

○ PRINCES OF PRINT VERSUS WARLORDS OF THE WEB?

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Review of Margaret Simons' *The Content Makers: Understanding the Media in Australia*. (Penguin Australia, September 2007, 528 pp. Paperback, RRP \$34.95. ISBN 9780143007852.)

In the lead-up to the 2006 legislation which changed the media laws in Australia, many of us were alarmed at the new concentrations of ownership of television, radio and newspapers that would be permitted. The 'Princes of Print' could now become 'Queens of the Screen'. (The 'Regents of the Radio' weren't part of Keating's colourful 1980s metaphor.) The fact that Rupert Murdoch was publicly pooh-pooing our concerns in 2005, declaring that new online media would make old media increasingly irrelevant, tended to increase one's mistrust, as he seemed poised to benefit materially from the changes. Yet it seems now that his point was reasonably valid. And when an independent journalist like Margaret Simons makes the same point, with lots of examples, one becomes more inclined to take the argument seriously. Perhaps we do now have more diverse sources of news and hence less scope for political manipulation than before.

Simons herself works for *Crikey.com.au*, the online subscription newsletter. *Crikey* lives at the frontier between the traditional capitalist media and the 'gift economy' of self-funded commentators, whistleblowers and diarists who provide a rich if haphazard source of supplementary news and opinion every day on the Internet. *Crikey* has been ruled out of participating in the Federal Treasurer's annual Budget lock-ups on the grounds that 'it isn't mainstream media'. However it shares several characteristics with traditional newspapers: it covers the news, and employs journalists, an editor and a political cartoonist for this purpose; it earns revenue from both ads and subscriptions; and it comes out daily. But it also has some of the character of the Internet fringe – an in-group feel to it, an encouragement of insider leaks, and a readiness to provide hyperlinks to relevant vodcasts and blogs. So Simons is well positioned at the crossroads to comment on both the traditional and the new media.

In the main chapters of her book, Simons provides surveys of the Australian media scene: the audience, the trends, the business models, the journalists, the owners and their empires, the relevant politicians and regulators. She book-ends these with two nice pieces of participant-observer journalism. Her introduction, triggered by the rather callous treatment of the retirement of a traditional print journalist by his colleagues, reflects on her own 25 years in newspaper journalism, starting as a cadet journalist with *The Age*. Her Epilogue captures the insider feeling of attending the November 2006 Walkley journalism awards as a member of the Crikey team. This was the sensational night when Crikey's founder Stephen Mayne was not just criticised by the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* as being 'unsuitable' to give out an award, but was pushed off the stage by a drunken and resentful Glenn Milne, known as the 'poison dwarf' for his penmanship on *The Australian* (and his stature). She uses both incidents to reflect adroitly on the tribal values of Australian journalists.

The part of her book I found most interesting was her section on the gift economy. The term comes from anthropology, in societies where material goods are so plentiful that 'people gain

prestige from what they give away'. She points out how the gift economy has always thrived amongst scholars, with a centuries-old tradition of publishing their results for personal recognition and the satisfaction of sharing useful knowledge, not direct cash. She notes how most information gains value through being shared, not kept secret. And how the vast contents of Wikipedia, currently the greatest online encyclopedia, with over two million articles in the English version alone, have been contributed 'for the satisfaction that comes from sharing knowledge'.

The 'gift economy' helps explain the ongoing momentum of journals like this one, where authors, reviewers and editors contribute without remuneration for the common good. As Simons points out, this is usually only possible in communities where the individuals concerned do not lack for basic material goods. She gives the example of super-rich individuals like Harold Mitchell donating their time to philanthropic causes. But in a basically egalitarian society like this one, you have never needed to be rich to donate your time and expertise. One notes that the gift economy has been part of Australian culture since the 19th century, with active volunteer traditions of fire-fighting, lifesaving and donating blood to the Red Cross, to name just the best known examples – open to individuals, admittedly fit individuals, from all walks of life. This culture readily extends to sharing knowledge through the media, in recent years via blogging, contributing letters to editors, specialist articles and opinion pieces, and capturing news images with mobile phones and other forms of digital cameras. As key facets of the gift economy's application to the media, Simons surveys the growth in community radio and television broadcasting as well as blogging across Australia.

Simons takes her book's title from an insensitive remark by Fred Hilmer to his senior journalists, when he was CEO of Fairfax, that their role was basically one of 'content providers for the advertising platforms'. She has softened the phrase to 'content makers'. Just as many participants in our industry prefer to think of their role as providing valuable communications services to the community rather than simply maximising their company's shareholder returns (let alone maximising their CEO's performance bonuses), one understands why journalists would be offended by such a reductionist view of their profession. We all need a noble purpose in life.

Simons devotes a large chapter, 'paying the piper', to examining the underlying business models behind both the mainstream and new media, and in particular the dominant role of advertising. While the level of explanation might not be quantitative enough to satisfy a business person or an economics student, it seems well pitched for general readers and for the media studies students that are likely to form a large part of the book's readership.

Overall the book is better on narrative explanation, especially on providing a feel for the cultures within the media industry, than on analysis. Nevertheless it provides useful insights for those of us who aren't media academics or experienced journalists, and gives us an enjoyable tour of the industry. Definitely worth reading.