

# Mark Ryan's speech to INFORM19 Summit

*Mark Ryan is director of the Judith Nielson Institute for Journalism and Ideas. This is an edited version of his speech to the NewsMediaWorks Inform Summit in Sydney.*

The great 19th century journalist and minor novelist, Charles Dickens, wrote: It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

He might have been referring to the state of journalism today.

If you're a consumer of journalism it's the best of times: credible, reliable news and writing, and film and documentaries - are all only a click away.

If you're a reporter in a shrinking newsroom, or a legacy media proprietor, it might be the worst of times. Or uncertain times at best.

When Judith Neilson asked me to help her establish a journalism institute I embarked on a four-month global tour of newsrooms, journalism schools and centres, start-ups, philanthropic media initiatives and Silicon Valley.

I spoke to more than 100 media owners, editors and journalists across a broad spectrum of media in Europe, the US and Asia, and here at home.

I read dozens of learned studies and articles, all pondering "the future of journalism."

At the end of it all I reached the conclusion that I think all of us coming to ... that is, that while we are certainly in the midst of massive disruption there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of journalism.

People still want news, and there are increasing signs they are willing to pay for quality.

They want great stories, told well in new and interesting ways in all kinds of formats we couldn't conceive of just a few years ago.

And despite the roiling churn and chatter of social media, we still rely on traditional sources for information we can trust.

Journalists are, by and large, romantics - we love the folklore and tradition of journalism that has inspired the profession for the past two hundred years or so.

I'm as guilty of overdosing on nostalgia as the next journo.

Just last week I read a wonderful speech given a few years ago by Mike Coward, best known as a cricket writer, but mostly he's just a great journalist.

The stories in his speech chimed with me because he was describing the papers that I first worked on - as a work experience kid at the *Adelaide News*, an afternoon paper that published four editions daily.

Four editions. For an afternoon paper. In Adelaide!

And *The Advertiser*, where I was a copyboy - still put to bed each night with the same linotype machines and presses that had been rolling for a century or more.

And then the Sun News-Pictorial in Flinders St Melbourne - a newspaper fortress that Mike reminded me turned out 1.1 million papers a day when I was there.

1.1 million copies of *The Sun* and *The Herald*.

Every day. Incredible.

Those days are, however, gone, and they ain't coming back. But, new and exciting days for journalism are ahead of us.

We often hear that the old business model of journalism is dead. But we are also seeing new and interesting models emerging.

And while the future of the business is not settled in all likelihood we will see a whole range of hybrid models - various combinations of commercial, not-for-profit, community-backed initiatives, philanthropy.

All of these will probably make up the journalism landscape of the future.

That's where the Judith Neilson Institute hopes to play a role. We have a simple mission - to encourage and celebrate quality journalism.

*Of course, we can't do everything. And we know that our role will evolve and change in the years ahead. We fundamentally believe that the ultimate goal is to get people to pay for quality content.*

But on the way towards that goal we believe the best way to support journalism is help get more of it done.

Do more of it. And do it better.

This aim has guided the first of our collaborative projects - a series with *The Australian* about China that we hope will complicate and enrich that enormously important story as it unfolds over the decades ahead.

We're helping *The Guardian* publish more reporting on the Pacific, and the *Australian Financial Review* is re-opening its Jakarta bureau with our help.

Nine is hiring two indigenous journalists to work on a series on indigenous issues to be published in the *SMH* and *The Age*.

We are helping other smaller projects in remote communities. And, like everyone else, we're helping with a podcast.

These kinds of collaborations will be ongoing as we take time over the next year or two to consider larger, signature projects that we hope can make a real and lasting impact for journalism.

I want to make some observations about Australian journalism right now.

Since I left journalism proper more than 30 years ago I've been around and about it - as a press secretary, heading up a Government media unit, and from the commanding heights of a prime minister's office and later a global corporation.

