



Andrew Olle Media Lecture - Fran Kelly - October 2024

I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we gather, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and recognise their leaders past and present and pay my respects to all first nations people here tonight.

When I moved to Sydney thirty years ago for a three-month gig on Triple J's daily current affairs program the Drum (the original!) I was young, green and wildly inexperienced. But I was also dead hungry ... and this was my big break.

Not surprisingly, it didn't take long – in a new city, in a new career – for my bravado to crash and risk burning me along with it, forcing me to realise I was actually raw, unblooded and all but unskilled. In other words, utterly out of my depth.

My good friend and mentor...and presenter of the Drum at the time ... Helen Thomas, a fantastic journalist whom many of you know and respect and who was later the manager of ABC News Radio, took me aside. "Just listen to Andrew Olle on 2BL every morning, Fran. Really listen. And make sure you catch his political cross with Paul Lyneham. If you want to know what a good story is, and what good radio is, that's the place to start."

I did. And it was.

I listened and learned, soaking it all up. I learned about speaking truth to power and holding the powerful to account. I learned about objectivity and balance, but importantly I also learned that the story was never about me and what I thought. It was about the issue and the facts and the people impacted by them. *The people*. And most of all it was about asking the questions that the listeners wanted or needed answered. It was also about warmth and humour and connection as those two old friends brought the political news of the day alive and invited the radio audience in.

Andrew Olle taught me all that without even knowing it...or knowing me as anything other than a kid he might have passed in a corridor...and I have always thanked him for it. I still think of him sometimes when I'm on air, mid-interview ...and others, too, like the great Paul Murphy, another of Andrew's great mates and one of the best political interviewers in the business. How would they handle this? Frame this?

And so to stand here tonight, in Andrew's name, is an unbelievable honour.

I'd like to begin tonight with a dog story... and apologies to those of you who aren't into dogs ... but I don't have a cat.

About ten years ago my little dog Buster got lost. He was a sweet rescue mutt who much later, during Covid, earned a bit of a national profile. Every morning for those Covid months we broadcast RN Breakfast from my living room Buster would lie curled up beside me in a tangle of cords and doze, quietly. He was so good ... unless the delivery person came to the front door, then he would spring awake and bark loudly. My partner, listening from somewhere else in the house, would fly in and drag him out in disgrace. But it wasn't only the delivery guy. Buster for some reason would also bark

very loudly ... whenever Anthony Albanese came on the radio. At the sound of the now PM's voice Buster would sit up, twitch his ears and vocalise. Albo might have been slightly offended, he is a dog lover after all ... but the listeners loved it and loved Buster for it. Dogs around Australia, I'm told, would join in with him in a scene straight out of 101 Dalmatians.

Anyway, a decade before that when Buster was a trembling new arrival in our home he ran away and despite papering the streets with his photo and calling his name night and day we couldn't find him. He was missing for several days until a man who lived nearby heard the softest of frightened whimpers, and peered over a fence to find Buster cowering in the corner of a dead-end laneway. The man, whom I'd seen before but never met, immediately scaled the fence and gently lifted the unhappy pup back over. There were cheers and handshakes all round.

I didn't see that guy again for quite some time and when I did, months later he came towards me in the street and let rip... screaming uncensored expletives and spitting hate. I was shocked and intimidated. "But it's me ... you found my dog," I tried. His face contorted into absolute revulsion. "And if I'd effing known it was you from the effing ABC, you effing dyke, I never would have got 'im." The hatred ratcheted up to a chorus of "effing ABC, effing ABC, effing ABC" and in all the years since, he still mutters it in my direction.

He doesn't like the ABC.

And every morning when I'd get in my car in the pre-dawn dark to go do my breakfast show I'd be aware of the hate that lived so close.

Call me naive, but I thought I was going to work to try and do something good. To deliver three hours of objective current affairs radio that I would give my absolute heart and soul to ...that would be informative, well researched. Accurate, balanced and empathic. That's what my team and I were striving for every day. I could understand he might not like some of the guests ... I didn't like some of the guests ... but to *hate* the national broadcaster, to have such visceral, threatening hate for it and so for me personally, was something I could not get my head around.

This was no anonymous keyboard warrior with cyberspace a protective barrier between us. He was, and often is, in touching distance. And when I picture us standing there – him screaming, me stunned – I see the horrible frozen tableau as representative of something much bigger, of feelings from some quarters towards the ABC and perhaps the mainstream media in general. Of deep social, cultural and political division. Of the unbridled hate which is increasingly shaping how as journalists we think and what we do.

