

❖ **'In conversation with Gaven Morris', Head, Continuous News at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation – ABC News 24**

Interviewer — Antonio Castillo, University of Sydney



Photo: Jessica Carter

Mr Gaven Morris is the Head, Continuous News at Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ABC News 24. Previously, Mr Morris was Head of Planning at *Al Jazeera English*. He has also been a Senior Planning Editor, News Editor, Reporter, Business News Editor at *CNN* and a former political correspondent and Bureau Manager at *Network Ten Australia*. He spoke to Dr Antonio Castillo, founding editor of *Global Media Journal*, Australian edition

**Castillo:** The first thing that I would like to talk to you about is the launch of ABC News 24. It was launched in the middle of a major political election and competing against SKY TV. I would just like to hear from you, your assessment: the post mortem assessment of the election coverage.

**Morris:** Yes exactly, lots of people say it was very courageous decision. As you know, a new channel in the middle of an election campaign, probably with not quite as much lead up time as we were expecting to have.

I think the election was a little bit earlier than we were hoping it might have been. We were

always planning on launching during July.

With the whole uncertainty around when the election might be and clearly all of the very busy news events that lead up to the election being called with the overthrow of a Prime Minister and all the turmoil that went with that - it was a very difficult time to focus on the logistical and editorial needs of setting up a channel.

But July was always what we were aiming for. We were happy that we ended up launching in July. I suppose it provided us a very clear focus in relation to a story to get us going on and that was probably the one advantage of doing it.

We - of course - couldn't anticipate that the election would linger slightly longer than it might of but clearly that ended up being an advantage for us too. It meant that more people were engaged in the news market during that period, more people were seeking to be informed and I think that helped. In the end I think it was a real challenge for us to launch in that period but I think it was a real opportunity for us too.

**Castillo:** You mentioned the challenge as well of engaging the audience and this is one of the points perhaps that I would like you to develop. How do you engage an audience in a 24-hour cycle? Engaging the audience in this endless supply of news?

**Morris:** The really important thing about a 24-hour news cycle is it is the structure of it is much more like a conversation than a very structured news program. In a news program you have a format and I think Australian news bulletins in particular have stuck to the format for a long time.

So it's a half an hour news bulletin that has a minute thirty-to-two minute packages with a presenter in between ... very structured.

I've always said for a very informal and laid back country our news is extremely formal, it's very structured and very formulaic. I think that in a news channel sense it's much more of a conversational structure. So from hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute, from day-to-day, the whole structure of the way you might put together a bulletin changes depending on the news.

So you may have one bulletin that's completely dominated by one story and then the next day it may well be that there are two very large stories, or the next day there might be no main stories. You will then try and put together a conversation through the program that takes the viewer somewhere.

I think one of the things we've had to get our heads around, that the presenters and the producers have had to learn, is keeping the audience constantly informed of where we're going next. When you've got a very structured bulletin it's very easy just say - "well they've watched it every night for you know how ever many years they've been watching the news." They know exactly what's coming next: you just present it in that formula and they'll be happy.

In a 24 hour news environment where you've got a live shot over here, you've got something happening here, a live event, a politician popping up, you've got a constantly keep the audience informed of where you're going next.

**Castillo:** Exactly.

**Morris:** I don't really know what's going to happen next and that can be very alienating for a viewer if they don't understand. So we're still working at that and I don't think we've got it right yet.

But our presenters and our producers - I'm constantly talking to them and saying: "tell the audience, if you don't know what's going on lets tell the audience that."

If you do know where we're expecting to go then say: "we're expecting to go there" and then if

it doesn't work technically or the plan changes or whatever, then keep them informed of that as we're going through. Tuesday [September 6, 2010] was a very good example.

Tuesday clearly was the day when we all woke up knowing that something was going to happen, but we didn't know what, we didn't know when and we didn't know where. But we knew it was going to be in Canberra and we knew that the three independents were going to make their decision about the future of the Government and that's about all we knew.

So we had to approach the programming that day by simply saying: "look we're going to try and keep you informed as things develop as best we can." And then let the logistics and the editorial process sort of take us all along, including the audience. So we were in as much, in the dark as much as the audience was on Tuesday morning.

Then what happened was we put all of our plans in place and we said: "all right well are our contingencies and here's what we'll plan for that afternoon show." They told us it might be two thirty, now there saying it's two o'clock, then they'll say it's three o'clock. Then suddenly Bob Katter called the press with 10 minutes notice into his office and we couldn't get a live signal so it was a mobile phone.

