

# WHY WE STILL NEED SERIOUS JOURNALISM

PHILLIP  
KNIGHTLEY

ColdType

# WHY WE STILL NEED SERIOUS JOURNALISM

PHILLIP  
KNIGHTLEY

ColdType

## PHILIP KNIGHTLEY

An Australian, Phillip Knightley became part of the celebrated Sunday Times Insight team from the 1950s to the 1970s. Now an acknowledged expert in the dark arts of warfare, having written the seminal text of wartime propaganda *First Casualty*, he lives in London and works as a freelance journalist for publications all over the world. He is the author of 10 books, covering in depth some of the biggest stories of recent times. Most recently he has written his autobiography *A Hack's Progress* and the critically acclaimed history *Australia: A Biography of a Nation*.

This is the text of a speech given at City University in London to celebrate his 50th year in Fleet Street, to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) on Saturday August 6, 2005.

© Phillip Knightley, 2005

**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD  
[www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)

*I apologise for addressing you sitting down. Sciatica – pain in my left buttock. I hear on the journalists' grapevine that a dodgy businessman I once investigated learnt of my plight and remarked, "Well, he's been a pain in the arse to a lot of people in his lifetime so it's only right that he should now have a pain in the arse himself.*

## Fifty years of Fleet Street.

How has journalism changed and where do we go from here? Let's begin with a few confessions. I started in journalism on a small daily newspaper, the Northern Star, which served a dairy farming town called Lismore in country Australia. I was the most junior of junior reporters and my assignment was what I have come to call public service journalism – keeping the people of Lismore informed of what was going on around them: Country Women's Association meetings, town council meetings, swimming carnivals, speeches by the mayor, interviews with the sergeant of police. Great training. You had to get your facts and the names right, or your readers would stop you in the street the next day to point out any errors.

But, yes, I have to admit it, that even so early on there was the odd moment of doubt, the first inkling that everything one reads in a newspaper is not necessarily the truth. One day the senior reporter turned to me and said, "Mate,

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

it's your turn to do Suzanne". Suzanne? "Yes, the astrology column. 'Your Week in the Stars', by Suzanne". I looked bewildered. "Get your arse down to the filing room, turn up some copies of the paper ten years ago, and copy out the stars." And then he added, "But change it around a bit. Stick the stuff for Aquarius under Leo and all that crap. And don't give the same people bad luck two days running. They'll complain."

I wrote about this many years later, and received a letter from a lady who said she had been the editorial secretary at about the same time. She said I shouldn't worry too much about having made up the stars column. It was her job to ring up the weather bureau each night just before deadline and ask what tomorrow's weather was going to be. She said she hated doing so because the weatherman thought forecasting was a science, and tried to dictate the forecast to her – "a cold front is moving in from the south-east". And she had to stop him and tell him that the paper had three little drawings for the weather – a girl with an umbrella, a girl with her skirt blowing up in the wind, and a girl in a bikini. "And when I'd say to him, 'so which drawing is it going to be?', he would hang up in my ear. So I'd have to go up on the roof, look at the sky and make up the weather report myself."

Looking back on it now, this should have been a warning to me. Someone was telling me, "Don't go to work for the Truth". Never, ever work for any publication that uses the word "truth" in its title. Truth was an Australian weekly that specialised in reporting all the details of all the juiciest divorce cases. It was full of sex, sex, and more sex. ANOTHER NUN OVER THE WALL AT SYDNEY CONVENT. BEASTLY BROTHER IN BED WITH BLONDE. GOLFER CAUGHT IN LOVE BUNKER. SEX MANIAC AT LARGE IN SYDENHAM

But I was young, ambitious and foolhardy, and I went to work for Truth and one Friday morning the editor said that the paper was short of a sex maniac story, and if I couldn't find a real one, I'd have to make one up. I can only plead that at the time it didn't seem such a big deal. TRUTH was a comic. No one believed most of it anyway. What harm could another fairy story cause? So to my everlasting shame, I invented a sex maniac who travelled on crowded suburban trains. He had a hook fashioned from a wire coat-hanger up his sleeve, and he would surreptitiously lower the hook and gently raise the skirts of girls standing next to him in order to glimpse the tops of their stockings.

The editor loved it. “If it’s not true”, he said, “it should be.” The only change that he made was to christen the sex maniac THE HOOK, and have him operating that very Saturday night among crowds coming into town. The following Tuesday it was clear that we had got away with it. No other paper had denied it. How could they? The railway authorities had not complained, and there was no word from the police. Then my telephone rang, and an official sounding voice said, “Detective Sergeant Plowman, Bankstown police here. You the reporter who wrote that story about that sex maniac, the Hook?” “Yes”, I said, fear in my voice. “Righto,” he said, “just wanted to tell you that we arrested the bastard this morning.”

