

# Tracing *The Age's* editorial culture from 1966-97: an oral history approach

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*This paper examines oral histories of The Age's editorial culture/identity, conducted with former Age journalists since Graham Perkin's editorship. While Australian media research focuses on Murdoch owned newspapers and their editorial positioning, The Age tends to be neglected as a subject for scholarly research. Moreover, as this paper argues, The Age's culture is more nuanced than its mere editorial position. The research is based on a historical approach, consisting of archival research and oral history interviews. It argues that The Age's culture and identity is intrinsic to the ways in which particular editors shape their editorial products. As applied to The Age, editorial culture manifests a fourth estate conception of journalism, an inclusive approach to reporting Melbourne and a commitment to giving The Age a "public face". Moreover, this paper illustrates how under successive editors and executives, The Age is perceived to have shifted from an aggressively engaged voice to a much weakened tabloid.*

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, 2013, *The Age*, which had been a quality broadsheet since its inception in 1854, shifted to a compact/tabloid size. This was a change made within the context of the changing nature of newspapers in general, including changing business models, declining circulation and readership as well as the financial situation of the Fairfax company itself (Simons 2012).

This historical event provides significant context for this research. Attempting to investigate *The Age's* culture at a time of radical change for a historical Melbourne institution is particularly timely. Despite the recent publication of Colleen Ryan's *Fairfax: The Rise and Fall* (Ryan, 2013) and Pamela Williams' *Killing Fairfax* (Williams, 2013), little is known about *The Age's* history and culture. *The Age's* history has only been partly told by journalists and often through a "Golden Age", congratulatory, or heroic lens (see Pratt, 1908; Sayers, 1965; Hutton and Tanner, 1979; Hills 2010). Much research has focused on David Syme, the impact of his editorship and ownership of *The Age*, and the history of Syme family ownership more generally (see Morrison, 2011, 2013 and 2014; Nolan, 2001a, 2003 and 2013).

Moreover, *The Age* is comparatively a unique, and traditionally "Melbourne", publication. It is one of only three generalist broadsheet (or "broadsheet style") newspapers available in Australia not owned by News Limited (*Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Canberra Times*). It is often considered important as an alternative to the right wing Murdoch press (see Manne, 2005 and 2011) and continues as the only "broadsheet style" alternative to the tabloid *Herald Sun*. In addition, as Sybil Nolan argues, *The Age* is thought to have a very specific identity and one in which "key virtues of the Western journalism tradition reside" (2001a, p. 1). Patricia Edgar (1979) elucidates this further, suggesting this is based upon *The Age's* serious, independent and probing style.

This paper argues that engaging with this notion necessitates a closer examination of *The Age's* editorial identity/culture. While the concept of culture may be multifaceted (see Hanitzsch, 2007 & Hanusch, 2008), as applied to *The Age*, editorial culture/identity is arguably underpinned by *The Age's* role in the public/political sphere. In this way, and as this paper illustrates, the approach of successive editors, the style of reportage and writing, *The Age's* connection to Melbourne and its investigative unit, equate with an understanding of editorial culture and identity. It is, however, out of the scope of this paper to provide a full analysis of culture and identity under each editor. This paper limits its analysis to Graham Perkin's, Michael Davie's and Bruce Guthrie's editorship. These represent key periods in *The Age's* history and elucidate significant aspects of *The Age's* culture/identity.

This paper examines the issues noted above in detail by seeking answers to the research questions below:

- How do oral history interviews with former *Age* journalists illuminate the culture and identity of *The Age*?
- How has *The Age's* editorial direction shifted under successive editors?

Before examining these questions, the author briefly discusses previous research surrounding *The Age's* history as a traditionally influential, liberal and campaigning publication.

### Literature review

*The Age* has been an influential and campaigning publication since 1860, the year David Syme became sole owner and editor-in-chief. With the intervention of owner and editor-in-chief David Syme. Established in 1854 by John and Henry Cooke, *The Age* under the Cooke brothers had a smaller profile, low circulation, and a precarious business model (Macintyre, 1991; Sayers, 1965). *The Age's* liberal, even radical tradition was set by Ebenezer Syme (Tidey, 1997), however it was not until David Syme took over the running of *The Age* in 1860 that it was established as a significant political player.