I just kept saying to our teams: "we've just got to keep the audience informed that we don't really know what's going to happen next here. We're at the mercy of people that aren't necessarily telling us completely what's going to unfold. Let's just explain that to people."

I think the news flow on a 24-hour news channel is very similar to the online experience and I keep saying this to our guys out here. People are very used to going to a website different parts of the day and getting a piece of information. Then when they go back later it may well be the same story, but its been updated or it may have subtly changed or the picture may of changed or details will emerge. I think a news channel is actually quite similar to the sort of online experience.

A lot of people will say: "well I watched your news broadcast at this hour and then I came back three hours later and it was very similar and it was very repetitive." I keep saying – well probably the similar experience if you went to our online site three hours ago and then you came back three hours later and the mix of stories was largely similar, but some of the details had changed.

I think for an Australian audience who has had limited access to 24 hour news, in a broadcast sense, that's the best way of trying to explain how it works. That it is a constantly evolving source of information, to which the main stories may be the same in the morning as they are in the afternoon.

**Castillo:** One of the things that emerged here and – you mention the audience, and I want to take you back to one comment by Mark Scott [Head of ABC]. He said that news could be framed around the audience: the news agenda is going to be set by the audience. How are you going to frame the stories around the audience? Or set the agenda around the audience?

**Morris:** I think there's a number of ways. The first is simply the idea that we would say to our audience, there's an awful lot happening today and you'll have to wait until 7 o'clock to find out – just doesn't work any more.

We had to say to the audience the information is accessible whenever you need it and whenever you want, whenever suits your lifestyle. So if you're going to watch a news bulletin at 9pm or 11am – your choice. You can do that. So it's framing it firstly around their lifestyle really and around people's time demands.

For people who are older than 40, they understand that news was available when somebody

said it was available. For people under 40, they don't understand that at all.

The concept that Michael Jackson might die and the first you might really get to know about it is either the top of the hour when the radio news bulletin comes along, a midday news report or a 7 pm news report, or if you really want to get the detail on it, the following morning in a newspaper. That's completely inconceivable to anyone under 40, completely understandable for anybody over 40. That's where I think the real paradigm has changed. It is above 40s and below 40s who have got completely different experiences in how they grew up using the media.

The online situation – where people can go online anytime of the day, or through their mobile – they don't even need to be sitting at a computer and get the latest detail and get a lot of context and get all the background. [It] means that without this, we were not a modern news broadcaster.

So that's the first thing I think – framing it around their [audience] time frames, framing it around when they seek to get the information. In an editorial sense I think it's the ABC News 24 [that] has allowed us to really focus on offering a greater diversity of content.

One of the frustrations from our foreign correspondents for instance, has been if it's a busy domestic news day, you may have quite a strong foreign story but it's very difficult to squeeze that in to a half hour news bulletin if there are four or five dominant domestic stories. Now we have the flexibility to say to the audience: "across the day, we've got things that may interest you at different parts of the day so that you can tune in." It is framing content, allowing a lot more of it – allowing the audience access to a lot more of it.

One of the key additions to the schedule that I'm quite proud of - and I think is really going to grow in interest – is the program we do at 9 pm which is *The World*. The purpose of that is to make full advantage - and maybe a strong domestic news day – but there's a place for a good international bulletin from the ABC each day.

**Castillo:** Is it going to be interrupted by a local story?

**Morris:** And a local story will be included.

If it's a big local story it will still be included, because it's an important world story if you like. But you will know that if the news agenda is completely dominated by domestic news there's still a place you can go and get a good TV international news bulletin. You can still catch up with what's going on around the world.

So it's catering to those sorts of tastes as well as recognizing that the audience has got a diverse range of things that they're interested in and being able to say: "well lets try and cater to each of those things."

It's still sort of in a linear fashion if you like, which is what a broadcast channel does. But I think our approach over time will be to work with digital platforms to provide more of that on demand. To provide more of that in a non-linear way, so that people can then really get access to it any time of the day. That's a real part of what I wanted to do.

I didn't just want to build a television channel: I wanted to build sort of a multi platform experience. If you're watching on mobile again there's a bunch of offerings around the mobile stream that will suit people that are trying to access information in that kind of environment.

**Castillo:** One thing that you mentioned is the audience, and I was doing a quick sort of survey: "what would you ask to the Head of 24?" One of the questions that emerged was the *quality of news* – ABC News 24 was created with an objective – breaking news. But *breaking news* does not mean *quality of news*. How are you going to ensure that there's going to be not

just a channel that will break news stories, but also would provide in-depth analysis content.