I keep trying to understand this man but the division between us is confusing. To me it is irrational and unfair. To him it must be a valid response to a set of experiences or perceptions that I can't see. Or is it simply anger for anger's sake, an outlet for suppressed rage born of other things in other times. Of hurt? Suspicion? The powerful elites that control his life? He was so kind to a little dog. He clearly has love and kindness within. So where does it come from? This overt hate and division.

The political as the personal.

It comes, at its essence, from perception. From where we sit and how we see things. All of you sitting here tonight have a different view of these proceedings. As do I. Later, we will all describe this event in our own way. How we found the food. The other guests. The keynote speaker (be nice). We will take a shared reality and spin it differently. Layer it with our own views, expectations, experiences and emotion and make it our own.

Forty years ago, the magician David Copperfield – who, for the record, this year has had serious allegations of sexual assault made against him – made the Statue of Liberty disappear. He did! People who were there that night saw it happen. One minute it was towering above them, the next it was gone. The cheering audience and fifty million TV viewers were not wrong in believing it had disappeared. It had gone from right in front of their eyes. Only, of course, it hadn't.

In an audacious sleight of hand, aided by clever engineering, the stage upon which the audience sat had been moved surreptitiously to *change their perspective* – to block their view of the statue behind two giant columns. To obscure their view of what was really there.

David Copperfield was in the business of magic, benign trickery, so people who turned up and tuned in for the show knew he was out to deceive them in the name of entertainment ... but vox-pops with people in the crowd showed they were so happy to believe the statue was gone. Their incredulity and delight was real. No-one would fall for it in 2024, but back then, the thumping bass-heavy music and flashing lights used to distract from the moving floor beneath them had done the job.

The paradigm of perspective had framed the audience's belief and reinforced their desire and need to believe.

But I saw it. So it must be true.

As Copperfield so boldly demonstrated, perception of reality, of truth, can be manipulated. And easily, if you've got the chutzpah, the confidence, the malign intent to con maybe – and nowadays an accommodating mass media to spread the deceit. You can make people believe the unbelievable and – stepping away from the conjurer's stage and onto the political one – you can easily flame the embers of mistrust, fear and hate, reinforce the negative bias that lies within us all – and send them into the wind, or onto the internet where they will glow and burn.

People in power have always known it; that facts can be manipulated, distorted and denied in the quest to hang onto that power or expand it. Call it what you will. It used to be propaganda. Now it is misinformation, disinformation. Or false facts.... An Orwellian contradiction in terms that is increasingly reshaping our realities.

I read it on Facebook ...I saw it on YouTube... So it must be true.

The world has become an echo chamber of conflicting perceived truths, fuelled by the internet. Small groups of plotters whispering in a village tavern have morphed into harnessed groups of hundreds of thousands if not millions. What once could be proven categorically is now up for bitter, sustained debate on a scale that was simply impossible to achieve before we all moved online. Fact-checkers around the globe cannot keep up. We're trapped in a crazy battle of the so-called, conflicting truths ... or as Trump counsel Kellyanne Conway put it "alternate facts"... with those most intensely invested in one side or the other marshalling their forces, their own version of the facts and spreading their lies more potently. It seems we've lost any notion of "agreed facts." as a baseline for civilised debate.

Indeed, arguments abound that facts don't matter anymore ... only perception. Only emotion. Copperfield's trick. The politicians' lie. The conspiracy theory.

But no, no, no.

As journalists, verified, irrefutable facts are our stock in trade, our only credential is the truth. And as the waters of disinformation swirl, we must seek it, hold it and raise it above the waves. Literally, as we saw in the US this month with the reports that Hurricane Milton was a government scam, that

meteorologists were somehow creating and steering these storms. Ridiculous, right? But a Republican congresswoman was one of those spreading the accusation on her social media.

The cost of abandoning our brief of factual truth and dogged inquiry is too high.

Yet, as we've seen it's not easy to do and is getting harder. Let's not kid ourselves that what Trump's managed to achieve with his populist truth re-imagining could never happen here.

Let's take a look at the Voice referendum. It's in no way a direct comparison but the vibe – the shift – is of the same genus. Facts were brutalised – abandoned even – and fault lines mined for political advantage.

