

An Unseen Weakening of Fairfax's Journalism Culture: The  
Impact of Copy Sharing in *The Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*  
and *Canberra Times* Books Pages

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## An Unseen Weakening of Fairfax's Journalism Culture: The Impact of Copy Sharing in *The Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Canberra Times* Books Pages

### **Abstract**

The value of covering new books and literary culture in Australian newspapers has been widely accepted even if it has not been widely studied in journalism scholarship. The massive transformation of media in the Web 2.0 era has affected the Australian press in numerous ways, collapsing its well-established business model and driving publishers to offer print journalism online. The impact on newspaper journalists can be seen immediately in the large numbers that have been made redundant or have taken packages in recent years. More difficult to assess is the undoubted impact of such wholesale change on the cultural authority associated with print journalism and on Australian journalism culture itself. This conference paper focuses on one aspect of newspaper journalism in an effort to engage with these questions. It examines how the transformed media climate has affected Australian newspapers' coverage of books and literary culture, by describing and analysing the expansion of copy sharing in the books pages of Fairfax Media's three metropolitan daily newspapers, *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Canberra Times*.

Keywords: books, newspapers, book reviews, Fairfax Media

### **Introduction**

The Canadian media scholar Elizabeth Dickens, analyzing book reviewing in British weeklies between the wars, observed that debates about the viability of intellectual culture are 'not disembodied': that 'material contexts' such as newspapers and

periodicals provide a frame through which they can be described and evaluated (Dickens, 2011: 182). Like Dickens, we are also interested in the culture of book reviewing, but our subject is the contemporary press in Australia. As with its counterparts in Britain and the United States, in the past decade the press in this country has seen its business model buckle under the pressure of the global financial crisis and the rise of smartphones and mobile internet (Nolan and Ricketson, 2013a, 2013b). This conference paper uses content analysis to assess recent changes to the books pages of *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Canberra Times* which are a direct response to their owner, Fairfax Media's, much weakened commercial state. We are interested in what these changes can tell us about changing journalism practice at Fairfax Media, and what, in turn, the implications may be for Fairfax journalism culture and the traditional cultural authority of Fairfax's metropolitan dailies.

The books pages of these three newspapers are particularly suited to this study: first, because their formats are relatively fixed, which makes it easy to detect patterns of change; and secondly, because there has been substantial change to these sections over the past three years, mainly as the result of Fairfax management directives directed at 'de-duplicating' costs through enforced sharing of copy and combined production. Counting the sharing of reviews between these sections over a two-year period, our research demonstrates the reduction of resources dedicated to book reviewing in the three papers, and consequently the winnowing of local critical voices, and the reduced possibilities for each masthead to create a distinctive style and perspective within its literary pages. These findings are discussed in the context of the documented history of newspaper reviewing in Australia, and against other recent

scholarship about the changing role of newspapers, in order to analyse what they imply for journalism culture at Fairfax.

This is, unapologetically, a study of newspapers in the late age of print; but a nostalgic rallying cry to revive ‘the good old days’ of Australian newspaper journalism or preserve the Fairfax press per se it most definitely is not. Criticism of the press’s tendency to social exclusion has been a persistent theme in Australian media scholarship (Ewart and Snowden, 2012). The changed conditions emerging from the Web 2.0 era offer opportunities for a more socially inclusive media landscape yet, as Penman and Turnbull (2012: 75) observe, making media socially inclusive is more complex than the idealistic early rhetoric of new media suggested. We argue that understanding the particularity of what is being lost through media transformation is essential to successfully strategizing new media projects and reinventing reporting in the era of the citizen journalist. Scholars interested in the potentialities of new media should be careful not to elide the positive functions of the twentieth-century press. That includes newspapers’ somewhat taken-for-granted role in the reviewing of books, which historically has played a key role in informing large audiences about new books.

