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Club Bloggery: Once Were Barons

By Axel Bruns, Jason Wilson, and Barry Saunders

Though we often give the print media a hard time here at Club Bloggery, we're not so sanguine about the [end](#) of the iconic magazine, *The Bulletin*, last month. Despite its virulently racist origins, and its tendency under Kerry Packer to be used now and then as the mogul's mouthpiece, its end is an alarming symptom of something wider and more serious. The worrying structural problem it reveals is the difficulty of sustaining any venues for the specialised task of investigative journalism in Australian and international media.

Investigative journalism is a notoriously protracted, expensive and difficult business. Complicated stories, stories that must get past deliberate obfuscation by powerful interests, or stories that take a long time to unfold, all require major investment.

'Proper' investigative journalists may spend weeks or even months doing little more than following the paper trail and unravelling fact and fiction, and there's no guarantee of a usable story at the end of their work - but if it comes, the payoff is the kind of reporting that brings down governments, blows open corporate scandals, and brings public figures to account. *The Bulletin*, at least while Kerry Packer was prepared to subsidise it, was hailed as one of the last refuges for investigative journalists within an otherwise increasingly indifferent commercial media environment.

As Queenslanders, our modern history is overshadowed by the fall of the Bjelke-Petersen government, which was brought about by gutsy investigative reporting by *Courier-Mail* and ABC journalists. More recently, the AWB scandal was reported in a classic piece of investigative reporting by News Ltd journalist Caroline Overington, at a time when she was shining a light in dark places rather than merely [writing colour](#).

The increasing complexity of the machinations of modern corporate and political institutions means that there is an ever greater need for quality investigative journalism, while at the same time such journalism is also ever more expensive - and therefore, ever less likely to happen. And therein lies the problem.

Investigative journalism has always been about prestige rather than value for money, and its funding arrangements have therefore rather resembled feudal patronage more than hard-nosed business decisions.

Much as medieval rulers patronised the leading artisans of their day - certainly in part for the intrinsic worth of their work, but just as much also for the international propaganda value of gathering the best and brightest at their court -, so the media barons of the late 20th century often invested in a handful of quality investigative outfits (not least also in order to paper over some of the less seemly publications in their empires).

For the same reason, *The Bulletin* ran at a loss for a long, long time essentially because Packer decided that he could afford it: whether motivated by the bragging rights and the political influence, or (less likely) by the warm glow of contributing to Australian public life that his support for quality investigative journalism provided, that support can ultimately be seen as a form of philanthropy.

By and large, however, the age of the media baron now appears to be drawing to a close - the disinterest in his late father's media operations shown by James Packer, and their eventual sale to a faceless equity firm, clearly demonstrate this shift. Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Stokes, and a few others still cling to the reins of power over their domains, but few of their underlings are old enough to have grown up with the smell of newspaper ink in their nostrils (as Murdoch himself did).

If Rupert Murdoch were to sell his empire to a faceless equity consortium tomorrow, we might wonder whether *The Australian's* days as a self-proclaimed quality newspaper would be numbered too - its profit margin is a nice bonus for Murdoch, but would a more "rational" ownership think it was worth the trouble?

So, unless a new golden age of media feudalism is around the corner - unlikely, in the decentralised, distributed, syndicated, and aggregated world of network and online news -, what if any future remains for investigative journalism?

Perhaps, and just perhaps, the analogy with feudal patronage and philanthropy provides one answer. As modernity stirred, funding for artists and artisans shifted from the aristocracy to the upper and middle classes, either through direct patronage or indirect, taxpayer-funded subsidies. Similarly, it may now be time to look at strong public funding for quality investigative journalism. For too long we have placed ourselves at the mercy of media barons whose interest in supporting quality was mixed up with their own purposes; as their age passes, we must develop more independent systems to support the investigative journalism that we know we need.

It's in this sense that we'd have to disagree with our *ABC Opinion* colleague Mark Bahnisch's [implication](#) that *The Bulletin* died because it was "dull", or that it could have saved itself with some fresh voices in its opinion pages.

The Bulletin died because no one would pay for the privilege of owning it any more; its demise is the sign of a beginning post-feudal age in journalism, in which broad-based support for investigative journalism must come from the citizenry itself even if a return on investment is not guaranteed.

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