. He also lists useful tools for reeling in a journalist—conviction and purpose, irony, humour, wit, confidentiality, deception.

'Be patient,' he urges the would-be angler; 'Once the hook is set, they usually jump in the boat. And believe it or not, many others simply follow suit. Often feeding frenzies occur and you might even catch more than you can handle.' He suggests that, once caught though, journalists puff up. And should be iced quickly.

It seems real piranhas are actually ... apparently ... a popular food fish. (Who knew?) Even more fascinating, a piranha caught on a hook and line may be attacked by the others. Turning on your own kind. Imagine that.

And while it's commonly known that piranhas are found in the Amazonian, Guianas and Paraguayan river systems, I was delighted, a bit appalled and really not all that surprised to discover they have also been found swimming in the Potomac River in Washington DC. Apparently they don't do so well there in the winter.<sup>2</sup>

Anyway, who would've thought there'd be such a cheap link from piranhas to politics, just waiting for me to shamelessly exploit it?

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<sup>1</sup> 'A Well Cooked Journalist', Joey Skaggs, June 21, 2003. [www.joeyskaggs.com](http://www.joeyskaggs.com)

<sup>2</sup> 'In river of many aliens, snakehead looms as threat', *Washington Post*, May 29, 2005.

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In this national capital and this particular fish tank, some argue that parliamentarians and the media should be separated, at least by glass, to avoid one being eaten alive by the other.

I guess that's understandable.

We in the media can be vicious. When we smell blood, we circle and we strike. Sometimes the more merciless among us enjoy taking a single, debilitating bite to leave the victim swimming in circles, missing a fin. Other times, in a feeding frenzy, there can be little more than a carcass left.

We're not all piranhas of course. Some of us are Parrotfish. Blowfish. Goldfish. Silverfish.

But as far as reputation goes, we all tend to be caught in the same net. After all, it only takes the suggestion of sharp fins or gigantic teeth to make people want to get out of the water.

### **Predator and Prey**

In politics, the feeding goes in both directions. Journalists pursue politicians. And politicians pursue coverage. And when they don't like the coverage, they pursue journalists.

At a church service earlier in the year to mark the opening of Parliament for a new year, Anglican Bishop Tom Frame was clear about who he believed was the predator and who was the prey.<sup>3</sup> His remarks were *to* the politicians and *about* those of us who deal most publicly with them.

'Very few care or have any regard for your feelings of those of your families, who are often deeply wounded by the arrows that are hurled at you,' the Bishop said. 'So please don't say "oh, it comes with the job" as though by saying that, it absolves the people, it absolves the *Press*, from such appalling behaviour. We can do better. We ought to do better. You deserve better', he told them.

But there was a second message too:

'There are some things that we cannot demand from others,' the Bishop said; 'Respect readily comes to mind. It's not gained through persuasion, intimidation or coercion. Respect can only be earned.'

He was right, on both fronts.

Some of us in the media can be terribly cruel, occasionally oblivious to the hurt we cause in pursuit of a good story or just a good line. That is as true in political

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<sup>3</sup> Sermon, church service marking the opening of Parliament. Anglican Bishop Tom Frame. St Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Canberra, February 6, 2007.

journalism as any other kind and probably more so. But at least as often, in this part of the pond, we can find ourselves in receipt of some heavy-handed persuasion, intimidation and—if not quite coercion—then trickery at least.

Bishop Frame didn't seek to excuse either set of behaviour. And I certainly don't suggest that being on the receiving end of one justifies resorting to the other.

### **Who's devouring whom?**

But between the Press and politicians—and on politicians I'll speak mostly here of governments because governments have the most political power—it would be wrong to suggest only *one* is doing the devouring.

Despite how we're sometimes portrayed, journalists don't spend their days looking for new ways to destroy the careers of the nation's elected representatives. We are frequently, perhaps even mostly, legitimately pursuing stories that are in the public interest, though sometimes there are differences of opinion on how 'public interest' should be defined.