It is an orthodoxy that the eighteenth-century literary review was a prior factor in the development of news journalism’s fourth-estate role (Schudson, 2011: 59). Just as newspapers generally have been committed to the free flow of information in society, coverage of books has represented an essential component of the press’s commitment to the free flow of ideas, insight and imagination. Any contemporary newspaper’s literary section quickly reveals whether the paper in question values ideas; whether its

editor and management are prepared to devote much space to reviews, to review 'serious books' (for example, history, current affairs and literary fiction) as well as popular titles, and to incur extra effort and expense by commissioning reviews from notable contributors. At any given point in time, the books pages tend to indicate how seriously a paper takes its traditional role of circulating not only news but also ideas and opinion, thereby advancing public debate. Thus the historian John McLaren, analyzing the Australian press of the late 1950s, noted the stirring of book reviewers' interest in new 'conflicts of people and ideas beyond our shores':

The main news and feature pages of the newspapers scarcely reflected these changes, other than by reporting the more dramatic highlights, but the review pages gradually started to question the complacency of that comfortable Menzies society (McLaren, 1981: 242).

At their best, the weekend books pages in the Australian dailies have served as advance intelligence of new writing, new ideas and new influential social actors. They have performed this function not only for general readers, but also for staff journalists, for whom the literary section may represent both an important source of information about cultural matters and a space in which their own views and writing are, from time to time, welcome. The role of literary editor, usually an internal appointment, is a prize keenly sought and jealously guarded: indeed, the question of whether a newspaper has its own dedicated literary editor, and what level of autonomy he or she enjoys, speaks volumes to journalists about the paper's values and culture. Concerned as the books pages are with culture, they help make the newspaper's own journalism culture visible inside and outside the paper. Like the proverbial canary in the coalmine, they are a useful early indicator of changes in the

conditions of production, and of potential damaging human consequences beyond the coalface.

### **Literature Review**

Elizabeth Morrison has described how books have played an important role in Australian newspapers since colonial times, when they provided a significant alternative to quotidian coverage of colonial affairs (Nolan and Ricketson, 2013a: 30). Yet, surprisingly, there has been little scholarly research in Australia into book reviewing as a journalistic activity. Media scholars generally have tended to focus on news rather than features (Zelizer, 2004: 6), even though the expansion of the amount and range of feature material in metropolitan daily newspapers in the twentieth century is an important component of the Western media landscape (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001; Ricketson, 1999; Tiffen, 2010). This preoccupation with analysis of news coverage apparently endures in scholarship about the effects of new communication technologies on journalism; witness the influential journal *Media, Culture and Society*'s recent special issue 'Internet Revolution Revisited: A Comparative Study of Online News' (2013). Studies of feature-writing have taken magazines rather than newspapers as their sites of research, for example in the extensive work on gender in men's magazines and lifestyle journalism (Bonner and McKay, 2003; Mikosza, 2003; Furlong, 2010). Articles such as Matthew Ricketson's study of the recent history of newspaper feature writing in Australia (Ricketson, 1999) and Jane Johnston's examination of newspapers' increased use of narrative style (Johnston, 2007) are unusual.

What work has been done on Australian newspaper reviewing has principally emanated from historians of Australian literature or scholars of English literature. Thomson and Dale (2009), focusing on the interwar years, described the presence of “a well-established and fairly widespread culture of reviewing within the Australian press in 1930 ... not confined to the metropolitan newspapers” (129). Post-war, the most extensive study is John McLaren’s ‘Book Reviewing in Newspapers, 1948–1978’ (McLaren, 1981), a content analysis spanning 30 years. The author not only counted numbers of reviews and word lengths for reviews, but also commented on differences in genres selected for review and approaches to reviewing. His analysis, which included the three newspapers discussed here, starkly demonstrated significant differences in reviewing practices over time.

McLaren advanced the now-familiar argument that from the late 1960s, Australian newspapers ‘returned to the responsibility they had once accepted for reflecting on events as well as reporting them and for nurturing the development and exchange of ideas which provide the basis for social and political action’ (245). For him the books pages were integral to these changes: ‘no longer a piece of peripheral entertainment tacked on to the serious reporting’ (245). By 1980 the major metropolitan dailies, all ‘systematically’ reviewed new books as part of their ‘paper of record’ role, he noted; the *SMH* and *Age* did so throughout the period of his study (McLaren, 1981: 240–41).