**Morris:** Yeah.

**Castillo:** And not a fragmented sort of news

**Morris:** I think people have in my mind people are a little selective when they talk about quality.

A lot of people say: "well quality journalism is having a large team of investigative reporters spending a long period of time really lifting the lid on something that otherwise wouldn't be exposed."

Now the ABC does that. It's called *Four Corners*; it does it in other parts of the ABC on radio, in current affairs all the rest of it.

So we don't have an aspiration to be doing that, to be running long form current affairs pieces that we've initiated, that ABC News 24 to do that.

So people will say: "well then that's, you're just going to detract from the quality, because you've all these people down here who are processing content. They're not originating content; you know that can only be a slippery slope."

I think we – across the breadth of what ABC news and current affairs does at the moment – do the best quality independent reporting on a whole range of things. What we do with a 24-hour news channel is allow people a lot more access to that.

So if all we are adding to the quality argument is access to a lot more quality journalism, firstly that's not a bad thing, but I don't think that's all we're doing.

I think the ability for people to watch things live, on a free service, in relation to events that are important to the nation is critical in providing people access to quality information.

So being able to sit there and watch what happened on Tuesday without any interpretation, without any packaging, tightly, getting a journalist telling me what they said and paraphrasing it and all the rest of it. I can watch the press conferences in full, live and I can make my own judgments about what I think of that.

Maybe people don't consider that journalism, but I consider it an extremely important contribution to people's understanding of issues and understanding of the public conversation and public affairs.

To me is a very important part. The thing that then follows from that is [that] we [are] seeking out people to then come and interpret those events that are intelligent, that can provide context, that can explain, that can put detail around it.

**Castillo:** Context?

**Morris:** By getting people on then to analyze that, I think that adds to the quality of people's understanding.

We will not be doing a lot of original investigative reporting on ABC News 24, but the ABC does a lot of that already and we will be showing it more often.

We will be showing more live events, allow people to make their own views about what's going on in the public arena and will be providing more context around that by interviewing intelligent people.

Now we've got, there's a bunch of things we'd like to do. I'd like to do a whole series of

discussions with institutions around the country.

**Castillo:** This is what I wanted to ask you. How you going to get that kind of sense of engagement with the stakeholders?

**Morris:** The thing that emerged out of the election was a lot of people came away from the election campaign saying whatever happened to policy discussion? You know, the election campaign was a bit shallow, that it was a lot of focus on Mark Latham and not a lot of focus on public policy. I tend to agree with that analysis.

Perhaps we've lost sight of what really matters sometimes in the political process.

We would like to, over time – as we grow the channel – look at really good public policy conversations, look at debates, look at getting more analysis, more context, more discussion going and involving the public more as well. So allowing the public to be involved in that process too.

We've digitally plugged it in to all sorts of you know – webcams and social media and all those sorts of things – that will allow the public to contribute to that discussion as well.

There are areas we will seek to grow from here. We built a basic service and now we get to sort of grow it.

**Castillo:** One of the things I was talking to one of the persons who was involved in the early stage of *Al Jazeera*, said that *Al Jazeera* changed the dynamic – it was called the "Al Jazeera factor" in the Middle East media. ABC News 24 – will change also the dynamic of the news in this country?

**Morris:** I think there are two different concepts there. I worked for Al Jazeera to set up the English channel for three years.

The aim of what Al Jazeera sort to do in a media sense was to point the lens of the camera at stories and places and issues that otherwise weren't being covered by the mainstream western media.

That was their aim and their ambition was to say, well BBC do a very good job over here, and CNN do a very good job over here, and the American Business Channels do a very good job of covering this over here.

They [Al Jazeera] always referred to it as covering the south.

You know covering the places and the people and the stories and the issues that didn't get much currency in the Western media channels and I think Al Jazeera's done a brilliant job at doing that.

I wouldn't think that is what we will bring to the market here. I don't think that what the ABC will seek to do is change the way it covers the Australian scene in a way that will depart from how ABC news has always covered the Australian scene.

So I don't think we're seeking to be a cultural change in the issues that are covered or the journalism that we seek to do.

**Castillo:** The question [is] whether 24 hours will also suppose different challenges and new paradigms.

**Morris:** I think what will happen is that people - because the ABC News 24 is on free to air television and it is freely available to anybody that within three years everyone will have digital HD television, pretty much, and in that context this is available to everybody. Which is different

to a subscription channel.