I did a ten-part podcast series in the lead-up to the Voice with my colleague Carly Williams, a proud Quandamooka woman with the ABC's Indigenous Affairs Unit and producer Madeleine Genner. Carly and I spoke to as many players and experts and communities as we could fit into ten short episodes, trying to explain the proposal itself, the issues at the heart of it, the implications of the constitutional change and the concerns about it. Trying to help people unwind all the misinformation and understand the proposal we would all be voting on. We explored the claims and arguments of both sides.

It is one year since the referendum that proved to be a case study of the widening fissures in our society and the distorting impact misinformation and disinformation can have on our democratic processes. It's also a case study of how ill-equipped our media and our institutions are to deal with it, taking sides early and backing into corners from which there is no emerging. A hard line, taken early and argued forcefully has much more impact than a nuanced open minded, consider-all-sides campaign.

Indigenous Australians are still reeling from that tactic.

We've had plenty of referendums with a No outcome in this country – only eight out of the forty-five have been successful – but none of these No votes came with such an avalanche of fear-mongering and false claims. We know the fault lines are not new and division in referendums is certainly not new ... they were on noisy display back in the 1999 vote on a Republic but the argy bargy of then seems almost benign by comparison.

But disinformation during the Voice was in a completely different league. It was used to spark hate and division. It was used to cause damage and hurt.

This is not to say that the outcome of the referendum would necessarily have been reversed if the online disinformation industry hadn't been unleashed but the impact on Indigenous Australians of a no vote would certainly have been less brutal, less hurtful, and on the community more broadly, less divisive.

For months while making the podcast Carly and I sat down with academics, lawyers, traditional owners, politicians in a climate of confusion, resentment and orchestrated fear ... and we sat down with the hurt. And can I tell you, until you do that, until you look despair right in the eye you cannot really grasp what is at stake at a personal level, much less at a bigger one – when things get so ugly.

As one devastated indigenous leader said to me late on referendum night. "They hate us. I never would believe it before, but now I know it's true. Australians hate us." Indigenous academic Professor Marcia Langton said afterwards that reconciliation in this country is dead.

I know most Australians don't want that to be true – the polls show it – but in the short-term I think it is fair to say that black and white relations have been set back. Many First Nations people nurse the

hurt and the grief of that vote and the knowledge that the people they live amongst voted overwhelmingly against their inclusion in the Constitution in the way that was meaningful to them. Many of those who voted No, only see a waste of millions of dollars of taxpayers' money.

Last week's anniversary was painful and raw for many ... but indigenous leaders are now beginning to re-emerge to ask, "What's next?" In his recent book, Yes campaigner Thomas Mayo, himself a target of vile racist attacks during the referendum, urges Australians to flood the disinformation zone with truth and hope.

In the aftermath of the referendum The ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods dissected the vote ...and the results were stark.

Twenty-three of 25 urban electorates backed a Voice. But as you moved away from the city centre the vote changed.

Only four of the 43 outer suburban electorates voted Yes.

And nearly every rural and regional electorate voted No....bar two...61 out of 63 voted No.

That's an unequivocal geographical divide in this country that needs to be addressed.

And there were other clear demarcations too. Education, gender, age and income. Again, not new.... but amplified.

That ANU survey revealed something else too....that the overwhelming reason most Australians voted no was because they thought the Voice would divide the nation. Dig deeper into those numbers and you find a reluctance to enshrine rights for some but not for all.... and a belief that Aboriginal disadvantage lies in a lack of effort on their part.

That's why spreading disinformation, including by perpetuating false racial profiling, was so potent. **Most** of it was online where today **most** of us get our news and connection; lies that went viral on popular platforms like Twitter and TikTok....that a yes vote would mean an Aboriginal tax or an apartheid system of governmentor that they'd come for our backyards and farms – a scare tactic that I first encountered way back during the Mabo debate of the early 90s — revived everywhere I seemed to turn in the lead-up to the referendum. It was simply not true...none of it was true... but fitted neatly into some deep seated stereotypes.

Most of this out and out disinformation came from conspiracy theorists, and far right white supremacist groups ... and some of it, according to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, was sponsored by social media accounts linked to the Chinese Communist Party; ramping up the disinformation to fuel division within Australian society. But other misinformation – that thirty billion dollars is already spent on indigenous Australians every year, for instance – was repeated by No campaigners and was misleading. And once these claims are out there it allows others, including politicians and the media to repeat them ...even if in a bid to counter them. No smoke without fire.

It was insidious and dangerous.

But what we learned was that the mainstream media, the tech giants and our institutions were ill-equipped or not prepared to recognise and deal with outright lies presented as truths in this important electoral process.

The Australian Electoral Commission, one of the most trusted institutions in the country, had a go. They knew it was coming because they'd seen the stirrings of it in the 2022 election... but the amount of disinformation out there on social media this time was a tsunami from the get-go.

*Bring your own pen to the polling booth because the AEC uses pencils so votes can be changed.
...#useapen.*

It's an oldie but a goldie turbocharged on social media in the referendum. In a sign of the times, the AEC now has a disinformation register.

It was against this simmering backdrop of mistrust that the electoral commissioner Tom Rogers put his head above the parapet to tell voters to write Yes or No on their ballot paper, to not use a tick or a cross. If they did, a tick would likely be counted as a yes and a cross would be dismissed as an informal vote and not counted.

No campaigners Fair Australia accused the AEC of stacking the deck and Opposition Leader Peter Dutton said it was rigged, labelling the AEC position "completely outrageous ... giving the Yes campaign a clear advantage."

But this was not a subversive anti-no tactic. It has been the standard practice in elections in this country for thirty years. The AEC quickly and robustly rejected the criticism but flickers of doubt were sown.

Constitutional lawyers warned our politicians at the time to be careful, that this was dangerous, not just for that referendum but for our electoral process more broadly. Trusting the integrity of the electoral process is key to trusting the election results which is in turn key to the peaceful transfer of power – a foundation stone of a functioning, stable democracy. January 6. Washington riots.

We can't ever let it happen here.

If it has become a fight then we have to fight back against it ...and quality journalism is key to that fight .

We have to do what we do so well. Question. Check. Verify.. And check again. Basic, basic stuff.

Accuracy, objectivity and fairness.

Which brings us to the debate about disinformation's bedmate; moral equivalence. That's the case that not all arguments and claims are equal and treating them as such in the name of balance distorts the truth.

Professor Megan Davies from the Yes campaign complained about the media coverage for this very reason. She said, "Thinly veiled racism was given respectability and wide ventilation through conventional media because of its slavish adherence to "both sides". It was a false equivalence she said that gave licence for it to run even more rampant on social media.

The No campaign had its own gripes with the media...criticising some outlets for depicting a No vote as evidence that Australia is a racist country.

At the ABC we did all we could to prepare for increased scrutiny and claims of bias from our detractors. We went to great lengths to show public proof of balance and independence.

Moral equivalence is a conundrum public broadcasters all over the world are grappling with. Jay Rosen from New York University puts it like this: "That's what the he said/she said reporting, and the balanced treatment of an unbalanced phenomenon are all about" ... protection against criticism.

But that criticism is not the whole story. If I look at the ABC's coverage, or some of the great work done by other media outlets during the referendum – Narelda Jacobs on Ten, John Paul Janke on SBS, Lorena Allam at The Guardian, Paige Taylor in The Australian, Brooke Boney on Nine – the media

worked hard to bring a range of views on the referendum. To get beyond the *he said/she said* and the campaign spokespeople.

Our ABC Indigenous reporting team did an incredible job, travelling all over the country bringing the voices of remote, rural and urban indigenous communities ... and the complexity of views within them...to the rest of us so we could make up our minds for ourselves based on actual facts.

And it turns out it was true that Indigenous Australians voted overwhelmingly for the Voice to Parliament.

So this is the task for the mainstream media. We need to come out of any defensive crouch and get back to our crucial role of providing the national audience with the information it needs to make an informed view at times of contentious, divisive national debate. On the Voice, on climate science, on the Middle East, on Covid. Whatever it is.

Less commentary, more reporting. Less telling, more enquiry.

Within that, we need to hold our nerve and stop running scared of our detractors – our self-appointed enemies within the media and individual politicians or online haters. And in doing that we need to keep serving up the facts – not facts that come with ridiculous qualifiers such as true or false, real or fake - but facts.

Verifiable Facts. Facts verified by us.

Misinformation breeds mistrust and misunderstanding; disinformation breeds distrust, distress and division. The age of both is well and truly here and both by their very nature are never used in the name of the good.

I stress again this is not an argument that says misinformation and disinformation caused Australia to vote No overwhelmingly in the referendum. But this is an argument that says our democratic processes are being impacted and potentially undermined by the manipulation of information and we need to be alert to it so we can do our jobs better.

Misinformation expert Ed Coper says we have entered a new age which merits new approaches instead of “clinging to the losing belief that facts are an antidote of falsehoods”.

I can't agree with Ed that facts aren't the best weapon to defeat a lie but I do agree that on their own they are not enough

Unless we also convince Australians that as journalists we are reporting the facts, and not bending them to fit our agendas.

Unless we can convince people we are committed to holding the powerful to account rather than just being a mouthpiece for their claims.

And unless we can find a way to make our news gathering accessible, relatable and available where people gather online in communities they trust, it doesn't matter how good we are with facts, those stoking fear and mistrust through emotional manipulation...weaponizing the fault lines ...*will* win.

I recall how Fair Australia reportedly coached the No Campaign volunteers during the referendum “ Emotion defeats facts and figures every time.”

Emotion is subjective. And persuasive. But as Carl Bernstein said back in his President-crushing day, “The truth is not a matter of opinion. It's what the evidence shows.”

Attacks on the utility of truth is now the constant backdrop to what we do.

They come as the tectonic plates of the media landscape have shifted and our audience is balkansing, drifting off into niche markets that speak only to themselves... into corners where the light of truth is filtered, blacked out even.... or drifting off and disengaging completely.

We want them back. Democracy, I believe, needs them back.

To do that, as journalists, we need to get down from the pedestals we have perhaps unintentionally put ourselves on and look at things through the eyes of our consumers. Focus more on their perspective. Think creatively about how to gain their trust. We are trying really, really hard to do that, with myriad initiatives. Like the Reuters Trust project. Or ABC Verify. Or the New York Times in the run up to this Presidential Election urging readers to send in their questions about its coverage, of how and what it reports. It describes it as an effort to bring clarity and transparency to its journalism.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, a great masthead was enough. It needed no explaining.

Like our electoral commissioner Tom Rogers during the referendum, this is the New York Times trying to get ahead of the disinformation and the conspiracy theories about its coverage. Trying to help its audience trust what it publishes.

And yet trust in the media continues to flag...the latest Roy Morgan Risk Monitor has the mainstream media rated 21 on the Trusted Organisations Chart....behind political parties, gambling organisations, property developers and insurance agents. That really hurts.

But social media ranks even lower...down at 26...and therein lies an opportunity I guess. We're still in the lead here.

When I think about all this I think about desire paths. Do you know what a desire path is?

It is an unofficial short cut when pedestrians bypass the paved and theoretically well-designed footpaths laid by city planners and cut across the grass to get where they want to go. Everyone instinctively does the same thing and soon a track is worn, creating a cobweb of human determination across city parks and public spaces which, seen from above, mirror a snapshot of our synapses. More and more, urban planners are responding to these lines by surrendering and paving them, or even waiting to see where natural paths form before even considering creating permanent ones. Listening not telling!

There's a lesson here for us all. As journalists it is futile, anachronistic, presumptive and egotistical to continue to concrete the same old paths based on our own expectations of listener, viewer and reader behaviour ... to expect ... to demand ... that people follow our imposed planning. They won't and they're not. In huge numbers.

They're making their own new paths ... and we are reeling from it. As we reorientate we have to be led by the desire lines and respect and follow them. And the real challenge is to anticipate them. Because it doesn't matter how good our work, we are nothing without the reader, the viewer, the listener.

As I was thinking about this speech I caught up with a senior colleague from the Canberra Press Gallery who described the challenge and the opportunity of the real time feedback on what he writes these days. He can literally count the clicks on his stories as soon as they're up and see how the readers are responding to it...and so can his editors. It's the same for most of us these days.

Obviously this impacts how and what he reports. It's like a director waving their arms about off camera. No clicks on this political analysis or incremental shift in the policy debate? Okay then, how do I tell this story differently or maybe dump it all together, rather than cobblestone our outlets with stories no one wants to read anymore.

I'm not saying we should sell out. Certain stories will always have to be told, people in power held to account.... it's the mode of telling we're being asked to adjust as we study the paths consumers are creating across the media grasslands.

We have to go where they want to go or have gone already and, I suggest, we have to abandon any notion that this is "dumbing down." By whose measure? An ivory tower is a precarious edifice. If we're honest with ourselves, the digital age has compromised our concentration spans, many of us anyway. Lists, digital explainers, graphics, fact boxes are handy shortcuts through an important story. Is that dumbing down, or just being helpful?

The culture of journalism was shaped by its privilege of being the gatekeepers of information. We are no longer that, but it is still a privileged business, and a passionate one. Passion is the flipside of hate. Just as passion drives division ...so too can it drive social cohesion and healing.

Passion is the buzz that sustains us. It's the thousand phone calls. The refusal to take no. It's the thrill of the chase. The spirited debates at news conferences. The racing heart when you realize you've got something big, something good, something great. It's watching the outcome of your work, the accountability it forces. It is the fun, the grunt-work, the frustrations, the camaraderie.

It is being taken into confidences, being handed hearts to hold, tears to witness, pain or joy to share.

It is the audience.

I did breakfast radio for seventeen years and there was not one morning I didn't feel that passion and the privilege as I turned on my mic at 6am not one! And it pumped through me for every minute until I switched off at nine. That's the truth.

And every journalist in this room gets that.

I know a retired editor of regional and capital city papers who wants the only music played at his funeral to be the sound of the presses rolling.

Maybe I'll have the ABC's Majestic Fanfare news theme at mine!

Which brings me to radio. Because radio is my passion.

And tonight I make a bold prediction.

To misquote Mark Twain "Reports of the death of radio are greatly exaggerated."

That's my thesisthat radio is the medium of the future ... and we should invest to make it so. I know what you're thinking. She's kidding right?

For decades now those of us working in radio have always known it was the poor cousin of television, but in the past decade or so we have felt something more than that: the sword of Damocles poised overhead. Radio is a dying media, they said; the audiences will fall off a cliff when car radios go digital, when the older audience disappears. Mutterings about turning off the transmitters... Imagine the money we'll save.

It's been a little dispiriting and not reflected in the audience response that those of us on air get every day.

But the budgets got tighter, the radio teams even smaller, rare carparks fewer. And the promotional effort Sometimes it felt like they were trying to kill us off...despite the reassurances.

But then, suddenly audio content was king. Listening was the new black and everyone was tuned in 24/7 ... to podcasts, to audio books, to music streaming and.... to live radio. And with earpods, we are literally wired for sound.

The recent ABC audio survey found ninety-five percent of the population consume audio content every week and *the most consumed audio type is radio*.... time spent listening is split fifty-one percent radio and forty-nine percent the rest.

Okay, sure ... right now, radio ratings are down across the board and that's disappointing. Post covid there has been a shift in listening from news and talk to music stations. So the big winners for radio at the moment are the commercial FM music networks. After the grim covid years, juxtaposed against the current flood of global wars and catastrophes, people want to lighten up. We call it news avoidance or news fatigue and it's causing havoc and panic within, as ratings and audiences shrink along with the budgets of all mainstream news media and the social license of the public broadcasters.

I wonder sometimes if our human brains have simply not evolved to cope with knowing and witnessing all the tragic events in every corner of the world at once. It's too much. Back in the cave we only had to face one sabre-tooth tiger at a time, we didn't know there were thousands more over the hills. Out of sight was blissfully out of mind.

Combine news fatigue with what all the surveys tell us – that people have less interest in, and tolerance for, views outside their own tribal truths, then music is an easy listening space.

Covid also showed something else important though, and was a real-time focus test for the ABC. During Covid our radio audience soared. Why was that? Because people needed a reliable trustworthy news source at one of the scariest times in their lives, but more than that they wanted a reliable trustworthy friend at a time when so many of us felt so isolated. Were isolated. They craved the web of human connectivity that radio provided.

On Radio National Breakfast our text-line showed listeners appreciated the real-time company we offered, the constancy and reassurance, the latest up to date info, the voice in the background. They saw us as their friend in a way pre-recorded audio can never be; because we are talking directly to them, greeting the same day, looking at the same sky at the same time. That is precious.

ABC local radio also peaked during the pandemic as it does during bushfires or floods as the nation's emergency broadcaster. It too, is a friend and a literal lifeline for the country and always has been. It shares the same streets, knows the same landmarks, smells the same fires, sees the same river rising.

There's nothing more local than local radio especially in this shrinking regional media landscape.

Think of all the people who couldn't get through the night without the radio, who turn it on in the wee small hours when they can't sleep, so to hear someone up and chatting in real time. It is your 3am friend when you need one.

Radio is immediate and it's responsive and it's personal.

I remember Prime Minister John Howard once telling me he used to shave listening to RN Breakfast at The Lodge in the mornings...and the number of people who've said to me over the years....shyly or slyly... I love waking up with you every morning Fran. What's more intimate than that?

And the farmers listening on their tractors – one of my favorite images – and the builders on their worksites, the artists in their studios...they're listening to live radio. I know because they tell me over and over.

They're not all listening to the ABC... and that is the beauty of the medium; it reflects our national identity. There's a network for everyone.

Now I don't want to sound like a dinosaur here. But just because public radio has been around for one hundred years does not make it up for extinction.... but rather for continuing evolution. Radio is the parent that has spawned the other audio options – and we co-exist in that audio landscape as family. You might listen to a podcast on your walk for sure... but you won't have it blaring out in the shearing shed. Radio can be consumed communally.

We are also uniquely placed to cross over between the huge appetite for podcasting and our ubiquitous and excellent radio content. The Triton podcast tracker Top 100 is chock full of ABC radio shows in podcast form as people time shift but still want to listen to some of our great broadcasters. Think Conversations, or Late Night Live or Dr Karl or Roy and HG or PK on Breakfast because you can't miss the agenda setting interview of that morning.

A friend's dad gardens listening to the ABC Listen app, not through earphones but through the speaker. He calls it the tranny... as in a transistor radio of old. Perfect!

This genuine human interaction of live radio will become even more imperative as bots and AI generated half truths and nonsense take hold elsewhere. We are real. And we are there, right now. And so is that expert we're talking to.

NATO's cyber boss, James Appathurai, told the ABC recently that the major AI companies had revealed to it within one year seventy percent of what's produced for the internet will be produced by AI – so not by people – and within five years ninety per cent of what's on the internet will be fake. Will be false.

So while the Dead Internet Theory might have started out a few years ago as a weird conspiracy theory, the arrival of Generative AI plus deliberate disinformation from bad actors funding bot factories to warp the algorithms is making a version of it come true.

And people know it. So when people don't want to search for information or news or online connection in a fake AI flooded online ecosystem they will look for a new/old reliable source of information and conversation and a genuine online community.

And they will find it at the ABC across all our platforms... or online at The Guardian or the News.com website or the Nine media blog. We all need to get better at how we deliver our journalism and where we deliver it...but we need to keep delivering it because now more than ever people know that a lot of what's on the internet and on social media is wrong, is rubbish, is manipulative. Many fall for it, happily so... but many also want out.

And radio... my love..., is a vital part of the antidote to the mistrust and disillusionment.... and unless we celebrate and preserve this we risk ruining a great national treasure.

We need to understand what we've got here and not be embarrassed by it...by this legacy medium. It's a gem and it's worth polishing.

So this is my pitch to any executives in the room: Fund it better. Spruik it – Sing our praises and sell our wares and get our best content across all the socials and build our brands. Build it and they will come ...back. Maybe we build it differently, with new formats and some new voices, but keep building.

Because in this world of narrowcasting where we exist in our chosen silos, hardly coming across anything outside our curated sphere of interest, radio is a weapon for truth, breadth and surprise. Without it, the silence would be deafening.

When I said goodbye on-air to the RN Breakfast listeners after all those years, I was humbled beyond measure at the audience outpouring. The words I kept hearing were “friendship”; “company, “constant.”; “commitment”.

We had all been in it together; the early morning breast-feeders and the shift workers, the pollies prepping for battle; the lyer-inners; the school runners; the post early morning swimmers; the cattle wranglers and the commuters. We were all connected in the same moments of the same morning.

It is the magic of radio.

An ABC sound engineer told me recently she worked as an operator on Andrew’s Morning show all those years ago and when I asked her what was he like?... she said.. “gentle.” And then she added, “Thoughtful, intelligent... kind.....he really cared about everyone he talked to on the show. And he really listened.”

They’re the qualities that make for good journalism.

And they’re the qualities that can bridge division and counter the culture of hate in which we now work. A shout out here to all you young reporters who face it in spades .. who’ve never known anything different .. and yet aren’t giving up on journalism because of it. We need you.

Oh...and one more thing before I go. Buster died last year. But he got ten more years of bliss with us and us with him because that man reached out with kindness that day. And I will always be thankful to him for that.

Thankyou