McLaren attributed the flourishing of the books pages to increased competition thanks to the creation of *The Australian* in 1964, and to Fairfax’s acquisition of *The Canberra Times*, which thereafter published more book reviews and, like *The Australian*, allowed longer reviews. This assessment was supported by the

distinguished literary scholar John Colmer, who surveyed Australian newspaper reviewing in an article for *Meanjin* in 1971. Colmer, an Englishman who made his career at the University of Adelaide, concluded that Australian newspaper reviewing was dominated by reviews of non-fiction; that Canberra readers probably enjoyed the best book reviews in the country given their ease of access to interstate morning papers and the quality of *The Canberra Times*'s own reviewing; and that the standard of reviews in *The Australian* 'compare[d] favorably with the English *Guardian*' (344). His observation that the review sections were more interested in international affairs, politics and sport than fiction is given flavour by McLaren's comment that in 1968, in one month alone, *The Age* carried 'reviews of books on Australian architecture, black power, cosmology, foreign policy, the United Nations, psychotherapy, Australian trade unions, Australian schools, Vatican politics, Moishe Tshombe, Jewish resistances to the Nazis, and universities in the modern world' (246).

In summary, these studies of newspaper reviewing suggest the social and cultural significance of book reviews in the Australian press from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. While to some extent their emphasis on 'seriousness' and 'quality' represents a default academic resistance to middlebrow literary activity, and even perhaps a response to that underlying Australian anxiety known as 'the cultural cringe', they nevertheless document Australian newspapers' recognition of the importance of books pages, the traditional focus of these pages on politics, international affairs and social issues, and the aspiration of journalists and editors of the major dailies to write, commission and publish in-depth, well-written analysis.



The first installment of our research, published in 2013, differed from the studies above insofar as it focused on changes to books coverage that were the direct result of copy-sharing within newspaper families (Nolan and Ricketson, 2013a, 2013b). It described and analysed how the global financial crisis combined with consumers' flight to mobile internet had resulted in significant structural reforms of editorial practices and processes by both major newspaper groups ((Nolan and Ricketson, 2013a: 29). News Corporation had already rigorously consolidated and streamlined the editorial production of sections in its metropolitan newspapers, and Fairfax was moving rapidly in the same direction. Our study therefore focused on Fairfax's three major morning papers, *The Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Canberra Times*, where these changes were still unfolding. Through content analysis and interviews with journalists, publishers and booksellers, we established that sharing of Fairfax book reviews was now pervasive and systematic. We also analysed the company's decision to make the position of literary editor at *The Canberra Times* redundant. Focusing on potential impacts to the already troubled book industry, we warned that the changes at Fairfax were thoroughgoing, and could affect the book industry in ways not yet fully understood (Nolan and Ricketson, 2013b).

### **Methodology and Results**

Christmas is the pinnacle of Australian book publishers' business year: by late October many key releases are out, and by early November, customers are making (or planning) gift purchases. Our first content analysis counted and compared pagination and reviews in the three Fairfax papers for the last Saturday in October and first two Saturdays in November, 2012: a limited but still telling sample. In 2013, we repeated

this count, over the same Saturdays. Some comparative results are shown in tables 1 and 2 below.

**[Table 1 goes here]**

**[Table 2 goes here]**

Our analysis revealed that copy sharing between the three titles, already strongly evident in 2012, was dominant in 2013. The percentage of reviews which appeared in all three papers rose from 35 to 63. Year on year, there was a noticeable trend towards total sharing of reviews, with partial sharing of reviews dropping drastically and reviews unique to one masthead also declining.

Against this background, the overall number of reviews remained largely static, as did the number of literary pages (see table 3, below).

**[Table 3 goes here]**

Table 4 (below) consolidates the main comparative data. To summarise the main points: our content analysis revealed that the majority of book reviews in all three papers were shared, and the trend to sharing was growing.