As John Tidey has written, *The Age's* "status as a radical journal was confirmed within weeks of its launch" (Tidey, 1997, p. 1). It reached "a pinnacle of influence" at the start of the twentieth century, retaining influence that did not exist among other newspapers (Hutton and Tanner, p. x). According to Geoffrey Blainey, not only did *The Age* increase circulation among readers in Victoria, it also established a significant political impact (cited in Hutton and Tanner, p. x).

A strong example of this political impact is exemplified in what became known as *The Age* Tapes affair in the 1980s. As journalist Bob Bottom argues, *The Age* Tapes Affair is the closest that the Australian press has come to a Watergate legend in Australia (Bottom, 1984, p. 134). *The Age* Tapes was one of the most controversial stories of the 1980s. Expanding on work published earlier by the now defunct *National Times*, the affair was a series of stories which exposed "networks of influence and links between organised crime and public administration in New South Wales", becoming the basis for investigation of corruption involving the High Court Judge, Justice Lionel Murphy (Minchin, 2000, p. 80). Earlier under Graham Perkin's editorship, stories such as the campaign for the Little Dessert, the Minus Children series and the Victorian Housing Commission land scandals, among others, also created for *The Age*, significant political influence (see Hills, 2010).

The publication of the Housing Commission land deals under Perkin and *The Age* Tapes during Creighton Burns' editorship, epitomised themselves as the fourth estate stories of their era and marked the increasing willingness of editors and journalists to act in the public interest (Schultz, 1998, pp. 214-215). More importantly, according to Schultz, "the publication of *The Age* tapes marked the beginning of the third phase of investigative reporting in Australia in the 1980s" (Schultz, 1998, pp. 215). It was during this period that prominent individuals were beginning to be implicated in improper or unethical practice and the news media pursued them in traditional fourth estate style (Schultz, 1998, pp. 215). As Schultz argues, *The Age* Tapes Affair distinguished this era of fourth estate investigative reporting. The implications shook the political agenda and continued to play out in Parliament and the court for some time (Schultz, 1998). Today, *The Age* continues to promote fourth estate style journalism through its investigative team, albeit with far less impact.

In contrast to *The Age's* influence in the 1970s and 1980s, in the fifty year period between David Syme and Graham Perkin, Sybil Nolan (2001a) has shown that *The Age* became obscure and irrelevant, in terms of its political influence, circulation, design and appearance. According to Nolan (2001a), the failure of *The Age* to introduce technological changes in production, layout and editorial technique led to the ability of its competitors to gain much of *The Age's* lost ground. Accounts of the paper during these years, argue the paper was "second rate; out-dated in both outlook and appearance" (Nolan, 2001a, p. 2).

This was in addition to its political conservatism. Interestingly, *The Age* has often been criticised by political opponents as a left wing and radical publication (see Hills, 2010). In 1982, however, Martin Walker described a newspaper which had "fallen asleep in the embrace of the Liberal Party" (Walker, 1982, p. 293). Nonetheless, it was not just political conservatism that defined *The Age* during this period. Terms "querulous", "dodderly" and "turgid" were used by journalist Desmond Zwar (1980, p. 68). *The*

*Age's* conservatism in this era and the view that it had over zealously pursued the distinction of being Robert Menzies' favourite paper (Griffen-Foley, 2003, p. 179), led to the appointment of a new editor in 1966. Graham Perkin was appointed at a time when the Syme board decided to shift from the problems of the past, and establish itself as "an independent, liberal paper" (Griffen-Foley, 2003, p. 179). Perkin edited *The Age* from 1966 until 1975, the year he died of a heart attack, aged only 45. Perkin had a significant impact on *The Age* during his tenure, revitalising and refocusing its reportage (Nolan, 2001a and 2008; Hills, 2010). The years under Perkin have commonly been called by Perkin's staff, the "Golden Age" of *The Age* (Hills, 2010).

