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❖ In conversation with Bridget Griffen-Foley

Neville Petersen — Interviewer

Associate Professor Bridget Griffen-Foley is the Director of the Centre for Media History, established at Macquarie University. She is the convenor of the ARC Cultural Research Network's Media Histories node and the Australian Media History database and listserv. Associate Professor Griffen-Foley writes a regular media column for Australian Book Review, and serves on the Library Council of NSW, the editorial board of Media International Australia, and the NSW Working Party of the Australian Dictionary of Biography. Since completing her PhD thesis at Macquarie University in 1996, she has been specialising in the history of the Australian media. Associate Professor Griffen-Foley spoke to Neville Petersen, the former ABC journalist, academic and author of *News not Views*; *the ABC, the Press and Politics, 1932-1947* and *Whose news? Organisational Conflict in the ABC, 1947-1999*.

Petersen: Now Bridget, what led to your interest in media history research in the first place?

Griffen-Foley: *I'd always been interested in the media as such. My paternal grandfather was actually a founding member of the Australian Journalists' Association and my late father was also a journalist, sub-editor and worked for Sir Frank Packer. He was on the Daily and Sunday Telegraph. I guess I had ink in the veins as it were and as I was studying history at [Macquarie] University, I was particularly interested in political history and began to realise that not a great deal of research into the history of the Australian media had been undertaken. There were certain studies and books that I just assumed would have been written that weren't there. So I really identified a gap in the field and started to set out to try, in my modest way, to fill some of those gaps.*

Petersen: So what did you do for your PhD?

Griffen-Foley: *My honours thesis actually was on how the press portrayed Dr. H. V. [Herbert Vere] Evatt. It was during that project I realised that there had been remarkably little written about the history of Australian Consolidated Press, then one of the biggest media companies in Australia, and that there had only been one biography of Sir Frank Packer, the so-called legendary press baron. This biography had been something of a hagiography as it was written*

*by one his employees. For my PhD thesis I decided to write a history of Australian Consolidated Press. I began with the company rather than with the individual and focused on the company's history under Sir Frank. I focused on the period from the 1930s up until his death in 1974 and the thesis formed the basis of my first book, *The House of Packer* (1999).*

Petersen: And you've written others since haven't you on Packer?

Griffen-Foley: *Yes, in the course of doing that thesis, and finishing the book that it generated, I was asked to write the article on Sir Frank for the Australian Dictionary of Biography, and that required a good deal of additional research concerning Sir Frank's non-media activities. Obviously his marriage, his childhood, his upbringing, his role as a father, his sporting activities, were quite diverse and quite considerable. As I was doing that I began to realise that there really still was room for a biography of Sir Frank. There were other things I wanted to say and to cover that I couldn't cover in a company history. So my second book, *The Young Master: A Biography of Sir Frank Packer*, came out a year after the company history. So I ended up with two books on the Packer dynasty.*

Petersen: How much cooperation did you get from the Packer family?

Griffen-Foley: *I didn't get active cooperation from the company or from Kerry Packer. But there were no obstacles put in my way. So far as I'm aware no one was told not to speak to me. I had considerable cooperation from members of the Packer family. Sir Frank's sister Kathleen, Lady Stening, I was able to interview her a number of times. She had some papers, some wonderful photographs which hadn't really been in the public domain. I was very fortunate to have her cooperation. I did conduct some phone interviews with Clyde Packer, Kerry's brother, and had some other contacts with others members of the family. As I say, there were no obstacles placed in my path. However, there was never a Frank Packer manuscript collection as such - there was not one and I did not have access to one. And I also did not have access to internal company archives such as there were. There are not really ACP archives as there are Fairfax archives. The material has been dispersed. I do not think there has been the same level of interest in history as displayed in the venerable old Fairfax Company and there is also some Herald and Weekly Times material. That is not really the case for Australian Consolidated Press. That really did mean that I had to think very creatively about the sorts of sources I could use without having one core collection. So that meant there was a lot of detective work required.*

Petersen: Was there any family reaction to your book?

Griffen-Foley: *Well not as such. I think from memory I was able to give Lady Stening a copy of the first book, which was *The House of Packer*, but sadly she died before the second book, the biography of Sir Frank Packer. I was obviously quite looking forward to giving her that. These studies were in no way authorised - I also preferred not to think of them as unauthorised either. I set out to write these books as a serious scholar. I was not looking to do a salacious exposé either. So it would have been nice to have had perhaps some reaction from Lady Stening. Though I would have been sure that there were parts of the book she would not like. When the second book came out, the biography, there was actually then a two-page feature on the book that ran in the *Bulletin* which was then owned by the Packers. It was a very positive review -extremely positive - lovely photos. While I do not know the circumstances behind the appearance of that review, it was quite satisfying to see that the company did not think I had done a complete hatchet job and indicated that this was quite an*

important book. I actually found that very gratifying even though I was not writing this to get great accolades from ACP or Kerry Packer.

