
Volume 13 Issue 1 – 2019

Young, Sally - *Paper Emperors: The Rise of Australia's Newspaper Empires*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2019, ISBN 978-1-742-234984 (pp 672)

Reviewed by Josie Vine - RMIT University

Professor Sally Young's latest investigation into the history of Australian social institutions is an uncomfortable read. I don't mean that in a bad way – *Paper Emperors* is meticulously researched and written by a true wordsmith. Its stories, that read together make up the narrative of Australian newspaper proprietorship up to 1941, are rollicking good yarns. No, I certainly don't mean *Paper Emperors* is an uncomfortable read in a bad way – it's just that Young questions some of journalism's most cherished myths with such a commitment to fact, and scholarly rigor that readers can hardly deny her interpretations. Joining the tomes on newspaper ownership – starting with publications such as Gavin Souter's (1981) *Company of Heralds*, Bridget Griffen-Foley's (1999) *House of Packer* and on to more recent books such as Tom Roberts' (2015) *Before Rupert* – Young's *Paper Emperors* fills a gap in the current body of knowledge on Australian proprietorship. It follows the narrative from its Colonial origins and through its complex set of commercial and political interrelationships, encompassing how it could build, and tear down, careers in Australia's political and business worlds.

To this end, the book is divided into three clear sections: the foundational context of the Colonial press; how the major proprietorial players found themselves in the powerful position that they did and; how these same players used their power to make and/ or break their friends and/ or enemies – politicians and criminals alike. In other words, Young's investigation lifts the lid on the multifaceted commercial and political interests of the complex and mesmerizing characters who owned Australian newspapers and who have shaped its content.

The list of acknowledgements at the start of the book is extensive, and the biggest names in Australian socio-political history stand out as contributors to the research underpinning this tome: Tom Roberts; Rod Kirkpatrick, Eric Beecher, James Curran, Bridget Griffen-Foley, Gavin Souter and Rod Tiffen are among many of the high-profile scholars. In other words, if readers disagree with Young, it's a matter of disagreeing with her historical interpretation, rather than any omission of fact on her part.

Young starts by debunking some of journalism's most prominent professional narratives, most notably that Australia's earliest journalists – who, admittedly, were also proprietors – were demanding journalistic freedom, not from a sense of social or democratic responsibility, or any other Enlightenment-informed belief, but to further their own self-interested commercial and political ambitions. Young is fair when she says Australia's first newspapers were, indeed, deferential to authority. The nation's first publication in 1803, George Howe's *Sydney Gazette and NSW Advertiser*, renounced all political discussion and was edited by the Governor's own hand. It is also fair to say that political propaganda came to Australia before journalism ever did, and that Mr. Howe was a public relations practitioner not a journalist. It's probably not necessary for the book to discuss the differences between the two, but that does not negate the fact that there *is* a difference.

Young tells the stories of Australia's earliest journalists who took on the Colonial authorities to gain journalistic freedom in this country. But her interpretation of the William Wentworth and Robert Wardell narrative – traditionally a tale about two young British lawyers sneaking a printing press into Sydney in 1824, audaciously printing *The Australian* without 'prior restraint', and getting away with it merely because the Sydney Legislative Council was not yet functioning – says the pair were motivated by commercial 'opportunity' (14). This included not only press ownership, but also banks and law firms, with each enterprise supporting the others. Meanwhile, *The Hobart Town Gazette's* Andrew Bent – whose story traditionally is one of an emancipated convict who 'martyred himself for a free press' (in the words of University of Tasmania academic, Nicola Goc (2011)) – is portrayed as a 'barely literate' and unwitting pawn of a political faction of Van Diemen's Land. It is somewhat uncomfortable for those who have championed journalists from the sidelines with rousing cheers of 'makes your antecedents proud' (such as the author of this review), to find that those very same antecedents were, in reality, power-hungry egocentrics, or passive dupes who were manipulated to support the political ambitions of others.

In defence of our Colonial journalism antecedents, however, Young does not explore contextual factors to the extent that they arguably deserve. She portrays Australia's first journalists as being associated with 'groveling deference to authority' (19) but does not take into consideration that 'authority' in the Colonial context, not only owned the printing presses, but also financed the ventures.

Similarly, there is somewhat of a gap left by a lack of discussion about early journalism's underpinning Enlightenment-informed philosophy, and what would appear – in hindsight anyway – as an inherently impracticable endeavor.

Young recognises that early Australian journalists were ‘commercially-minded, politically-strident’ owners who published anti-authority content merely because it attracted wider audiences (19), she does not discuss the fact that this intent was, at the time, so close to Enlightenment-informed thinking that a commercial ethos can be interpreted as aligned with freedom of the press and freedom of opinion, albeit heavily focused on John Locke’s (1640) belief in inherent rights to ‘health, liberty and possessions’. At the time, however, it is unlikely that Australia’s colonial journalists (who were also media proprietors and entrepreneurs) could have foreseen the paradox in marrying ideological commitments to property ownership with editorial independence, and the eventual, and possibly inevitable, calamitous repercussions on the practical application of freedom of the news media.

Young makes the point that:

As a group, Australia’s first newspaper owners were a commercially oriented bunch, several of whom also held an ambition to obtain personal political power. These two elements set the tone for the Australian press from the beginning (20).