These stories can occasionally cause considerable discomfort to those who feature in them. We can find that we thwart political ambition, stymie a promotion, or obstruct someone on a path of least resistance. And then we meet considerable resistance in return.

As tools to be used against pesky journalists, persuasion, intimidation and trickery have been around for years. Many of my colleagues recount colourful tales of abusive phone calls, withdrawn access, threats of future non-cooperation and punishment for perceived bad behaviour. They mostly laugh about it later. Mostly.

When former Labor minister Ros Kelly's resignation was rumoured, her colleague Graham Richardson tried to shut down the speculation, launching one of those routine, all-out assaults on those who reported it, ridiculing them for writing rubbish worthy of nothing but fish-wrapping. Of course shortly thereafter, Kelly did resign and then, suddenly, so did Richardson. As a parting gift, a couple of journalists gave Richardson a dead fish wrapped in copies of their newspaper. He bellowed with laughter and called it the 'perfect Mafia present'.

Politicians also regularly use the media to get at each *other*. One senator, now retired, used to enjoy leaking provocative anonymous quotes to newspapers, deliberately using *another* colleague's recognisable turn of phrase.

And two members of the current Opposition front bench, watching a colleague doing a terribly serious Lateline interview on the ABC, spotted the telltale outline of his ever-present mobile phone in his top pocket. They fell about laughing in an office downstairs, watching him fumbling onscreen as they rang it. Twice.

But the relationships are not always quite so jolly.

In 1990–91, the leadership rivalry between Bob Hawke and Paul Keating split the Press Gallery, as each man enlisted commentators and columnists to his cause.

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On the night Hawke finally lost to his rival, he threw open the doors of the Cabinet room and put on a huge party. But any journalist he saw as having sided with Keating was barred. There were stand-up rows at the door and almost fisticuffs as Hawke's defenders squared off against those they blamed for his defeat. Some of us weren't tarred with either the Hawke *or* Keating brush—probably because we were too young and irrelevant—and we wandered right through the Cabinet suite, drinks in hand, looking in every cupboard drawer and swinging on every chair. ASIO must've been in there for weeks afterwards.

There *are* occasionally moments of strange solidarity, like September 11 2001, when John Howard and the travelling media were all caught up in the terrorist attacks in Washington. On the lawns of the ambassador's residence the following day, as he prepared to fly out of the country in specially-opened airspace on the Vice President's plane, Howard asked that the cameras be turned off and then apologised for leaving us all behind. We told him we had work to do.

So there is a sort of mutual understanding that develops if you hang around here too long. Elsewhere, I think they call it 'Stockholm Syndrome'. But often in the relationship, it's us using them and them using us with the blowtorches applied in both directions.

When Paul Keating was Prime Minister, he famously went after the *West Australian* newspaper because of a highly critical story it published about him. The revenge and ostracisation went on for years.

There are rare occasions, of course, when the politician *is* on solid ground.

Some 20 or so years ago, when I was working at the *Canberra Times* a national debate was raging about tax and, specifically, the then Treasurer Keating's personal arrangements. Some newspaper executive in his wisdom had decided it would be fun to publish photographs of Keating's residences in both Sydney and Canberra, complete with their full street addresses.

I got to the office very early that morning and the only other person on the editorial floor was colleague Graham Downie, affectionately known as the God reporter. It was so early, neither of us had even read the paper yet, though Graham had a better excuse than me because Graham is blind.

He also has a very black sense of humour and had, back then, a very small windowless office in the same wing as the editorial executives. So when the editor's phone rang, he got there first. He was slightly puzzled when a torrent of abuse spewed into his ear and he politely asked who was calling.

It was Paul (expletive deleted) Keating, who explained in straightforward terms that he was really quite upset about the houses and the addresses and who did we think we were etc. All, as you can imagine, punctuated in a most animated four-letter fashion.