Petersen: You are now the director of the Centre for Media History at Macquarie? What led to this being set up?

Griffen-Foley: *I am actually a graduate of Macquarie. I did my graduate work – my PhD - and I wrote my thesis on ACP there. I re-joined Macquarie as a research fellow about five years ago and as my time went on there I realised that there were a number of people working at Macquarie who had an interest in either the history of the media or the way in which history is presented in the media and by the time we got to 2007 there was the possibility of setting up some new areas of research strength at Macquarie. Universities, I think, are increasingly looking at thinking strategically about what their concentrations of research excellence should be and there were enough of us working in humanities departments at Macquarie to constitute a mass of researchers interested in this area. There's no other media history centre in Australia: it is something of a growth area. It has been growing within the academy, even outside the academy in recent years, as you would know yourself, but there was no one place to act as a centre of activity in the field. We set up this centre in mid 2007. People such as Marnie Hughes Warrington, an expert on film history, Michelle Arrow, who's done a great deal of work on the history of popular culture and on women playwrights particularly on radio, Murray Goot, who is the leading expert on public opinion polling in Australia is also there. So, there were a number of other scholars as well, and we were able to form this centre around our research interests.*

Petersen: How would you describe its aims?

Griffen-Foley: *The aims are to foster interdisciplinary research and research excellence in the field of media history. We're certainly not limiting ourselves to Australian media history. That is obviously my area of expertise but a number of my colleagues have interests beyond Australia. We are already working on some collaborative projects together, in different combinations. We can organise events whether they be small one-off seminars or whether they be public lectures or whether they be fuller symposia or conferences and we also want to create a nurturing environment for postgraduate students working in the field. We have a number of postgraduate students working on relevant theses who are associate members of the Centre and the fact that the Centre now exists I think is also (and I can say twelve months into its formation) working as something of a magnet for people who may be considering working on media history to contact us and to think about actually working with us at Macquarie.*

Petersen: What kind of resources can you give to such students?

Griffen-Foley: *At present because [the centre is] very much in its infancy, the sort of support we can offer them is principally intellectual/academic. We can include them in seminar programs. For instance, the first couple of events we held were seminars involving quite senior media historians from outside Macquarie, but we would schedule a postgraduate student to speak on the same day to present a work in progress paper in order to widen the audience for their work and give them and us the opportunity to find out what their work is and to think through issues and so forth and to fit them within some kind of historiographical tradition. We are able to connect up with other resources in the field. Through an ARC (Australian Research Council) Network [the Cultural Research Network], I run a Media History Database. So our students have easy access to that database. I also run a listserv so they know I'm doing that*

and I can talk about their research on the listserv or they can contribute to it and we can basically get discussions going using the Centre at Macquarie, the database, the listserv, to build up a sort of core mass in the field and to build up a really collegial environment where dialogue can take place. But we would like to think that we can also build postgraduate involvement in some of our projects. We did get a grant to work on a media reception database. A number of us in the centre got that grant and as our postgraduate students interview media consumers their work can actually be uploaded to the database and that could be made available to other researchers. So they're contributing their own scholarly work that is of considerable value to hopefully a wider audience than just us in the Centre.

Petersen: How does the work at the Centre relate to contemporary media?

Griffen-Foley: *We do define media history quite broadly and generously. I think it's obviously difficult to draw a line between where you say something is historical and something isn't. There are lots of media, communications, and journalism departments around Australia and you know they all have considerable strengths and merit. The thing that distinguishes us is that we concentrate on media history research. Having said that, we don't draw an arbitrary line, as I said, between what is contemporary and what isn't. So we're quite prepared to look at studies centred on the 1980s, studies centred on the sort of evolution of converging media and so forth. We would like to think that the work that we do as individual scholars and as collaborators often does have some contemporary relevance. That it helps us to look at this very complex media environment that we're in now in Australia, and of course globally, and try to think critically about how we reached this point, what sort of trends might we be able to identify and so forth. So hopefully we can play some sort of useful role as well. We are certainly not an archive and we're certainly not going to become one, but by encouraging the preservation of archival material, we hope we will help to convince media practitioners and media corporations that their history is important; that it is worthy of critical analysis, and for those things to take place we do actually need access to material documenting the evolution of the media.*

Petersen: Now tell me about this huge current research grant that you have for the project of developing A Companion to Australian Media, what does that involve?