Clearly this material provides significant context for this research. However clear insights into *The Age's* culture are not apparent. According to Patricia Edgar, "analysing *The Age* means dealing with an explicitly political process" (Edgar, 1979, p. 141). Elucidating her claim further, Edgar argues "*The Age* wrestles publicly [with matters of public importance], and speaks to its readers about its own intentions with regard to [political] coverage" (Edgar, 1979, p. 141). Here, Edgar gives only a slight insight into *The Age's* identity. Given the comparative lack of literature examining *The Age*, and the recent shift from broadsheet to compact size, the issue of *The Age's* editorial culture and identity makes for an interesting and important investigation. Before examining in detail the findings of this research, below I provide a brief discussion of the methods utilised to bring about these results.

### Research methods

To answer the research questions presented above, the author utilised a historical approach. According to Bruce L. Berg, historical research is an attempt to "recapture the complex nuances, the people, meanings, events and ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present" (2009, p. 297). Previous research on *The Age* has tended to overlook historical approaches, with a few exceptions. Sybil Nolan (2001b) utilised archival research with interviews to illustrate a partial disconnect between the memory of journalists who worked under Perkin and the actual record in Graham Perkin's personal papers. The majority of journalistic histories of *The Age* have tended to rely on interviews, given that this is the journalistic method, to investigate aspects of the newspaper's past, ignoring other methods of investigation (see Tidey, 2012; Hills, 2010). In particular, Ben Hills's biography of Perkin provided no analysis or obvious use of Perkin's papers. Hence, utilising historical research which has tended to be ignored by much literature as a method provides significant potential to reveal hidden insights.

To attempt to reveal these hidden insights, archival research into the personal papers of Graham Perkin, held at the National Library of Australia, was conducted over a five day period in March 2013. The archive is unique, illustrating many aspects of the Perkin editorship, including his relationship with prominent Melbournians, his commitment to the public role of journalism through lecture notes and transcripts, as well as the internal politics of *The Age* during the 1972 and 1975 federal elections. This was a time during which newspapers were having significant influence on the political process (see Griffen-Foley, 2003). The Perkin papers are a fundamental source for any historical investigation into *The Age's* history. They are one of the few archives available to researchers which provide primary source material on *The Age* (other archives available include the Fairfax archives at the State Library of NSW). Moreover, Perkin's papers are particularly important given the ambiguity over the existence of *The Age* archives. The papers are extensive, hence the author's interest was limited to Perkin's lecture notes and transcripts and the correspondence and board memoranda which illustrate the paper's internal politics and editorial policies around the 1972, 1974 and 1975 federal elections.

In addition to archival research, I conducted a total of ten oral history interviews with the former staff of *The Age*. According to Valerie J. Janesick, oral history is the "collection of stories and reminiscences of those who have first-hand knowledge of particular experiences" (2013, p. 152). At the core of oral history according to Janesick, "we find the testimony of someone telling a story" (Janesick, 2013, p. 152). The interviews conducted were essential to fully elucidate an understanding of *The Age's* editorial culture and identity. The interviews were unstructured, in line with the principles of oral history. These principles are built around asking open ended questions and allowing the participant the freedom to speak without interruption or interrogation (see Parks and Thomson, 2003; Curthoys and McGrath, 2009). Interview

questions were not pre-fixed so that I was able to encourage interviewees to speak freely and openly about their experiences working under successive editors and their understandings of *The Age's* culture. Interview questions tended to evolve as the research evolved.

By utilising this historical approach, a more nuanced understanding of editorial culture/identity is elucidated. Much previous research has tended to focus on *one* method of investigation. In this research an attempt is made to combine stories of *The Age's* past with rigorous analysis of these stories to illuminate *The Age's* culture and illustrate how the approach of editors has shifted over time. The application of this approach has revealed insightful results as illustrated below.

### Graham Perkin, Insight and editorial identity

Graham Perkin, editor from 1966 until 1975, established *The Age* Insight investigative unit in 1973 (Perkin, 1973). According to interviewees, Insight's establishment was an important development in Australia, establishing *The Age* as a political force. Russell Skelton, Cameron Forbes, Corrie Perkin and Sally White argued Insight's establishment brought about the formation of *The Age's* editorial identity. As Russell Skelton suggested, under Perkin's editorship, *The Age*, in large part due to Insight, "went from being a fairly passive, non-reactive newspaper of record, to being a very aggressively engaged newspaper within the community and with the politicians" (R Skelton, 2013, pers. comm., 15 July).