This will be available to people who may not of ever thought of watching a news channel but now have it on their televisions in their homes. And as a result of that I think that the dynamic in the way politicians and publicists and institutional media organizations and all of those things work will shift.

What was very obvious to me in the election campaign – I traveled on a lot of election campaigns in the 90s – and what as a journalist used to strike you is that you go to event after event, from either leader of the party and they would have the same lines that they would repeat over and over and over.

The news that night would take away those lines and they would package them into their piece – their three minutes piece – and that was what people saw.

They knew exactly what they were doing when the politicians opened their mouths they structured it accordingly. Now if you did that on live television you'd look like an idiot.

**Castillo:** Absolutely.

**Morris:** If you stand up now in front of the media day after day, and say exactly the same thing to focus your message and the Julia Gillard example of "moving forward," 22 times in a press conference or whatever it was, was a fascinating example that the public can now [and think] I'd like to hear something that's informative.

Within three years – I think [it] will play a very important dynamic in changing the way messages are put across to the public and interpreted by the public. It is what ABC News 24 has really added to the context.

What they [politicians] go before cameras now – [they] know that the full context of what they are saying can be taken by the public sitting in their living room, making their judgments instantly. That's a huge change.

In my living room I can watch all of it. I make my own decisions. I don't need a journalist to interpret it for me anymore. So I think that's the real sort of shift in the paradigm or shift in the change of the way the media will work.

**Castillo:** I interrupted you before in regard to the "town hall" consultation. Trying to get how the stakeholders, institutions and universities involved in this. How it going to work? In concrete, how is it going to happen? Consultations?

**Morris:** This is my personal view, and its something that an ambition more than anything else at the moment. We have an incredible amount of interesting things being done by institutions around the country that in my view are very important issues and that [they] rarely get talked about.

So that Mark Latham on a election campaign trail can get blanket coverage for a week and yet a very important piece of research around a topic that may be at the heart of our public conversation may not get any coverage at all.

There's not going to be a mass market for it but this is not a mass-market channel at the moment. It's a relatively small audience.

**Castillo:** Is it an objective to you to increase that reach? [Audience]

**Morris:** We're not focused on increasing the reach. Yes, we'd like more people to watch and yes more people as they become aware of the channel and as more people get HD digital television and all of those things come, those numbers will grow.

But we're not sitting here going – "we really need to get those numbers up immediately."

One of the key things we want to do is make sure we're getting a younger demographic. The ABC News demographic is very old. It is to me a serious problem for the ABC. The people who watch the seven o'clock bulletin is very old and my aim is to make this channel available to all those people that watch the seven o'clock news.

We don't want to alienate them, but there are people like us, in their 30s and 40s, who are interested in serious things that are going on in the public that until now haven't necessarily been engaged with ABC News. They are very engaged with ABC News Online and our key demographic online.

Our largest demographic online is 25 to 39s, that's our largest group. Yet in our television audience that's our smallest group.

So my sort of strategy is not necessarily to grow the numbers exponentially, but to ensure that we're attracting more of the people that like what we do online to the broadcast news service.

The key part of that is providing the news when it happens. There's no point telling them that: "we've got all these really important things happening but you have to wait until seven o'clock to see them."

**Castillo:** Absolutely. But the young audience that you mention, this is very important, and I think how you going to reach this audience? Niche programs?

**Morris:** Well I'm not a believer in that we need to go out there and make youth news.

Programs like *The Drum* for instance – which is a discussion program – it's slightly livelier, it's slightly more informal, it's more relaxed. Steve Cannane presents at the moment.

He is a thirty something guy who's very accessible, quite conversational. I just think people are looking for information presented in a slightly different way. Less blokes in suits sitting at a desk presenting things very formally, at a time slot that we've determined for them not that they've chosen for themselves.

But the news itself doesn't change. I mean the information that we're putting across to people is still ABC News.

So we're not kind of going out there to say, let's chase more stories about rock stars or do more Britney Spears or anything like that. We're doing serious news for people that are interested in serious news. We're just trying to make it more accessible to people who are more used to this environment.

I'm already told by our research people that it's paying off, that our audience is much younger than SKY's, it's much younger than the ABC's traditional television news audience and it's more like what we've got online. Which is great which is what I was hoping to hear

**Castillo:** Jay Rosen [Professor of Journalism at New York University] was here – he made a few recommendations in his book about again, providing more context with stories, providing more understanding and explanation to stories. Coming back to one of the original questions – how do you break news and at the same time provide context? It's very hard especially when you have a small pool of reporters.