## Back in 1954

I could see that if I continued to work for the Truth, it would get me in the end, so I set off for London and Fleet Street. OK, OK. Not exactly Fleet Street, Red Lion Court, one of those little alleyways off Fleet Street where all the small newspaper bureaux had their offices. Still, you could hear the presses and sniff the printer’s ink so the romance was still there. I was one of five foreign correspondents working for a chain of Australian newspapers. Sounds exciting but what we actually did was to steal all the news straight out of the Fleet Street newspapers, rewrite it a bit, jiggle the order of the paragraphs and cable it off to Australia as original work. There was a lot of competition to see how far we could disguise the original story without destroying it. A colleague held the ultimate accolade. He so made-over a story – I remember it as being stolen from the Daily Mail – that when it appeared in Sydney, the Mail’s correspondent there cabled it back to London because he hadn’t seen it in his paper and the Mail failed to recognise it and used it a second time.

But at least there were famous faces in the pubs and sandwich bars of Fleet and eventually I got to meet one of them, O. D. Gallagher, the great Daily Express correspondent. You can find him as the character Corker in Evelyn Waugh’s “Scoop” which I was alarmed to learn was not really a novel, more a straight history disguised to avoid libel. The Express had sent Gallagher to the war in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) because it was in Africa and Gallagher came from South Africa so presumably knew something about it.

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

What I am about to read comes not from “Scoop” but from what Gallagher told me about his experiences in Abyssinia. He had no idea where to begin. Nothing was happening – except the correspondents quarrelling with each other, so Gallagher was alarmed to receive a cable from the Express saying, “Phillips in Telegraph says tribesmen massacred Italian scouting party. Await action reports from you.” Gallagher checked. There had been no such massacre. The next day came another cable. “Phillips in Telegraph describes Haile Selassie Square as Piccadilly Circus of Addis Ababa. This great stuff. Why you not send similar.” Gallagher decided the comparison was ludicrous and not worth rebutting. Next day the Express cabled him again. “Your lack reports most disconcerting. Beg you emulate Phillips. Your job and mine both on line.”

Gallagher told me that, desperate to save both jobs, he managed to discover that a lot of Phillips’s material had been paraphrased from an old book called “In the Country of the Blue Nile by Colonel C.F. Rey, so with the help of the Daily Mail correspondent Noel Monks, he wrote a series of reports based on Colonel Rey’s travels, updating them and putting them into the context of the Abyssinian War. At the end of the week he received a cable from three Express which read: “Phillips brilliant in Telegraph but you excel him. Keep it up.” Gallagher told me: “Monks and I were astounded. Monks said, ‘Well, now we know. It’s entertainment they want.’”

Gallagher went on to a brilliant career as a war correspondent. He covered the Sino-Japanese War, the Spanish Civil War and the early days of the Second World War in France. Then he rushed off to the East and went down with the British warships the Repulse and the Prince of Wales when the Japanese sank them in the Gulf of Siam. He survived to get out of Singapore just before the Japanese entered it, raced to Rangoon and yet again escaped to India just before it fell. Then, back in London he went into the offices of the Daily Express in Fleet Street and resigned. “Bugger this war correspondents’ lark,” he told his editor. It’s going to get me killed. I’d be safer in the armed forces. “So he joined the army, safely saw out the war there, and died many years later from a heart attack on the shores of Loch Ness where – I kid you not – he was the Express’s Loch Ness Monster correspondent.

With examples like this to spur me on, I tried for years to get on to Fleet Street and nearly gave up. Then, with one of those strokes of luck which all journalists

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

need, in 1965 I wiggled my way on to the Sunday Times. I'd done one story for it as a freelance and had been given a spare desk and a telephone. The next week I went in and sat at the vacant desk. After a day or two, someone noticed me and gave me another story to do. One week led to another and bang, there I was, a reporter on one of the world's great newspapers as it entered its finest years.

The Sunday Times had 350 editorial staff to produce a 48- or 64-page two-section quality broadsheet every week. It was so overstaffed that some journalists went weeks without getting anything published in the paper. In fact, some of them were not even SEEN for weeks. It spent money like water on investigative journalism – two million pounds on legal costs alone fighting for its right to publish the story about the thalidomide scandal. It was scared of no one. It averaged a libel writ a week. The editor, Harold Evans, was unhappy if a libel writ had not arrived by Tuesday, because he felt that the paper had not been doing its job – defending people without power from those who wielded it unfairly, exposing corruption, making a difference to the lives of ordinary citizens. Here was a paper that believed in something, which took enormous pains to get things right, and which fought for its editorial integrity.