Still trying to decipher it all, Graham said ‘I’m sorry but I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Keating went into an apoplectic rage that someone who worked for a newspaper had not even seen its front page: ‘What *are* you... *BLIND?*’

I still remember the smile that came across Graham’s face. ‘Actually,’ he said, (and he really enjoyed the pause) ‘I am.’

The *Treasurer* only paused for a moment and then the abuse resumed.

### **Tending the tank and taming the wildlife**

Perhaps it’s an even greater sense of past media persecution that’s inspired the leader of the current Government to bite back on a much greater scale and harness the volatile power of the circling media.

Over the past 11 years, the Prime Minister has learned to control media coverage like none before him have. He knows how to minimise the risk of the uncontrollable feeding frenzy. He knows when we’re hungry—in these days of the 24 hour news cycle, that’s all the time—and either feeds us, starves us into submission or just slowly raises the water temperature till we start to roll over.

I would suggest that history will record the ‘control of the bowl’, if I may continue to torture the analogy, as absolutely central to John Howard’s success.

This Government’s media management strategy has flourished through a combination of restriction and distraction.

Restriction is hardly new. The previous Government certainly engaged in it too, though not as effectively as its successor. Under Labor, the application of the Freedom of Information Act became increasingly subjective, with journalists’ requests routinely finding their way onto ministers’ desks for political scrutiny before approval. Or denial.

The monitoring and, by extension, control of information was alive and well then too, in the guise of a unit we used to call aNiMaLS. ‘aNiMaLS’ was officially called the National Media Liaison Service, which laboured under an awkward acronym until it was rescued by a few cheeky vowels.

It was squeezed into an L-shaped set of offices just downstairs from here ... around the corner from the Prime Minister’s suite. Its rather un-subtle location on one of the building’s main thoroughfares was offset by frosted windows and a lack of obvious signage, giving it the slightly mysterious air of a spy agency hard at work.

aNiMaLS’ ‘liaising’ involved monitoring media all over Australia and disseminating useful snippets to embarrass or nobble the Opposition. If an Opposition figure made a hash of something, somewhere, they had it covered. If a partial transcript from Radio Gunnedah appeared on your desk, you knew it was aNiMaLS—and your taxes—at work.

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The Coalition—much monitored and, by 1996, very cranky—abolished aNiMaLS upon winning office.

In its place has grown a much MORE sophisticated network without the snazzy acronym. It's a sort of media-monitoring-cum-spin set-up. The monitoring is once again paid from the public purse and you can bet the bill is off the charts compared with those old days. But it's now accepted as a necessary expense in these days of 24-hour news.

In terms of outward information flow, it's the Prime Minister's press office that's ultimately in charge. Announcements are centrally coordinated to ensure no conflicting messages or wasted media opportunities. Ministers are assigned to appear on Sunday morning talk shows to reinforce a theme ... and ordered to cancel if plans change.

On the wider media stage, it's the ministerial committee on government communications—comprised ... not surprisingly ... of Government MPs—which has the oversight role, vetting and approving all Government advertising and national media campaigns.

Access to people and events is increasingly restricted, often attributed to 'security' but sometimes looking suspiciously like convenience or playing favourites. Despite the lip-service paid to press freedom, information control is pretty tight.

Some journalists and organisations are deemed useful and given extra assistance while others are designated as either being of no benefit, because of low circulation or ratings, or just being 'trouble'. That's a practice that's gone on for decades but it has been greatly refined under the current regime.

There's restriction on our questioning these days too. When heads of government visit from abroad, the Prime Minister insists on taking only two questions from each country's media—a trick he picked up in Washington.

And we are increasingly in the age of the 'video news release'—the advent of which causes heated discussion along the Press Gallery corridor. Where the Prime Minister is concerned, these emerge in response to a particular event—the death of Slim Dusty, a sporting hero's retirement, a triumph on Oscar night.

