

- Thank you etc etc.

I feel like the prodigal son. Returning home after 36 years, even if only for a day.

- And I can't think of a better reason to return. Dick Wordley was an amazing character - nothing like the journos we were encouraged to admire in the good old days at *The 'tiser*.

- Dick was passionate, enjoyed a drink, nudge nudge, wink

... and nailed his colours to the mast.

YES, HE MAY HAVE BEEN A LITTLE TOO  
UPON CLAIRVOYANTS SOLVING MURDERS -  
A LITTLE TOO READY TO DIG UP THE CONCRETE,  
BUT WHAT THE HECK?

I first got to know him about 20 years ago in the early

days of *60 Minutes*.

— I persuaded Gerald Stone, the Executive Producer, that Dick's hobby ... repossessing children abducted by non-custodial parents - might be a good yarn.

Dick agreed and we followed him to Spain where he

— eventually made his move in a restaurant, grabbed his <sup>QUARRY</sup> ~~target~~ and fled to the coast with the Guardia Civil in hot pursuit.

It was all too much for our freelance cameraman, who

— decided his liberty was worth more than a story for Australian television.

So our report ended with still pictures on a fishing boat taking our triumphant raiding party to safety in Gibraltar.

— It wasn't a bad yarn, actually. Although Dick was deeply offended by the title on the introductory graphic ... *The Kidnapper*.

— Still he didn't stop calling me - almost always with stories of crime and corruption.

He seemed to have a hotline to hell.

— He helped us break many stories in the years that followed and I was always impressed by his passionate love of justice and hatred for injustice. You couldn't shut him up - <sup>AND HE ALWAYS SEEMED TO REVERSE THE CHARGES</sup> which meant that for a while, my phone bill matched Peter Reith's.

— It was a vastly different experience from the dusty, desiccated corridors of *The Advertiser*.

There I was taught the virtues of good grammar and the importance of being able to master Pitmans at 120 words

— a minute. I never made it.

THERE WERE SOME GREAT JOURNOS THEN.  
 MAX FATCHEN, STEWART COCKBURN, DES COLQUHOUN ...  
 BUT MOST OF

~~All~~ the sentences seemed to me to be too long and back to front.

— For instance: South Australia had a long and prosperous future, provided the union movement dropped its <sup>RIDICULOUS</sup> demand for a 50-hour week and the cherry harvest didn't fail, the Premier, Sir Thomas Playford, said yesterday.

I also recall that *The 'tiser* used to run half a column photographs. Regular readers were rewarded at Christmas with a magnifying glass.

Coward that I was, I fled to the sunrise industry of television.

Well, sort of.

My first job was News Director. Not bad eh? A News Director at 24.

The station was SES-8 Mt Gambier - wedged between the cemetery and the legendary Blue Lake.

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And I have to admit that the News Director was the only employee in the newsroom.

Responsible for writing and editing six 30-minute bulletins a week and a 15-minute show on Sunday.

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I was also required to shoot film of fetes and car crashes. I wasn't the newsreader though. I lack the charisma. A local accountant did that job.

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After a while, I was joined by a deputy news director - Richard Wienckel who has accused me in the past of ignoring his Herculean contributions. Well, Richard, thanks for everything, but remember you left even before I did.

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— Ah, the good old days.

There was no current affairs on commercial TV then.

— Only news and, if a big story broke <sup>OVERSEAS</sup> you had to wait two or three days for the pictures to arrive.

It was long before the time that vinegary television writers started asking whether TV news was information or entertainment. That would have been far too deep for us.

— We didn't even know if our fledgling industry would last.

**INFORMATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?**

— Having got circuitously to the point, lets address it.

In my view, journalists sought to entertain their readers long before John Logie Baird tuned in his black and white receiver.

Elbert Hubbard wasn't referring to television when he said an editor's job was to separate the wheat from the chaff and then print the chaff.

Facts do not speak for themselves. Our job is to arrange them in palatable order and eliminate the irrelevant. And, yes, the boring bits.

I don't see any shame in that - provided we're not guilty of over-simplification or distortion.



— But, of course, not everyone agrees with me.

I'm referring to the W.B.D. school of journalism. W.B.D. - incidentally - stands for worthy but dull.

— To them, information is like medicine. If you like it, it's not doing you any good.

My point is there's no point in having the best story in the world, if no one's prepared to sit and listen.

— What service do we do to any good cause by making it indigestible and sending the nation into a coma? We have the ABC for that.

- The challenge to all journalists - not just those of us who work in television - is to tell an important story in an interesting way.

I'll be honest.

- In commercial television, there is a performance imperative. In prime time, we have to attract a mass audience.

- No apologies.

It's a case of popular or perish.

And yes ... some issues, at face value, don't get the

- turnstiles clicking.

We've all heard the dictum that, aboriginal stories don't rate. That complicated economic or legal issues are beyond the intellectual reach, let alone the appetite of the audience.

The answer is not to throw up our hands and walk away.

*WE DO*  
If we do the nation a dis-service.

And, despite public perceptions, few stories of earth-shaking consequence haven't been told on commercial television ... yes... and in prime time.