**[Table 4 goes here]**

Somewhat surprisingly, the data was most discouraging for the *SMH*, where the books section had fewest pages and reviews, and was least likely to carry a review unique to itself. *The Age*, under pressure, had largely held its ground, with only marginal declines in its indicative data. *The Canberra Times* had changed most year on year. Its literary section grew in pagination, and it used more reviews, but at the same time these reviews were more likely to be sourced from its sister papers than individually commissioned. The majority of the reviews it ran were now shared copy, with the proportion of its unique reviews falling year on year from 60 per cent to 43 per cent. On its face, the data suggested *The Canberra Times* was a significant site of literary

reviewing in the Fairfax papers, and not a mere satellite of its sister publications, but like them it was under pressure. Interesting to note then, that Fairfax Media had rendered its literary editor's position redundant early in 2012.

## **Discussion**

It is a commonplace of journalism studies that a concentration of media ownership diminishes the diversity of news sources, thus potentially damaging the press's fourth-estate role. Our study of Fairfax Media's weekend books pages reveals a similar diminution of diversity of news and views is happening in the books pages, if on a smaller scale. This dwindling of voices is epitomized in the simple fact that we found no instance in the 2013 survey of a title being reviewed by different critics. Yet the weakening of the Fairfax books pages that we documented has happened almost in an unseen way, thanks to the geographic dispersal of the three mastheads and the relative dearth of scholarly attention paid to newspaper reviewing of books.

Diving into the coverage of particular books further demonstrates some ways in which the Fairfax books pages' diversity of coverage is being weakened. To take but two examples. On 9 November 2013, all three papers ran the *SMH's* literary editor Susan Wyndham's interview with Tom Keneally about *Shame and the Captives*, his novel recreating an escape of Japanese prisoners of war, drawing on the real events of the 1944 Cowra breakout. Keneally is a prominent Australian author and the Cowra breakout is a significant event in Australian history; the interview draws out his reasons for rendering the historical events as a work of fiction. This general approach to the writing of the book would be of interest to readers in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra, whereas an interviewer writing mainly for NSW audiences might have

fruitfully pursued the local angle, investigating the real relationships between POWs held at Cowra and the local farming families to whom they were assigned as labour.

Secondly, in the 2013 sample, several works of narrative non-fiction were the subject of shared reviews, including Australian novelist and playwright Louis Nowra's Sydney-centric urban biography, *Kings Cross* (reviewed by Michael Duffy), historian Iain McCalman's examination of the endangered Great Barrier Reef, *The Reef* (reviewed by Jennifer Moran), and journalist David Finkel's painful recounting of the lives of American soldiers returning home from the war in Iraq, *Thank You for Your Service* (reviewed by Owen Richardson). These reviews all touched on issues likely to generate further debate and discussion. Where in previous years such books would have been assessed by three different reviewers for the three newspapers now overwhelmingly they are assessed by one critic, and yet the Barrier Reef and Kings Cross, not to mention many other topics that are the subjects of books, are complex, controversial and deserve discussion from a range of perspectives.

The paper's literary editors (or ex-editor, as in the case of Gia Metherell, formerly of *The Canberra Times*) all commented on this narrowing of reviewing in the interviews we conducted in 2012. The problem was sharpest when the three newspapers carried the same negative review of a book; this meant 'too much weight being given to one review', Susan Wyndham of the *SMH* said. In her view, 'the diversity of literary and cultural ideas is as important as the diversity of political ideas on the opinion pages' (Wyndham, 2012).

At *The Canberra Times*, the problem has undoubtedly been aggravated by the abolition of the literary editor's position. As discussed in the literature review above, that newspaper, since its acquisition by Fairfax in 1964, has produced a notable books section. Both McLaren's research and our own establishes that the *CT* has generally punched above its weight in the number, range of subject matter, and, often, the quality of its reviews. It has made a distinctive contribution by providing a space for longer reviews on important but less popular non-fiction, 'serious books' concerned with public administration, policy history, and biographies of administrative careers (Nolan and Ricketson, 2013a: 38). It strongly conforms to McLaren's idea of a 'paper of record' systematically reviewing new books.