I feel as though I've seen journalism in the round, as it were. But for the past 18 months I've been totally immersed in it again, here and overseas, and I'm seeing it with fresh eyes.

One of the most striking features of Australian journalism is how fractious it's become. How combative and mean-spirited. Some might say even self-obsessed.

And please, be aware that I'm generalising here to make a point.

The collegiality that existed when I started out - even among the fiercest competitors - seems to have leached away.

Like society at large, journalism has formed tribes and each tribe has its spear carriers. These spear carriers are too quick to point out a competitor's unforced error.

Or too slow to judge that mistake against a career's worth of diligent and accurate reporting. Too slow to give a colleague, or a rival organisation, the benefit of the doubt.

The relentless sniping between media organisations has become tiresome.

And the sniping goes both ways, I know, between what is called the Left and the Right - as if those terms mean anything these days.

But do the readers or viewers really care?

ScoMo might have his Canberra Bubble. But I reckon journos have created a pretty good bubble of their own.

Much of the criticism that gets tossed back and forth within the bubble is merely a reminder that we live in a pretty healthy democracy.

*Mostly, we get to say or write what we think, but a lot of the heated and mostly petty carping is of little interest to a wider audience.*

I happen to believe, somewhat unfashionably as I've discovered in some quarters, that News Corporation is good for journalism. Do I agree with everything News does or says? Of course not.

But look at the body of work - look at the great journalism, the great editors and reporters whose careers have been born and sustained under News mastheads over the past 60 years or so.

Journalism needs to be a broad church. It is made up of all types and it must take all types if it is serve its audience and serve our democracy.

I'm not a regular viewer of Sky After Dark. But to Andrew, Paul, and Chris and the others, I say: knock yourselves out.

I happen to think Lenore Taylor at *The Guardian* is one of the most talented and committed editors anywhere. She and her team generate great journalism that people are paying for. But I don't rely on *The Guardian* alone for sustenance.

And while I occasionally question why the ABC made this or that editorial decision, I remind myself of the scale of what that organisation undertakes every day, and that it is bound to misstep from time to time.

But in the end, even the ABC's most vocal critics must concede that it consistently produces indispensable, first-class journalism.

A journalist I admire once said this better than I can. He said: quality journalism is grounded in facts while abounding in disagreements.

*Journalism is, of course, more important than ever. But not only because of Trump. Or Brexit. Or because democracy is under threat around the world.*

So by all means let's go on having disagreements. And let's make it as robust as possible within the bounds of civil debate. But let's not continue with the infantile notion that one organisation or another is "all good" or "all bad."

We all know it's more complicated and more subtle than that. This is why the Judith Neilson Institute will work with all media players where we think it can do some good.

We'll work with commercial players trying to make journalism pay. And we'll try to lend a hand in places where it will always be hard to turn a profit.

But above all we will help journalists spend more time chasing the story. Because ultimately that is what really matters. And there are more stories out there than ever.

For one thing, technology - the devil that disrupted journalism - is opening up vast new mines of information that can be turned into amazing stories.

What comes next for journalism is an open question. But we can be pretty sure that most of the bold predictions won't pan out - they rarely do.

That's why the Institute is spreading the risk, as it were...positioning ourselves in the midst of all this change and hoping to move with it.

Journalism is, of course, more important than ever. But not only because of Trump. Or Brexit. Or because democracy is under threat around the world.

It's important because humans have an insatiable hunger for great stories, well told.

Whether they're told by News Corp, or *The Guardian*, or a talented freelancer, or a filmmaker or a tabloid sub-editor who comes up with a killer headline - they all add up to a great future for journalism.

As Kyle Pope, one of the Institute's international advisory council members and Editor-in-Chief of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, says: "Clearly, journalism faces daunting, even epic, challenges in the way it is financed and distributed and in the expectations and habits of a new generation of readers. But we see this moment as a pivotal transition between the journalism that was, and the one that will be."

The Judith Nielson Institute for Journalism and Ideas see it the same way.