**Morris:** I really don't think it is.

Because of the very tightly structured format of bulletins – in Australia in particular –we've done a very bad job at putting the news in the context. Quite often we will try and report on something like Afghanistan – because Australia has soldiers there – we assume that the



audience knows the background to all of that.

You may step back from it all and say let's just take stock of what all of this means and what the context is and how the Australians fitted into the NATO situation in Afghanistan. What region are they in and who lives in that region?

Again, I'm taking the lead from what we do online, where we build specials online that seek to fill out that context. What we found online was by providing [context] people are staying significantly longer periods of time on our website.

I'm also in charge of the news website and I very much sort of set in a train of strategies to explain, to do a lot more explainers and contextual pieces and as a result of that people are coming more often. They are staying longer, they are clicking through more pages, they want it, they [are] are seeking out the context.

One thing we've done is – apart from getting good intelligent interviews – is to explain the context. We've set up The Background Briefing, which is a segment that Jeremy Fernandez does most days. Where we'll pick one issue and we'll say all right well let's talk about global warming and let's explain the different views or let's explain some of the context to that.

We do it by using video graphics in one of the big screens and we put together a sequence where we simply seek to put some context straight. It might only be a two or three minute segment but its with graphics, it's with pictures, it's with a script, it's with grabs from pertinent people.

**Castillo:** That's a huge challenge for reporters as well – I suppose for journalists to explain the complexities of issues.

**Morris:** I worked for CNN for a while as well and I used to be parachuted in to all sorts of different environments, knowing nothing.

I remember landing in Monrovia in Liberia, in the middle of the Liberian Civil War and like I'd never heard of Liberia. I'll be honest about it. I was a journalist who was going to cover the story: I knew nothing about the story. I'd read some wire copy. I'd you know, talk to a couple of people, I'd get the context and then I'd tell the audience. That's what sometimes television news requires you to do.

It's like going to a place and then take everything you know and that you've gathered very quickly, that sometimes you have not a lot of context about and fit it all in to a very tightly formatted package that simplifies it and then that's the job done.

Now there are contextual current affairs programs. There is *7.30 Report* every night there are things like *Four Corners*, *Foreign Correspondent* that seek to provide context. We still need to do all the contextual reporting. But it is a real challenge to change the idea that the journalist's job is to simplify the issue in every occasion and not sometimes provide more context.

**Castillo:** How does ABC News 24 change the quality of news distribution? It's not the same corporate system that runs all other news program.

**Morris:** I think that what we've tried to do here is set up a distribution system where the device by which you watch it offers you a different experience.

So, if I'm going to watch the news channel stream on my mobile phone – and we were the first news channel in Australia to fully stream constantly 24 hours a day on mobile phone.

But by the nature of watching it on a mobile phone, you're probably on the move, you're sitting on a bus, you're sitting on a train, you're in a passenger seat in a car or you're out and about.

So you're probably not looking at the top of the hour to say right now I need to click play to watch the top of the hour, to watch news.

So what we've done with our mobile applications is provided news headline services, provided catch up services, provided individual news items and all of that or you can turn the stream on and watch the stream at any point.

In a desktop sense I have a feeling there's an awful lot of people that sit in offices that don't have televisions that may seek access to a news service. By offering it as a live stream on the computer you then need to think about what might people at their computer like to have around that service.

So we've plugged in *Twitter* to that, we've got a discussion box that we can open up around big events so that if there's an election debate, we can open the discussion and say: "well have your live discussion, watch the stream and discuss it while you're doing it or open your *Twitter*."

**Castillo:** The charter of the ABC – what is going to happen with this electronic experience of ABC News 24?

**Morris:** To me the key things in the charter that tie in to what we're doing here are in universality. People have access to your news service universally. To me that is a very important part of this. In an age where you can get your news here, limiting people's access to television news to certain periods of the day.

I think by opening it up and saying: "right we've got a news service across the day now in broadcast in television, fits neatly into the universal sort of demands of the charter."

The word innovation is very much at the heart of what the charter also represents and I think this channel by looking at distributing it across different platforms is very much seeking to serve that charter responsibility and then all the other things we stand for independence, quality news and information, access to regional Australia, access to foreign reporting, all of those things.

I think very much fit our charter responsibility at ABC News has always served. So I don't think there's anything we depart from in relation to the charter. I think we enhance our ability to sort of, serve the charter and serve the Australian people that are meant to be served by the charter.

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