One day, the owner of the paper, the Canadian Lord Thomson, knocked on the editor's door while the morning news conference was in progress, said "Hello", and then rather tentatively asked: "Say boys, would it be possible to squeeze in the Canadian ice hockey results each Sunday?" There was a moment of shocked silence. Then the deputy editor, Hugo Young, said, "Lord Thomson, this is an editorial news conference to which you've not been invited. If you'd like to put your suggestion in writing, I'm sure that the sports editor will be willing to consider it." And next morning there was a note to the editor from Lord Thomson apologising for attempting to influence the paper's editorial policy.

So this is my benchmark. It's against this Golden Age that I plan to measure the performance of the media today, especially newspapers – because I know more about them – and especially in the field of investigative reporting.

Now, everybody who has anything to do with newspapers – either as a producer or a consumer – has been aware for years now that something big has been going on in the industry, a sea change as deep and as radical as the arrival of the

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

new technology in the 1980s. Newspaper circulations are declining all over the Western world. I emphasize “Western”. In India, for example, they are soaring. Again, in the West, viewing figures for news and current affairs are down. There is general public contempt for journalists. In the last five years half a million AB readers – educated top income group readers – have deserted the British quality press. OK, so they just changed papers, found the tabloids a quicker juicer read. I’m afraid not. They disappeared. It is an extraordinary fact that of the 11 million AB adults in Britain, the 11 million educated high-earners, about one-third do not read any daily newspaper whatsoever. All over the English-speaking world, many young people in all socio-economic classes have got out of the habit of reading newspapers.

In any other industry, if customers and prospective customers were vanishing at this rate there would be panic. But in the media industry it is only recently that hard questions are at last being asked. *Le Monde*, announcing an English language version of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, turned on its own. “We all know that the media can no longer be trusted, that their performance is incompetent ... that they broadcast blatant lies as if they were manifest truths.” The famous Polish journalist and author, Ryszard Kapuscinski agreed. “In the old days the most valued thing about news was that it was true. Now an editor no longer asks whether the news is true but whether it is interesting. If he or she doesn’t find it interesting, then they don’t publish it.”

Is the media, particularly TV, in the business of “the mass production of ignorance”? Is it possible that the more TV news we watch, the less we know? There is a case to answer on both counts. If it is the media’s job to interpret the world for us, why has the total output of factual programs on developing countries dropped by 50 per cent in the past ten years.

Perhaps this has been due to the death of the old-fashioned foreign correspondent. You remember them, the expert in his or her area who had the language, knowledge and background not only to report on what was happening, but to explain why it was happening. Professor Virgil Hawkins of Osaka University suggests that technology has killed them off. He says that the process goes like this: greater competition among media giants leads to budget cuts, so resources for newsgathering are diverted to buying and maintaining high-tech equipment. This means foreign correspondents are expected to cover larger areas of the globe, and

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

in the process lose their specialist expertise. “They race from one humanitarian disaster to another, with little time or background knowledge to grasp the issues behind the conflicts they cover”. This tends to produce highly emotional first hand accounts, described by Claudio Monteiro of Leicester University in her analysis of the Portuguese media coverage of East Timor, as “good cause journalism … journalism of affection”, with the journalist as the hero of his or her own story.

Now, while all this has been happening, government interest in the media has intensified. It is as if governments realised, even before the TV and newspaper bosses, that the power, reach and influence of the modern media are enormous. The CNN News group is available to 800 million people across the globe, BBC World can be viewed in more than 167 million homes across 200 countries, Al Jazeera reaches at least 75 million viewers in the Muslim world alone. For any political party, the ability to ‘handle the media’ is these days seen as an essential element in gaining power and then, once in government, in maintaining it and carrying out policy. The old-fashioned government ‘press officer’ has gone. Governments now have a ‘Director of Communications and Strategy’, whose job it is to manage the media and manipulate public perception of government actions.

The United States underpins its ‘hard’ power – its awe-inspiring military capacity – with ‘soft’ power – its ability to achieve its goals through the media; and its practitioners speak of a different world of journalism in which ‘global media strategy’ and ‘international perception management’ use journalists as pawns in the new Great Game. In its updated foreign policy, Washington talks of “full spectrum dominance”: the US should aim to be top dog in all spheres – military, economic production, business, culture and, significantly, information.

In an ideal world, a free press and a curious, sceptical army of campaigning journalists should keep democracies and their leaders in line, especially today. And, almost as important, it should act as a check to the increasing power of corporations, especially international ones.