Griffen-Foley: *At the moment I'm finishing off a history of commercial radio in Australia [Changing Stations] and then I'm going to embark upon this very ambitious project which is designed to be a wide-ranging study of the media in Australia, basically from Australia's first newspaper, the Sydney Gazette in 1803, up to the present day. We don't have in Australia any one big book on the history of Australian media. We have lots of valuable studies of aspects of Australian media to which you yourself have contributed in a most distinguished way. I've done discrete studies, my colleagues have done studies, but I wanted a more cohesive, coherent, wide-ranging study. The companion model is built upon, earlier companions to other aspects of Australia society. We have had Oxford companions to Australian music, Australian sport, Australian history, Australian politics. Currency Press and Cambridge University Press have also published companions, but we haven't had one that is about Australian media. So I'm going to be producing and editing this study. It will consist of several hundred thousand words and entries both large and small on a range of different topics. There will be some entries on individual media outlets. There'll be some biographical entries, although I don't want to duplicate the contents of the Australian Dictionary of Biography. There will also be more*

sweeping essays on things such as media audiences, the press in New South Wales, commercial television in Australia, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. We are going to have a mixture of large and small entries in this volume. I will write a number of them myself, but I will also be commissioning a range of scholars and also hopefully some media practitioners to contribute discrete entries to this volume that is going to take four to five years to produce.

Petersen: Do you have a publisher?

Griffen-Foley: *I am in talks with a publisher. There is also the question of what sort of online presence a study such as this should have. If you think of a study on the media coming out in sometime like 2013, it may well be the case that I should think about having an online presence, something that media practitioners and students, in particular, can go to with the click of a button. It will have some sort of capacity then to enable me, as the editor, to update the contents because inevitably, the media evolves. So the relationship between the print volume and an online presence is going to have to be worked out.*

Petersen: Will you have any trouble finding all the contributors you need?

Griffen-Foley: *I hope not. I will be relying on the intellectual curiosity and generosity of scholars in the field. We have had in Australia a tradition of great scholarly works which are multi-authored and edited, the contents being contributed on a voluntary basis by scholars. That has happened with the Australia Dictionary of Biography. It has happened with all of the companions that we have seen to date. I'm hoping that most media people will be so excited about the invitation they receive for one or more entries, that they will be willing to contribute their expertise to this volume.*

Petersen: Can I just ask you about an apparent dichotomy in both, with the Companion and the Centre for Media History? You are up against if you like, a current culture in which people want instant information. They want it now, they don't seem as prepared to reflect about the nature of the material at their disposal or seek multiple sources or that kind of thing. How much of a problem do you see that as being?

Griffen-Foley: *I think you're right. That is a considerable issue. Having said that, I think there is now such an abundance of information out there that people can feel completely swamped and overwhelmed by it. The world of Google really is an overwhelming one. I would like to think that scholars and media practitioners, particularly younger ones, as they've grown up with this amorphous mass out there, will look increasingly for credible sources of information. This is information and insight that has already been through some sort of vetting process in its own right and which is a respectable, reputable, judicious kind of source. If we think about something like the Australia Dictionary of Biography, it is still producing hard copy volumes, a print edition, but it did go online a couple of years ago and it is now getting millions of hits. These articles in the ADB are considered, measured, impeccably researched, very carefully fact checked and so forth and they're not suffering from any sort of reticence on the part of the consumer. The online presence has actually opened up a whole new audience, thirsty for a sort of credible source of information about the people who've made our country what it is today.*

Petersen: You've been closely associated with the ADB haven't you, for many years?

Griffen-Foley: Yes.

Petersen: How many contributions might you have made?

Griffen-Foley: *I think I've probably made about fourteen. I hope I'm not exaggerating, but I've been on the New South Wales Working Party, which is like the New South Wales editorial board, since around 2000. And, I've also, as you say, contributed a number of entries. It has been a terrific privilege to serve on that. I actually replaced Gavin Souter on the New South Wales Working Party. Gavin, of course, is the very distinguished historian of Fairfax. When he decided to retire after decades of service, they wanted someone with expertise on the history of the Australian media and I was asked to go on it. I think I can say that I remain the youngest member of it, but I love it. One of my colleagues was telling me the other night that he's been on it for thirty-one years. So I suspect I'm going to be on it for a long time yet and that's great, and it has also allowed me to think about not just the subjects about whom I've written. I've written about journalists, public relations consultants, radio broadcasters, etc. In the course of doing that it has opened my eyes to great voluntary collaborative endeavours and the sorts of issues that are entailed in creating these sorts of multi-authored works such as this and I think that my experience with the ADB helped lead me in the direction of deciding to do A Companion to the Australian Media.*

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