Sometimes the comment is on request from television bureaux, sometimes it's on offer.

The Prime Minister's office will agree to do a pooled 'interview', usually with a single television journalist—sometimes also one from radio—but restricted to the specified subject. Occasionally there's only a camera present and very occasionally the press secretary even conducts the 'interview'. The broadcast material is then distributed to all television and radio networks and the transcript to all print media and wire services.

It means we get a ‘grab’, as we call it, on one particular issue which we otherwise wouldn’t have. But it also means the Prime Minister avoids talking about anything else, that particular day.

His office argues he often doesn’t have time to do an ‘all-in’ news conference all the time—and to be fair, he does do them regularly—canvassing all the day’s issues with all the media together. And, they say, at least this way we get something.

It’s not an entirely unreasonable point. But neither is the suggestion that this way, he gets to ‘cherry pick’ the issues he wants to confront and sidestep others on difficult days.

So should we run these comments or not? It’s a dilemma. And we usually do.

### **Putting the lid on**

The policies of restriction also affect who we’re allowed to speak to—or rather who’s allowed to speak to us.

Since it won office, the Government has shut off or curtailed many traditional information sources for journalists. The large-scale background briefings on weekly coalition party meetings have been restructured. The affable, sometimes overly helpful backbench briefers have been replaced by savvier senior MPs whose own ‘brief’ is to only offer a selective picture of what went on. The Opposition has adopted the same approach. The spin can make you dizzy.

And the Government has been particularly tough with public servants. Few are even allowed to speak to journalists anymore and those the Government suspects of doing so without authorisation are pursued, even prosecuted.

So, too, are the journalists to whom they speak—witness the case of my two colleagues Michael Harvey and Gerard McManus from News Ltd’s *Herald Sun*.<sup>4</sup> They wrote a story on the Government’s relationship with war veterans and how despite its publicly sympathetic attitude, it was rejecting their request for financial assistance and then trying to spin what *was* on offer as generous.

McManus and Harvey have now been charged with contempt of court for refusing to reveal their sources. They have pleaded guilty. It’s not clear if they’ll be jailed, although the judge did indicate some hostility when he remarked recently that the journalists seemed to wear their refusal to obey the demand to disclose as a ‘badge of honour’. I’m not sure how much protection a badge of honour would offer inside. But I strongly support the non-disclosure.

Some may think it’s fair enough to jail journalists for refusing to spill. But what gets me in the gills is that senior members of government routinely offer journalists strategic ‘leaks’, sometimes as a kite-flying exercise to test the response to a proposed

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<sup>4</sup> Gerard McManus & Michael Harvey, ‘Cabinet’s \$500m rebuff revealed.’ *Herald Sun*, February 20, 2004.



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piece of policy, sometimes for other reasons. They do so in the full knowledge that the journalists, in upholding the vital confidentiality clause in our code of ethics, will not expose them as the source. So it's a bit breathtaking when someone *else* tells us something—something the Government doesn't want published—and we are hauled before a court for refusing to divulge *them* as the source, in order for them to be prosecuted.

I concede that this 'by agreement' arrangement in source protection can itself be a source of frustration for—and criticism by—those *consuming* the news because vital pieces of context will be missing—like who provided the information and why. But without the protection of sources under the code of ethics, you'd know a lot less about the workings of government, even than you do now. So it's a trade-off.

These days, it's a lot harder to find sources without a party-political agenda who *are* willing to talk. Whereas we used to seek information from specialist bureaucrats on the execution of a particular facet of policy, we are now routinely directed to the 'minister's office'. That's because there is nothing, now, that isn't political. Everything done by government, is done with the politics in mind.

So restriction also comes in the shape of spin. Just like the role of political journalism is, increasingly, to interpret events, it's important to see how the Government—and, slowly, the Opposition—is setting the context for their announcements for maximum PR impact.