As Cameron Forbes proposed, *The Age's* Insight investigations became "the tough edge to the paper's voice" (C Forbes, 2013, pers. comm., 25 June). The improvement of *The Age's* coverage and Insight's founding were deliberate acts intended to establish *The Age's* editorial identity as Russell Skelton expresses below:

Perkin set out to establish its [identity]. Um before that it had a very tiny readership; it was mainly an upper class sort of newspaper. It was very conservative, probably conservative to middle of the road liberal. Perkin first of all radicalised the news coverage. He started putting big pictures on page one as a regular thing, he ah gave by-lines to reporters so suddenly everyone had a visible "face" in the paper, he established an Insight team to do investigations, and then he sort of systematically targeted a number of issues which gave the paper an enormous following and big clout (R Skelton, 2013, pers. comm., 15 July).

This was an important development in *The Age's* future commercial success. As Graham Perkin's personal papers illustrate, the development of an identity for *The Age* was a key factor in obtaining new and younger readers. In a speech to the Public Relations Institute of Victoria, Perkin stated:

*The Age* more than most papers, has been a paper with a settled and established readership... But we do want to extend our appeal to a wider range of Australians and to serve these people in a more effective, more interesting and more challenging way. There is a popular myth *The Age* is not interested in selling newspapers. It *is* a myth. We are vitally interested in new readers and we will actively seek them by attempting to produce a better newspaper (Perkin, date unknown).

According to Russell Skelton, Perkin developed a large audience for *The Age* by developing its reportage and establishing *The Age* as a political player (R Skelton, 2013, pers. comm. 15 July). Perkin deeply believed in the role of newspapers as a watchdog on power of all kinds, and was particularly critical of newspapers which "ignored discomfort, disregarded injustice, and lived with administrative incompetence and governmental dishonesty" (Schultz, 1998, p. 182).

*The Age* was more than its investigative journalism however. As Sally White put to the author, "one of the things that Perkin did extremely well was being the public face of *The Age* and talking on television and radio about the state of the media" (S White, 2013, pers. comm., 16 July). Perkin's papers, however, show that Perkin delivered public speeches on topics as broad as the Vietnam War and the role of public institutions within society, as well as a range of speeches on the role and importance of a press in the democracy (Perkin, date unknown). This was a first for Australian newspapers which had traditionally

been non-reactive journals of record. The pure act of Perkin as the editor, delivering speeches in public helped to develop *The Age's* public profile and hence a very unique editorial identity.

The discussion above has focused on the establishment of *The Age's* editorial identity through Perkin's establishment and development of Insight and Perkin's commitment to developing a kind of "public face" for *The Age*. The results from the interviews appear to confirm the point made earlier that editorial culture and identity are underpinned by *The Age's* role in the public/political sphere. Interestingly, there exists little dissent in the views of *Age* journalists on the issue of Perkin's improvement of the paper. The senior journalists who worked under him have a fond and nostalgic memory of the times spent under his editorship. Below, the discussion moves from the Perkin editorship to Michael Davie's editorship, illustrating oral histories of *The Age's* editorial culture.

### Michael Davie and *The Age's* editorial culture

In contrast to Perkin's editorship, *The Age* under Davie's editorship moved beyond a focus on political coverage and hard news stories to bring broader Melbourne perspectives into the paper. Davie, an Englishman was brought to *The Age* from the *Observer* in London and edited *The Age* from 1979 until 1981. As Russell Skelton explained, *The Age* under Perkin had developed a very strong "news breaking culture" (R Davie, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August). This culture was focused on the enormous political change occurring in the early 1970s (R Davie, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August). However, according to Skelton, Davie was far more interested in the big personalities which were influencing Melbourne and its culture (R Skelton, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August). Davie was astonished that top artists such as Fred Williams, constitutional thinkers such as Colin Howards and intellectuals and academics weren't part of *The Age* domain and Davie set about bringing these kind of voices into the paper (R Skelton, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August). According to Skelton, Davie hired very good accomplished *writers* and *The Age* developed a significant writing element under Davie's editorship (R Skelton, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August). This combined with the kind of reportage *The Age* published (which was based on the city of Melbourne and the key thinkers influencing it) resulted in a real sophistication according to Skelton. When asked what Davie's contribution to *The Age* was Skelton replied:

Sophistication I think. And um it was more nuanced and was a bit more complex and as a result it made it a bit more appealing and – I mean the independence was firmly established by previous editors so I mean he of course didn't touch that but I think he broadened the paper out, made it less of a political beast and more of a social/political beast, made it far more sort of culturally aware. The Perkin paper was really very intensely political...although it ran big social justice campaigns and Davie did too... but it was Davie who took the broader view (R Skelton, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August).

Arguably, under Davie, *The Age* developed a sophisticated culture, particularly with regards to its writing and reportage. Interestingly though, Corrie Perkin, daughter of Graham Perkin, criticises *The Age's* writing culture under Davie:

When I first started at *The Age* and I looked to people who were sort of middle rung and senior journalists and they referred to themselves as, you know, writers of *The Age*. And I thought god my dad would have rolled around in his grave with hearing that because what you actually were – you were reporters and there was nothing particularly special about that. You were supposed to be the anonymous voice that reported accurately and independently and without fear or favour on news stories. *You weren't a celebrity and you weren't a writer* (C Perkin, 2013, pers. comm., 5 August).

Perkin's perspective is interesting, especially because one of the first things Graham Perkin did was give his reporters by-lines, thus giving them a public face. As the microfiche copies of *The Age* show, by the end of Perkin's editorship, all the most significant political stories were labelled with the author's by-line. Moreover, as *The Age's* circulation levels show (see Tidey, 1997), the style of Davie's approach in his broadening of *The Age's* journalism to writing *as well as* reportage and giving influential Melbournians a

voice in the paper, gave it a large following. It seems as if Perkin's criticism above is a criticism of *The Age's* culture under Michael Davie. Her point that journalists were the anonymous voice that reported accurately and independently seems to connect with journal of record notions (on journal of record see Simons and Buller, 2013). Interestingly, this tends to be anathema to the kind of editorial identity that Graham Perkin so passionately set out to develop. Moreover, Sybil Nolan (2001a) illustrates the way in which *The Age* was obscure when it was a journal of record. Below, the author examines the impact of structural changes occurring at *The Age* in the 1980s and 1990s. These changes were antithetical to the kind of editorial culture and identity developed during Perkin and Davie's editorships.

### *The Age's* editorial culture/identity in the 1980s and 1990s

As illustrated above, *The Age* under Perkin and Davie developed a culture that was politically influential and deeply connected to Melbourne and the key thinkers influencing it. In contrast, as former *Age* journalists argue, *The Age's* takeover by Fairfax in 1983 (see Souter, 1992) signalled the beginning of the end of *The Age's* Melbourne identity. As Corrie Perkin suggested in interviews, this takeover led to a significant disjuncture between *The Age* and the community it represents:

The Sydney ownership of David Syme and Company really, I believe, signalled the beginning of the end of *The Age* as a Melbourne brand. And we see that today with journalists interviewing people and you know, referring to themselves as from Fairfax Media, rather than *The Age*... I don't think Sydney has really understood the place that [*The Age*] has in the hearts of its citizens and they have over many years systematically just chipped away at that confidence that we've had in our newspaper (C Perkin, 2013, pers. comm., 5 August).