Here, she touches on the fact that the book isn’t dealing with journalism history *per se*, but with the history of newspaper ownership – a distinction which, in Colonial times, did not exist simply because journalists *were* proprietors.

Even so, as Young moves her readers out of the Colonial context into turn of the century Australia, she continues to omit an emphatic discussion on the distinction between ‘journalist’ and ‘proprietor’. This is particularly notable in her analysis of the effect the formation of the Australian Journalists Association (now the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance) had on the interpretive community of Australian journalism. Rather than pointing out that the formation of a specific union for journalists cast a clear distinction between employees and employers, Young implies that the organisation – a ‘moderate and discreet white-collar’ arrangement – and its officials, were ‘entwined’ with the fates of proprietors. As noted previously, this book is somewhat uncomfortable reading for a dyed-in-the-wool MEAA member such as the author of this review. And yet the book is so rigorously researched, and so supported by solid historical evidence, that one can hardly refute its claims.

Young takes her readers on a journey through the intricate commercial dealings of some of Australian journalism’s most mythologised historical figures, such as the first true newspaper mogul, Hugh Denison, who also happened to be a tobacco manufacturer, racehorse owner and radio pioneer. Denison’s story involves the elevation of *Sydney Morning Herald* subeditor Monty Grover who, in 1910, was engaged to convert the failing *Australian Star* in Melbourne into a popular Northcliffian broadsheet. *The Australian Star* was renamed the *Sun*, and employed a young, stammering, Keith Murdoch as its Melbourne political correspondent.

So, it's not only the myth of Denison and Grover that are laid bare; it's also that of Keith Murdoch. As we know, Murdoch went off to London to run Denison's *United Cable Service* in 1915, but on his way, he dropped off to see how the Anzacs were doing at Gallipoli. The story is that he was asked by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher to discover why the mail service from the front was so poor but took it upon himself to spend some time with the troops. Here, a very angry and disillusioned UK correspondent, Ellis Ashmead Bartlett, gave Murdoch a letter to smuggle out beneath the censor's radar, that slammed Sir Ian Hamilton's management of the campaign. This letter was, of course, intercepted and confiscated, but this didn't stop Murdoch from rewriting every word when he arrived back in London. The Murdoch narrative has since developed into one of Australian journalism's most retold myths about 'truth-telling'. But Young clothes the legend in all its factual complexity, from which Murdoch emerges, not as a journalistic hero, but as an ambitious political animal whose servility to Northcliffe in the UK, and Prime Minister Fisher in Australia, resulted in his daring escapade at Gallipoli. And this may be true, but as Philip Knightley wrote in *The First Casualty*:

Suspect though Murdoch's motives may have been, his report on the bungling at Gallipoli cost a general his job, contributed to the decision to abandon the campaign, and confirmed the opinion of the general staff that war correspondents were dangerous meddlers and that it had been a mistake to have ever imagined otherwise (Knightley, 2000: p. 106).

It's an epitaph that any journalist would be proud of.

Post-Gallipoli, Keith Murdoch took over the management of Melbourne's *Herald* newspaper. By 1922, his former boss, Hugh Denison moved into the Melbourne newspaper market. Because of a secret agreement not to compete with the *Herald* in the evening market, Denison then asked his editor, Monty Grover to design a new morning paper instead. The result was the tabloid *Sun News-Pictorial*. Today, the *Sun News-Pictorial* is known as the *Herald Sun*.

Two years later, Denison took threw the gauntlet down to the *Herald* by starting a second paper, the *Evening Sun*. There was very little contest with Murdoch's seemingly instinctual understanding of readerships. Denison accumulated huge losses, and his whole newspaper company was sold to the *Herald*. The rest, as they say, is history and the *Herald and Weekly Times* grew to be one of the most powerful media companies in Australia.

While Young somewhat controversially reinterprets some of journalism's most well-known myths, she also provides her readers with brand new stories that have only been heard in much smaller circles. Such as how media company News Limited was founded by a covert partnership between a 'secret and chronic' alcoholic journalist and a businessman high up in the mining industry. Reading through *Paper Emperors*, you get the feeling that its stories could keep rolling infinitely.

But Young's narrative stops at Menzies' 1941 downfall. Yet we know that the story of Australia's paper emperors continues well beyond that. We know there could be whole volumes on this subject. With the astounding job Young has done on the first volume, scholars, historians and people who just like a rollicking good yarn will be looking forward to another from the same author in the not-to-distant future – no matter how much discomfort it may cause!

About the reviewer

Dr Josie Vine has been teaching into the RMIT University journalism program since 2006. She specialises in the areas of the ethics and regulation of the journalism industry, as well as foundational professional disciplinary practice. After working as a journalist in regional news media for several years, Josie started her academic career at Deakin University in 2001 and completed her PhD in 2009. Her research interests include regional news values, Australian journalism history and culture and the intersections between academic and journalism ethical ideologies. Josie is currently writing a book on the history of freedom of the news media in Australia for Palgrave Macmillan, as well as co-authoring a comparative analysis between newsrooms in Australia and the UK with Salford University's Dr Carole O'Reilly for Routledge Publishers.

Email: josie.vine@rmit.edu.au