It's always been a challenge to expose racist elements in

Australia. *SOME OF THE AUDIENCE FEELS THREATENED AND UNCOMFORTABLE,*

As Pauline Hanson proved before she imploded, there are a lot of rednecks out there. I suspect we - and Ray Martin in particular - lost quite a few fans when we kept quizzing her about her ill-considered beliefs. Let's hope her self-destruction has made racism unfashionable.

Frankly, I doubt it has.

Another champion of intolerance will arrive before too long.

As I said, we have to try harder <sup>IN TELEVISION</sup> to tell the stories that matter - stories that will affect our future.

Find an angle - don't try to write the history of the world on the head of a pin. If necessary, chose a key element of a story and cover it well.

It is almost impossible to examine every detail in an hour  
- let alone 5-minutes.

Frankly, television is not the best medium for conveying  
information. Unless you spend hours on the replay  
button, words are spoken and vanish. There is such a  
thing as too much information - or verbal overload.

Television's great strength lies in conveying a mood or  
impression.

We have a lot of tools at our disposal to deliver  
information. Music, visual effects and so on. And, if the  
audience gets emotionally involved ~~and make it palatable~~  
- whether it be laughter, anger or tears - so much the  
better.

That, after all, is the true meaning of sensationalism.

Appealing to the emotions.

Avoid beat-ups. Be wary of miracle cures. If the Catholic

Church sees the need for a devil's advocate, why can't we?

The public is getting ~~too~~ wise. There are too many people on our case, and I welcome them, sometimes at personal expense. We must put our own house in order and I think we are ... but there are still a few mongrels doing their business on the carpet!

It all comes down to TRUST.

Journalists must be sick of hearing that we're on the nose.

We've only got ourselves to blame. There have been TOO many short cuts - too many inaccuracies. And now, some people hate us. How we get them to like us again is the big question.

We'll never get them all back. Nor should we. Our craft depends on <sup>GETTING</sup> ~~nailing~~ some people <sup>OFFSIDE</sup> ... - the silvertails, the shonks and so on.

But we'll only persuade the ordinary digger and his wife to trust us long term by showing decency and dependability day in, day out. And maybe we should be quicker to punish those who bring us into disrepute.

After all, most of us aren't bad people. some of my best friends are journalists ... and since I became an interviewee, I don't think anyone has seriously misquoted me or taken me out of context. Mind you, I have been known to misquote myself a few times - particularly after lunch.

## THE FUTURE

Well, of course, the future is now.

In the beginning, was the WORD and the WORD, courtesy of Caxton, was in print and the WORD was print.



Then there was radio and television news, and current affairs, and lifestyle programs and reality programs and now artificial reality programs. Otherwise known as "lab rat TV".

A lot of you will have seen *Survivor*, where Richard Hatch fished and schemed his way to a million dollars.

Well, there's more to come.

Like *Big Brother* where two dozen cameras and 50 microphones track 10 people's every moment in a purpose built house. For 100 days they have no contact with the outside world, but by the end only one is left standing. The others have been voted out by their housemates or the television audience.

—  
Newspaper coverage of *Big Brother* in England was massive. So big that, when *Nasty Nick* was expelled from the house, he got more column inches than the Russian submariners lost on the Kurtz.

—  
There are now two new adaptations of this genre.

—  
One's called *Orange Taxi* where the lucky contestants not only have to shack up together but get to drive a cab as well. And my personal favourite from Germany ... *Big Blubber*. In this version 10 fat people are locked in a house. Every week, the one who loses the least weight is thrown out. And the lucky winner is rewarded with the equivalent of the pounds he or she has shed in gold  
—  
bullion.

Where is it all going to end? God knows.

When is it all going to end? Pretty soon, I reckon.

This sort of stuff is Top 40 television. What's hot one week is stone cold the next.

I'll leave the web alone because I'm too old to understand it and sick of getting withering looks whenever I ask a bespectacled nerd "how are you ever going to make any money out of it?"

When I started in television, at SES-8, News was the only option for a journalist in television. Last year, I was asked to nominate the number of shows for which I was

– supposed to accept some degree of responsibility and it came to 23.

I think it's now about 25.

– So, even in the sunset industry of free-to-air television, the appetite for information appears to be insatiable.

– And whatever you read about commercial television being on the nose, you'll note that news, current affairs, lifestyle and reality shows, made by Australians for Australians, are among the most popular items on the menu.

– But, like my mother once said, is popularity a cheap virtue?

Is the worthy stodge of yesteryear being replaced by the

So-called

froth and bubble of shows like *Harry's Practice*, *Backyard*

*Blitz* and *Changing Rooms*?

Answer YES.

Well, not replaced exactly, but overwhelmed.

I know that many among you probably only ever watch

the ABC - unless there's a particularly lubricious movie on

SBS. There's a certain cachet that comes from viewing

the ABC. It's a bit like membership of the Melbourne

Club. Of course, if everyone who claimed to watch the

ABC actually watched the ABC, I wouldn't have a job and

neither would hundreds of others at Nine, Seven and Ten.