Research by Margaret Simons suggests that the 'newspaper of record' model is being abandoned or gradually withering for want of funds. Yet she argues strongly that 'journal of record functions are key to [news media] credibility' (Simons and Buller, 2013:15). Since we concluded our 2013 count, the process of increased copy-sharing in the Fairfax books pages has only continued. Although we were unable to obtain on-the-record comments sources at the papers confirmed that, by mid-2014, all reviews published in the *SMH* and *The Age* were effectively shared, and the only exceptions arose from unavoidable circumstances such as variations in pagination. This streamlining facilitated sharing of the *Age* and *SMH* production roles; most of the down-table sub-editing of the pages was now performed in New Zealand.

This attenuation of resources for production of the literary sections only underscores the gradual impoverishment of these books pages, with the remaining attached staff spreading themselves more thinly than ever in an effort to meet the papers' long-

standing exacting editorial standards and create pages of interest to their specific city and state readerships. Likewise, the suspension in 2013 of the longstanding *Age* Book of the Year prize, without explanation from Fairfax Media, speaks volumes about the company's reduced resources. If, following Dickens, Fairfax's metropolitan books pages are the material contexts through which the paper's intellectual and journalism culture are to be assessed, then one can only observe that that culture has already been degraded and there is a real threat of further decline.

### **Conclusion**

The research here shows clearly that the unique number of book reviews in the Fairfax press has declined in recent years, something which can only attributed to the decisions taken by the company's management to substantially reduce costs as a way of combating the declining revenue from classified advertising.

It is notable that despite the significant reduction in financial resources for the books pages in dedicated personnel and in contributor diversity, the Fairfax group has not yet moved to carve out an alternative literary space on the Web. The infinite nature of 'the cloud' should make it more possible than ever for newspapers to fulfill their role of newspaper-of-record role, through new media, Simons believes (Simons and Buller, 2013: 15); still, expanded online books coverage remains to become a reality on the popular SMH and *Age* websites. Meanwhile, new players are moving into the online space. Who those competitors are, and whether a diverse democracy still needs book reviews harnessed to old media's model of reach: these are among the subjects of our future research.

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**Table 1. Number of reviews published each week, year on year**

	27 Oct 2012	3 Nov 2012	10 Nov 2012	<b>Total (2012)</b>	26 Oct 2013	2 Nov 2013	9 Nov 2013	<b>Total (2013)</b>
<i>Age</i>	10	9	10	<b>29</b>	10	9	9	<b>28</b>
<i>Canberra Times</i>	8	11	9	<b>28</b>	10	11	11	<b>32</b>
<i>SMH</i>	5	7	8	<b>20</b>	7	6	7	<b>20</b>
<b>Total</b>	23	27	27	<b>77</b>	27	26	27	<b>80</b>

**Table 2. Uniformity of reviews, year on year**

	27 Oct 2012	3 Nov 2012	10 Nov 2012	<b>Total (2012)</b>	26 Oct 2013	2 Nov 201	9 Nov 2013	<b>Total (2013)</b>
Used in 3 Papers	4	4	1	<b>27</b>	5	5	7	<b>51</b>
Used in 2 Papers	2	3	5	<b>20</b>	1	1	0	<b>4</b>
Used in 1 paper	7	9	14	<b>30</b>	10	9	6	<b>25</b>
<b>Total</b>				<b>77</b>				<b>80</b>

**Table 3. Total pagination in the books pages, year on year**

	<b>Total (2012)</b>	<b>Total (2013)</b>
<i>Age</i>	<b>25</b>	<b>24</b>
<i>Canberra Times</i>	<b>21</b>	<b>24</b>
<i>SMH</i>	<b>19</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>66</b>

**Table 4. The papers' book pages compared, year on year**

	Number of pages		Number of reviews		Unique reviews	
	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013
<i>Age</i>	25	24	29	28	11	10
<b><i>CT</i></b>	<b>21</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>SMH</i>	19	18	20	20	2	1
Total	65	66	77	80	30	<b>25</b>