So what’s gone wrong? The list is lengthy. Government propaganda and pressure on journalists. Pressure from corporations, including those which own news-

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

papers and television stations. (Why didn't we realise earlier that the corporate world, so often the target for journalists, would one day find ways of fighting back.) Legal pressure. Social pressure. And professional self-pressure, for journalists themselves are not entirely without blame for the state of the media today. Let's deal with these pressures one by one.

Those in power who think about these things have always been puzzled by this question: "If we can so successfully manage the media in wartime, why can't we do the same in peacetime?" There is no trouble doing so in autocratic regimes. The media tells the public what the government wants it to know. End of story. Newspapers and broadcasting stations that do not toe the line lose their licences, or their editors go to jail, or – in some extreme cases – are shot. This does not happen in democratic countries, but there are nevertheless ways open to governments to exercise some control of the media. The first and most often used is an appeal to 'the national interest'.

In the United States, the events of 11 September have been used as an argument to deter journalists who dared to criticise or question their home country. When three times in July 2002 the New York Times printed excerpts of secret Pentagon plans to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration accused the newspaper of "reckless reporting", "putting American lives at risk" and even "treason". But the distinguished journalist academic, our colleague Bill Kovach, says that it is precisely at times like these that journalists need to be even more diligent in the pursuit of truth: "A journalist is never more true to democracy, is never more engaged as a citizen, is never more patriotic than when aggressively doing the job of independently verifying the news of the day". At other times, the media has been willing to censor itself at the government's request. In 1986 Washington Post editor, Benjamin C Bradlee, announced that in the first five months of that year the Post had, at the government's request, withheld information from stories a dozen times on the grounds of a risk to national security.

There are other ways of managing the media without using the "risk to national security" approach. The government of India adopts a carrot and stick tactic. The carrot can include subsidised housing in so-called "journalists' colonies", a government-paid trip abroad, a seat on an important government or semi-government committee, and even a posting as an ambassador. As the Pioneer news-

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

paper of New Delhi says, “With rewards like these, who would want to needless-ly antagonise the government?” Those who do find that the income tax inspector is suddenly paying close attention to the journalists’ tax returns and taxation offi-cers may even raid their homes and offices.

Now the battle between government and the media is not new – it has gone on since the late 19th century when a rise in literacy created millions of new readers for newspapers and magazines, and made those in power worry whether this could cost them control of the electorate. What is new and worrying is the rise of legal pressure on the media to desist from subjecting both governments and cor-porations to investigation and public scrutiny.

The libel laws in English-speaking countries are a burden on newspapers and a major deterrent to investigative reporting. Awards to politicians and other public figures are often huge, and sometimes include an element of punitive damages. These have a knock-on effect in the way they inhibit investigative reporting. Chuck Lewis has told us the battle that the Center for Public Integrity and the ICIJ has to obtain libel insurance and fight off threat of what could be crippling libel actions. Just to remind you, many American insurance companies have a rule that if the insured media organisation has three libel actions pending against it – irrespective of the merit of those actions – its insurance policy becomes void. Without defamation insurance, the Center could not risk continuing its function – its insurance company has already paid out over US\$1 million in legal fees defending one case, which its lawyers say will eventually be thrown out of court. Lawyers, of course, know the ‘three libel writs and you’re out’ rule. If they want to stop a story, one of the first things they do is to see how many writs a media organisation has outstanding, and if it is two, then they launch another one them-selves knowing that, frivolous or not, this will effectively shut down the story.

American law firms, always keen to push the law to the limits to deter investi-gative journalists, have come up with new ploys that many consider even more effective than an action for defamation. They offer corporations and individuals ‘pre-emptive strikes’ against troublesome media. Their advice is along these lines:

When you learn that journalists are making enquiries about you, or when jour-nalists approach you, do not wait until the news item is published or broadcast and then sue for defamation. The damage is already done. Hit back immediately

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

and stop the item before it is published. We know ways of doing this.

The “ways” include examining the financial structure of the media organisation to see if pressure can be applied through a parent or associated company, analysing the advertising revenue of the company to see if a major advertiser can be persuaded to apply pressure, and compiling a dossier on the personal background of the investigating reporter to see if he or she can be intimidated into dropping the story.

**Let's move on** to professional self-pressure. The new technology drew attention to the cost of gathering news – as distinct from the cost of producing a newspaper or running a TV program. The accountants – the people who now really run the media industry – moved to slash news-gathering budgets. All over the world, overseas news bureaux were closed, foreign correspondents called home or given early retirement.