Take the Government's ten million dollar water plan. A bit of grilling through the Senate estimates committee process has established that it didn't go to Cabinet for approval before Mr Howard unveiled it with fanfare in his pre-Australia Day speech. What that tells you is that somebody decided that the *timing* of the announcement—and its potential political impact—was more important than bedding down the details through the usual processes.

And it's not just *when* but *how* things are announced that's significant.

In her recent dissection of the Press Gallery,<sup>5</sup> Queensland academic Helen Ester writes about Mr Howard having chosen to announce his decision to go to war in Iraq at a news conference, rather than on the floor of Parliament as would once have been the case. She quotes my colleague Rob Chalmers, who produces the *Inside Canberra* newsletter and is now the longest-serving Press Gallery member with 50 years' service under his belt. Rob sums up the Government's PR priorities when he describes Parliament House as increasingly like Mr Howard's 'taxpayer-funded television studio'. Actually 'radio studio' might have been even more accurate.

More than any other political leader, John Howard has harnessed the power of talkback radio as a means of communicating over the heads of the local piranhas and straight into a much bigger and, as he sees it, less filtered pond. He has a weekly

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Ester, 'The Media', in Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison (eds), *Silencing Dissent: How the Australian Government is Controlling Public Opinion and Stifling Debate*. Crow's Nest, NSW, Allen & Unwin, 2007.

commitment to each of the main big-city morning radio shows and allowing a TV camera to witness his responses, and then issuing a transcript, ensures other media also regurgitate what he has to say. It has worked extremely well for him and is now so entrenched it's a practice which may well continue beyond this government.

### **Dangling the bait**

But along with all this restriction comes the artful practice of distraction. We fall for it every time. While limiting the flow of *some* information, the Government is a veritable font on other things, ensuring we always have something to write and broadcast—recognising the eternal appetite of the very hungry fish. It's forever announcing things, or re-announcing, or re-packaging them.

Keeping us occupied is a key objective. The busier we are tearing something apart, the less likely we are to start doing laps, looking for something else to munch.

So why do we put up with this?

Well, the trouble is, a lot of what the Government is 'announcing' *is* actually news. It has become very good at *manufacturing* news, at stashing things away in the bottom drawer to be unveiled with a grand 'ta-DA' on a day when a good, solid distraction is required.

The choice for us is either go with the big, obvious story—the ten billion dollar water plan or the discussion paper on values in education—or ignore it (*and every other* news outlet) and go trawling for something they *don't* want us to know about.

It's very hard to choose to ignore actual events—even if they are sometimes confected—in favour of chasing shadows, though the most important stories are often hiding in the weed.

I think we should all probably spend a little more time in the weed and less time gulping on the surface. But that takes a lot of effort. It takes time management—always a personal challenge for me. It takes determination not to be distracted by the electronic snowstorm of emailed press releases and the insistent parade of ministers and shadow ministers wanting to spruik their wares. And it takes resources—the backing of publishers and broadcasters willing to invest the time and space in having us look for the *real* news instead of being dependent creatures who need feeding daily and are told what we should eat.

Like pet piranhas who've actually forgotten how to bite.

In conclusion, I think there *is* more good about us all living here together than bad. But vigilance is required on *our* part—the part of those of us in the media—to ensure we're still doing what we're here for and not just acting as the bullhorns of government and opposition.

My research into real piranhas tells me they *can*, in fact, survive as pets. But they actually do need a varied diet. And though they seem to have an endless appetite, overfeeding—like underfeeding—will kill them.

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(After this, I may go hungry for some time.)

Thank you.



**Question** — How many journalists are there in the Press Gallery?

**Karen Middleton** — At my last count of the contact list for the Press Gallery there were 260 people working up there. I haven't dissected that to work out how many are reporters or writers. There are also editors, camera crews, photographers, administrative staff, because we have full television studio facilities and newspaper bureaus upstairs, wire services. So 260 were there at last count, and incidentally the Prime Minister's press office compiled the list for us. Isn't that nice of them. Actually I am grateful for that because I couldn't do it in a million years.