Perkin's perspective is interesting, particularly in contrast the relationship between the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. The current financial situation surrounding Fairfax and the increasing integration of *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* underlines the issue of editorial culture. As John Tidey suggests the financial problems with the Fairfax company and the amalgamation of content between *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* underlines issues of culture and identity "in the sense that the word amorphous comes to mind" (J Tidey, 2013, pers. comm., 17 June). From Tidey's perspective, *The Age* is no longer a bold, proud, independent, Melbourne institution, rather a "curious tabloid filled up with journalism by people who are just a likely to be on the *Sydney Morning Herald* as *The Age*" (J Tidey, 2013, pers. comm., 17 June). Hence Tidey illustrates a key fracture line in *The Age's* unique history. More importantly, Perkin's and Tidey's perspectives illustrate the importance of Melbourne based management. As interviewees revealed, the centralisation of *Age* management in Sydney following the departure of Ranald Macdonald (managing director between 1964 until 1983) also contributed to a key fracture line in *The Age's* traditions. Up until this point, *The Age* not only had a Melbourne owner, but a management that was deeply entrenched into the paper.

This disjuncture between a Melbourne based newspaper owned by a Sydney based company was a common theme emerging from interviews. Another key theme communicated by interviewees was the Bruce Guthrie's editorship (1995-1997). Interestingly, in interviews, Guthrie took the concept of editorial culture in a different direction. According to Guthrie, *The Age* was at its best when it was questioning authority, holding institutions to account and acting as a fourth estate (B Guthrie, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August). As Guthrie maintained in interviews, *The Age* campaigned aggressively on political issues, including the size of the Melbourne casino and aspects of the Kennett government, including education and health policy, thus fulfilling its fourth estate role (B Guthrie, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August).

What is most interesting about Guthrie's editorship however, in terms of editorial culture, is the way in which the structural changes occurring during his editorship appear to represent key departures from fourth estate principles. Guthrie gives some insight into this below:

There was this constant tension to get on with politicians [during my editorship] which I think really, you know, you talk about the [culture of *The Age*]. . That was a fundamental misunderstanding of

[culture and identity] of *The Age*. The [culture] of *The Age* was to hold those people to account whether they be Premiers, Prime Ministers, backbenchers, ministers, heads of industry, *The Age's* proper role was to say we're going to hold you accountable. And here I was in a board meeting being told that the most important thing was to get on with these people (B Guthrie, 2013, pers. comm., 7 August).

Hence, while Guthrie clearly articulated a fourth estate manifestation of editorial culture and identity in interviews, the approach of Fairfax management to *The Age's* traditions appears to have undermined *The Age* and its role in the public/political sphere.

### Conclusion

Previous research has tended to neglect *The Age* as a subject for scholarly research. Much current research focuses on David Syme and tends to epitomise a "Golden Age" perspective. Australian literature tends to be limited to studies written by journalists, with the exception of some scholarly research (Morrison, 2013; Nolan, 2001a, 2008 and 2013). The contribution of the research presented earlier to an understanding of editorial culture/identity is limited, tends to emphasise its liberal and independent traditions, while focusing on the 1980s. As this paper illustrates, *The Age's* history is far more nuanced than the picture painted by much of the literature.

Moreover, this paper illustrates the following definitive shifts in *The Age's* editorial direction. Under Graham Perkin, *The Age* was developed as a very aggressively engaged political news breaker. This was given expression especially through *The Age* Insight unit. In addition, Perkin developed a "public face" for *The Age* by regularly giving public lectures and appearing on radio and television. Michael Davie's approach developed *The Age* beyond political coverage with sophisticated thinking and sophisticated writing. The editorships of Perkin and Davie were *The Age's* high point, in terms of political influence, intelligence/ sophistication and circulation. Under Bruce Guthrie *The Age* interrogated political power and developed itself along strong fourth estate lines.

In conclusion, this paper illustrates how oral history interviews illuminate interesting aspects of *The Age's* editorial culture and identity. As this paper reveals, former *Age* journalists understand editorial culture/identity in the following ways: as a commitment to the public role of journalism (as exemplified by Perkin above); in relation to investigative reportage, particularly with regards to Insight; as a commitment to reporting Melbourne and the key thinkers influencing it; and holding powerful people and powerful institutions to account. Interestingly, the contemporary discussion surrounding the weakening of Fairfax and its flagship newspapers links this weakening to the influence of the internet and the breakdown of the business model. As former *Age* journalists argue however, the original decline in *The Age* relates to Fairfax's encroachment on a manifestly Melbourne institution.

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