All over the Western world, journalists, who should have been up in arms about the downgrading of foreign news, were seduced. Some became highly-paid columnists, celebrities in their own right, pushing their opinions rather than gathering facts. Or writers about lifestyle, relationships, gossip, travel, beauty, fashion, gardening and do-it-yourself which, although sometimes interesting in themselves, can hardly compare in importance with examining the human condition at the beginning of the 21st century, which is what serious journalists try to do.

One British proprietor has gone so far as to say he doesn't really need journalists on his newspapers. OK he admitted he needed a few to shovel the news into his papers and a celebrity writer or two. But the news itself he would “buy in” from outside sources. Money spent on journalism, he said, was wasted. There was no way of measuring what difference extra editorial expenditure had on circulation. On the other hand, he boasted, you could measure exactly the difference made by spending more money on promotion. Spend half a million dollars on marketing and give away a free movie DVD with every copy of the paper and you could see how many extra copies you sold. It seems to be working because his last balance sheet revealed he was paying himself nearly two million dollars a week.

We could do with a little of that. Although, let's face, we didn't go into journal-

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

ism for the money, did we? If we did then we were mad. Did you ever hear a proud mother say of her only daughter, "We don't have to worry about Alice. She married very well, you know. She married a journalist." No. We went into journalism because it's a chance to educate ourselves at someone else's expense, see the world, make a difference, serve the public, feel good and, let's face it, meet a lot of interesting people – mostly other journalists. And above all, it's fun. It's better than working.

OK I've made you all feel gloomy about the future. Now here's the up-side. We're still here. Most proprietors may not willing to finance investigative journalism but some still are, the Guardian group, for example, a beacon in a darkening world. The ICIJ is still going. The search goes on for new ways of financing it. We're survivors. Our colleague in Western Australia, Jan Mayman, unfortunately not with us this time because of a fall that injured her leg, has been plugging away for years investigating giant aluminium plant in Western Australia. Jan says that the plant pollutes the atmosphere and its fumes may well be responsible for serious mysterious illnesses and even deaths among the local people. No mainline Australian media group will finance her investigations. She finances them herself by writing well-paying human interest stories for women's magazines,

Jan says she realised that there is substance to the charges against the plant when, after a lot of negotiations, she finally got a face-to-face interview with its press office. Jan says the odour from the plant was terrible but the press officer insisted that it was harmless – a statement made not very convincing by the fact that the press officer herself sat at her office desk wearing a gas mask.

We are not complacent. We are prepared to look at our performance and try to do better. "Reporting the World", a project run by the Conflict and Peace Forums of Tapalow Court, Buckinghamshire, has spent a lot of time and effort in getting around a conference table those journalists who have reported major conflicts and crises in recent years, and encouraging them to criticise each other's work in a constructive manner. More than two hundred editors, writers, producers, and reporters helped to produce a practical check-list upholding the values of balance, fairness and responsibility in their coverage of international affairs. Most of these meetings were arranged by the European Centre of the Freedom Forum based in London. The Centre's parent body, the Freedom Association of Arlington,

## PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY | Why we still need serious journalism

Virginia, is a non-partisan foundation, a successor to one started in 1935 by publisher Frank E Gannett with the slogan: “a free press, free speech and free spirit for all people”.

The London centre was a beacon for journalists of all colours, creeds and political beliefs, united by their concern that journalism should remain more than celebrity lifestyle, trivialisation, confessions and comic book stories. Now for the irony. Six weeks after 9/11, the parent body in the United States closed it down, saying that they needed the money for a news museum in downtown Washington!

So investigative journalism is not dead yet. Let's run through what we should be doing. We have to convince news organisations that there is more to journalism than profits and share price, that slick accountancy, cost cutting and spending money on promotion are not going to win an editor or a proprietor a place in the history books. We need a public interest defence in all legal actions brought against the media. Journalists should be able to defend a story by showing that what it revealed was so important to the public that everything else was irrelevant – something that, thanks to the European Court of Human Rights, the Sunday Times succeeded in doing in the thalidomide case. I mean, if a drug company is aggressively marketing a drug that deforms unborn babies, then how the journalist got the story and whether it defamed drug company executives – and even whether publication would damage that elusive concept “the National Interest”, has just got to take second place to informing the public.

We can support media that does investigative journalism, and stop buying media that does not. We can encourage others to do the same. We can seek other sources of funding for our own investigations. We can learn to do more with less. And, if everything else fails, we can take the Jan Mayman path and somehow finance ourselves. If we stick together, we are not without power.

# **READ MORE POLITICAL ESSAYS**

*Download political essays by many of the best and brightest commentators from around the world, plus books, booklets, essays, newspapers and magazines – all in pdf format – all free of charge, at [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)  
(Click on this link to enter web site)*

**ColdType**  
WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD