

We need Aussie view of world

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The rise of Asia means Australia finds itself a lot closer to the centre of geopolitical and economic action than in the past. It is vital to the national interest, therefore, that Australians understand what is happening beyond our shores.

The media plays a central role in this regard. But we cannot simply rely on the homogenised worldview of international wire services. In the same way that it is important for Australia to have a voice in world affairs, it is important to have Australian eyes upon the world.

To understand why this is important you need only to think back to the contribution of the British journalist Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and his newly arrived Australian colleague, Keith Murdoch, on the shores of Gallipoli, in exposing the disastrous conduct of the Dardanelles campaign.

Or think of legendary Australian news cameraman Neil Davis, whose footage of the human impact of the Vietnam War drew the ire of US military authorities and the admiration of American news networks.

It is greatly to the country's advantage to have Australian journalists reporting, analysing and commenting on events in the world. One reason this is important relates to the particular Australian sensibility that our reporters bring to their work; another relates to our nation's interests. First, not every country engages with the world on the same terms. The same applies to their journalists.

Australian journalists tend not to be burdened with the sense of their own nation's global centrality carried by American journalists or with the historical baggage borne by their British counterparts. More often than not, they approach the world with an open mind, a natural curiosity and a robust filter for spin.

Second, not every story is equally important to every country around the world. It matters, for example, that Australia has journalists in the vital countries of our near neighbourhood, such as Papua New Guinea, in part because few international press agencies do.

Unfortunately, the number of Australian journalistic eyes on world events is declining. Australian international news bureaus are closing and the amount of time and space in the media dedicated to international news is shrinking -- unless, of course, you include the love lives of the Kardashians in the category of "global affairs".

Some might argue that in an era of a la carte news, where individuals can easily assemble a meal of mostly free information from multiple sources, it is anachronistic to hanker for more traditional forms of news gathering and analysis.

Yet neither new media nor social media has solved a fundamental problem. Today we suffer from a surplus of information but a deficit of analysis. Twitter can tell you quickly what is happening in the farthest corners of the globe, but it cannot tell you why it is happening. It is at these times that a journalist's presence in a country, and their feel for that country, really counts. It is at these times that we need journalists' ability to find the gold nuggets in the mud -- to discern what is important and make finely grained judgments about what it all means, including for Australia.

So how do we reverse the current decline? The truth is that citizens get the news they demand, not the news they deserve. It is not easy to alter the economics of newsgathering and the media business. But as consumers we can recognise effort and reward excellence when we see it.

For this reason we have decided to inaugurate the annual Lowy Institute Media Award to recognise Australian journalists who have deepened the knowledge, or shaped the discussion, of international policy issues in our country. This is a modest contribution toward ensuring that our journalists remain on the global beat. It is imperative to our national interest that they do.

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