**Question** — How many in the Prime Minister's press office?

**Karen Middleton** — In the press office he has three media advisors and then he has four or five assistant media advisors who do transcription and some of the administrative work and some of the junior media work.

**Question** — How different do you think the situation would be if the press gallery wasn't co-located in Parliament House?

**Karen Middleton** — It's always an interesting question. It would slow everything down, which is why I think it probably will never happen because the news cycle is so fast these days with communications the way they are that physically being located elsewhere wouldn't just mean that we couldn't harass politicians as easily, it would also mean they couldn't harass us as easily, and they couldn't whistle up a press conference at five minutes notice.

The way we work now is there is a bell in the Press Gallery and if someone is calling a press conference either here or even interstate at very short notice, because they know we are all co-located together here, they will ring the bell. Then it's like Pavlov's dog—everyone salivates and comes running and finds out what's going on. So these things can happen at very short notice and on weeks like Budget week, the bell is just going all the time and on Budget night we actually set up cameras in the Press Gallery at the press boxes and we just wheel people through because it's just so much easier.

It would be physically much more difficult to process the volume of information that we do if we weren't here and I think for the other side as well. Some people might think it would be a good thing to not have us here, and there are arguments in both directions. It might be a good thing to slow things down and we might be a little more discerning about we cover in that case. You could argue it both ways I guess.

**Question** — As you move around and talk to journalists from other countries, how do you compare your lot with theirs?

**Karen Middleton** — It's interesting actually, we don't often get enormous amounts of time to talk because we're racing around following our bloke and they are racing around following their bloke or woman, so we don't get a lot of time. Sometimes there's a few minutes standing waiting for a press conference.

On the trip we did with the Prime Minister to the United States, Canada and Ireland last year, a number of us found it interesting, when we were in Ottawa, the way their Press Gallery was set up. We have an administrative committee here, of which I'm the chair, so I'm the president and we're all elected and it's a voluntary arrangement and it's very haphazard and it really deals mostly with real estate issues: sort of body corporate liaison with the Parliament because we pay rent for our space here. But it's very ad hoc, and that does have its disadvantages because it's hard to act collectively if and when we need to. We don't act collectively on matters of policing each other's work or anything like that, but it's sometimes useful to act collectively in dealing with the Parliament on administrative matters, on matters of access, when we can and can't have cameras in the building, that sort of thing. The Canadian Press Gallery has a full-time paid director who co-ordinates that, and I've often thought that would be a great thing and may even pursue it, but how we would pay for that? It needs to be funded and we don't have any money and we never have any money. It's a bit different in that respect, they are set up in different ways, and you do observe different levels of control.

I made a reference to Washington, where the Press Gallery is very tightly controlled, and there's been a lot of public debate about some of the implications of that in relation to the Iraq war. I think there's a different culture in the States that perhaps doesn't exist here, where they are perhaps historically and culturally a little more accepting of authority because the presidency has this particular status there. In fact I remember once years ago there was a press conference here, for George Bush senior, and Keating was Prime Minister then. We were seated with the Australian media on one half of the room and the American media were on the other. When Bush and Keating walked into the room, all the Americans stood up. We didn't. So I think there are some cultural differences that will permeate the media anyway and we perhaps have a well known and documented suspicion of authority in this country that goes back a long way and it's played out in media as well.

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**Question** — I work for the ABC and it seems to me to be questionable where we are headed with freedom of speech in this country.

**Karen Middleton** — I think I mentioned that there is a lot of lip service paid to freedom of speech, but sometimes actions speak louder than words. It's not just this government. Once people get into office, they want to protect what they have and nobody likes you saying something that embarrasses them or that they don't want other people to know about. There is a natural reaction to that, but I think it has been on the increase in recent years, that there is this effort to try and stop the diversity of news and information. Sometimes that's a media ownership issue too. We've seen media ownership laws changed, and a reduction in the number of owners. I don't think there are as many conspiracies about owners dictating what goes in a newspaper or on air as people suggest, but my personal view is that it can't be good for the diversity of news and information if you have fewer owners and fewer journalists covering an issue and work being syndicated everywhere. So yes, it's an issue I think.

**Question** — You spoke earlier about journalists working collectively on real estate issues. To what extent do journalists work collectively in deciding what is going to be the issue of the day and how to detect a particular event? Do journalists work individually or collectively on these sorts of things?

**Karen Middleton** — Actually there is a lot less caucusing than people think. If you open a newspaper or a series of newspapers (and in this town you can get something like seven on your front lawn in the morning) you will see a similarity in the subjects covered and sometimes you'll see the same quotes used from one person to another. That is not so much because we stand around deciding what's the news of the day, it's because we are attuned to particular issues, following them closely, so we all recognise a development in an issue when we see it. You can argue about the way we're trained to do that and whether or not it's healthy, but I think it isn't as confected and organised as you might think. We really don't have time to stand around swapping stories with each other and working out what everyone thinks is the lead, because we're just too busy. We'll talk to each other on the way back from a press conference and swap commentary for as long as it takes to get from the Prime Minister's courtyard to the office, but there isn't as much standing around and organising as people think. It is more independent than that.

Of course you need to remember that while we do put the wagons in a circle a bit when people attack the Press Gallery, we're all highly competitive individual journalists, whose organisations are fighting each other for readers and viewers. So it's a strange atmosphere up there, where we have a bit of solidarity because we all work here and a lot of people like to criticise us for working here, but there's also huge competition and you want to beat someone else to whatever story there is. People sometimes forget about the competitive side of journalism, and sometimes governments and oppositions play to that. They will dangle things to somebody in order to get a frenzy going in some direction—we are reasonably competitive.

**Question** — You were talking about the pressure of the 24-hour news cycle. One thing I've noticed even in the few years that I've been working in the building, is the internet and online content. I was wondering how the change in the medium has affected your work in the media.

**Karen Middleton** — Yes, it is affecting the way we work. Because of the immediacy of online journalism, there is pressure to get things out fast. Some of the early practitioners of blogging and online journalism tend to put speed ahead of accuracy and fact sometimes, and that puts pressure on everybody because in journalism we are supposed to check and make sure that something is accurate. The time pressure can sometimes be the thing that thwarts you doing that properly, and sometimes I've found that online publications have been less good at accuracy. Certainly there was a criticism of Crikey when it first was set up, that they used to just publish all sorts of things; gossip, rumour, and they fell victim to people's manipulation too. People were sending them emails purporting to be from someone in high office, which was mocked up. So there are all kinds of traps when you're dealing online and when you want to get things out quickly, and I think we all have to be careful of that. The pressure of the 24-hour news cycle means that there is more urgency about everything. It's not just the online factor; it's 24 hour television, and having journalists reporting directly from overseas, with soldiers in the Middle East for example. The pressure to get everything out the minute that it happens means you are reporting one side of a conflict and not the other, and it can be a problem.

**Question** — Time and again in interviews we see politicians of all political persuasions being asked a question and then deliberately not answering it. They are trying to get their own message across. How well do you think as a profession in general you go at getting them to answer the question?

**Karen Middleton** — We have competing interests. If I'm interviewing a politician and they have a message they want to get out, they will be very focused because they will have done media training and some other person in my position will have taught them how to do this. They will repeat their message. Whatever question you ask them, they will say: 'Yes, well, that's a very interesting question and that brings me to this point, which is blah', and that's how they should do it as a good politician who has a message to get out. It is frustrating for us. We have to find creative ways to pursue both issues and to hope that we can extract the information that we want.

It is difficult because in broadcast journalism, we have time pressure. If there is a live interview, it may only go for a minute and a half. You may have a politician in for a minute and a half or on the 7.30 Report, it might be five minutes or longer, 10 minutes sometimes, but you're conscious that you don't want to lose your audience by just haranguing and haranguing and you have to make a judgement about when to harangue and pursue and point out that a question hasn't been answered and when to move on and that's a very difficult thing to do. For someone with a job like Kerry O'Brien's it's very, very difficult to manage—to adequately inform and entertain as well, because you need to hold the audience's attention and cover important issues, as well as make a judgement on the run about how far to pursue something and when to

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let it go and move onto something else. Whichever path you choose, there will be somebody who will say you did the wrong thing. It's incredibly frustrating. It is up to us to learn how to ask questions properly and pursue that and to be listening to the answers.

It is also very hard in a live interview. You're thinking: 'Where am I going next?' because the last thing you want to happen is for your mind to go blank. If you tune out what they are saying and look for where you are going next, you might miss something. It's a balancing act and the more experienced among us do it very well.

**Question** — Has the rise of the sort of opposition we have currently provided more embarrassment for the government through the media?

**Karen Middleton** — You mean since Kevin Rudd took over? Is it us doing it or is it Kevin Rudd doing it or is it Labor under Kevin Rudd doing it or is the Government being nervous because Kevin Rudd's there or because we're focussing on Kevin Rudd? I guess what I'm trying to say is it is a perfect storm in a sense. There are a whole lot of things that contribute. This is why some of us hang around in politics so long—it's quite fascinating, because it's never as straight-forward as you might think. It's psychology as well, so yes, there is more focus on the Opposition, and critical focus maybe on the Government because there's an Opposition that appears to be resonating more with the public. It's a sort of chicken and egg thing—where does it start? Is it starting with you and the opinion polls or is it starting with us paying more attention to them? I don't know, but most commentators that I've heard in the past week are saying they feel that the Government is under more pressure than it used to be because the Opposition seems to have renewed confidence for whatever reason. New leaders always get a lot of attention in the short term anyway in the media, and we talk about honeymoons, and there was a question about when the honeymoon ends. I think a lot of things contribute and I'm not saying the press is not part of it. Our attention can help to boost one side and lower another, not deliberately, but just by the fact that we focus on them.

**Question** — Do you believe there's a difference between the major parties and how they use the media and has it changed much in the last 11 years since Howard became leader?

**Karen Middleton** — Yes, well I guess that's the point I was making. It has changed a lot, partly because the media and the news cycle have changed. As I said we have CNN now, we have broadcasting all the time and newspapers aren't just once a day anymore. I don't know if you've noticed this, but the daily newspapers now are updating their news stories online and their journalists are under some pressure to file for the net before they file for the paper. The whole culture of news and information transmission has changed with the internet and the immediacy and tech positions and all that. So the culture has changed as a result, and you get people who are better than others at learning how to work that, and that's the point I'm making about John

Howard. He is exceptionally good at it—he is very, very good at it, and he has the resources of government to assist him.

You can be good at it, but if you haven't got the tools to work with, it's harder. Oppositions don't have the tools, they don't have the funding, they don't have the bureaucratic structure to help them. There has been criticism of whether the Government has appropriately or inappropriately used taxpayer's money to fund advertising campaigns and there is a fine line. It's a debate that will go on because some of those advertising campaigns are legitimate exposure of Government policy and things that people need to know about. Some of them look awfully like political advertising. The Government have the infrastructure and the support, and that helps when you've got a clever person who knows how to deal with it and you can get streets ahead. I think Kevin Rudd's pretty clever at it too, actually, and that's starting to emerge now that he's leader. He is learning about those things very quickly and we're starting to see a different sort of a contest because he's playing guerrilla warfare in the media too, which is interesting but exhausting. I think neither of them sleep—it's ridiculous.