The ABC has not moved with the times. I don't know if it even wants to move at all and if it does, it certainly doesn't know in which direction.

*The 7.30 Report* by all accounts is a dead duck. Maybe John Doherty would like to confirm that. And it's not a dead duck just because the shiny pants at Aunty decided to centralise it in Sydney but because a whole host of other information programs have been thrown against it on just about every night of the week. This week for instance, there was *Great Outdoors*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Our House*, *Getaway* and *Burke's Backyard* ...

— all on at 7.30 ... all well produced, all popular, particularly with the ABC's over 40 audience.

The ABC does many things extraordinarily well. It's a splendid training ground for commercial television. *Four*

— *Corners* and *This Day Tonight* were the pioneers. But

*Four Corners* these days often takes 45 minutes to tell a <sup>STORY THAT NOWADAYS IS WORTH MORE THAN 15</sup> ~~15-minute~~ story. The format has reached it used-by date and the ratings show most Australians agree with me.

— But first and foremost the ABC must decide if it wants to get locked in a ratings battle with the commercial networks. It can produce top rating shows like *SeaChange* - damn them!

— But most of its popular fare is imported - like *The Bill*.

The one thing that no one has discussed - to my knowledge anyway - is that there's a huge audience out there that none of the commercial stations really want. I'm talking about the over 50's. The advertisers don't want them. Kerry Stokes has found the upper limit of his target audience at 38. Channel 10 loses interest in its viewers almost as soon as they reach puberty ...and Channel 9 is becoming embarrassed that some of its viewers are as old as I am.

So there's your opportunity, Auntie.

27 percent of Australians are over 50 and they're becoming increasingly unloved as commercial television becomes more and more ageist.



We all know that older viewers are more loyal and less fickle than their sons and daughters. Also they are more conservative.

So here's a way the ABC can reconquer the heartland, stop the budget cuts, and win over John Howard at the same time - even if it costs a few lefties their job. I'm only half joking, by the way. One of the big issues of the future is the alienation of older viewers.

And there's another big issue on the horizon.

No doubt many of you despair at the quality of some Australian television shows. So do I - none of them on

Nine of course.

But, inevitably, there will be more and more television channels - requiring more and more content.

And as the number of stations increases, the number of viewers on each station will shrink.

The result - more programs required on smaller budgets.

And, if that's not a recipe for mountains of crap, I don't know what is. It will be a brave management that spends millions of dollars a year on an off-peak program like *Sunday* in that sort of climate.

And while I've got the crystal ball out - another fearless prediction.

Less and less television will be produced in Adelaide or anywhere else for that matter - except Sydney and Melbourne.

- Remember when Ernie Sigley hosted a tonight show here? Never again.

Networking is the go. Channel 10 couldn't see the point of firing up a studio so George and Nikki could read

- Adelaide news in Adelaide. It deported them to Melbourne. Did Adelaide care? Not really - judging by the ratings.

In fact, Channel 10 News usually gets a better audience

- share in Adelaide than Melbourne.

Maybe they should read the Melbourne News out of Adelaide. Maybe distance does lend enchantment.

That said, Channel Nine here has done well with *Postcards for South Australia*. Not exactly big budget stuff - but very watchable, well presented and it brings a rosy glow to my South Australian heart. And, of course, we "stole" the idea - that's stole in quotes - and transported it to Western Australia and Victoria.

Yes, we have to keep one eye on the bottom line but we should keep the other on the parish pump.

- Here again is an opportunity for the ABC to swing against the tide - an activity it should have perfected by now - and service its local markets.

Parochialism pays.

I'm reluctant to end this on a serious note, but I think the quality of the audience and the tone of the occasion demand it.

- We spend too much time debating non-issues such as whether information can possibly be entertaining or entertainment can be informative.

What matters is that every shade of opinion and every

- colour of thought should have an outlet somewhere. I'm

– particularly proud that for 19 years Nine has presented the *Sunday* program.

I won't pretend a lot of people watch it - not nearly as many as say they do. It's our private ABC. But when it comes to the image of the Nine Network as an agenda setter and a forum for debate, no program is more important.

Some critics have suggested we schedule *Sunday* in prime time in place of *60 Minutes*. That, of course, is stupid. It would struggle against the ~~prime time~~ competition and we'd end up having to sack the staff. Not a good outcome for them, or us or, I suspect, Australia.

- Many shows we produce, be it *Sunday, Business Sunday, The Small Business Show* or *Dot.Com.TV*, would never make it in prime time.

- The important thing is that we cover the bases and service their constituencies - that their voices be heard.

- We saw only recently how a torch lit up a nation. We carry another torch - in our uncertain, fallible hands - and it's more important even than the Olympic Torch, so let's not stumble too often.

- As for Dick Wordley, he should have the last word. He was on his deathbed when I sent him some flowers and a note with lame wishes for his recovery saying, "for once,

- Dick, the story doesn't come first."

DICK MAY HAVE BEEN DYING, BUT HE WAS IN NO DOUBT.

~~His response, I'm told,~~ was "the story still comes first."

And those I'm told were his final words.

Cheers mate.