

The Flip-Flop

'They've done it again,' journalist Sue exclaims. 'Last night's town hall panel with the public intellectuals generated plenty of discussion. The panel included a scientist, a legal scholar and a polemicist.'

'A polemicist?' responds her balding editor in amazement. 'That wouldn't be a term used by many in our readership.'

'Me either.' She laughs. 'But that was how he was introduced. He was a skilled debater who, I'm guessing, has studied and researched far more than most people. He seemed to enjoy challenging and provoking the audience. He was fun ... but serious too.'

'Alright, so what were they discussing this time?'

'Public officials flip-flopping their positions and the media frenzy around it.'

'We are in the media, Sue. Isn't that just holding people to account?'

She smiles. 'Perhaps I should write my précis for you and then you can decide.'

'Go for it, Sue. Your readership awaits.'

The Flip Flop by Sue Donym

Last night's town hall panel asked us, '**By what logic does a statement made at one stage in your life commit you to holding that same position for ever?**' And it rolled on from there.

The panel pointed out that the basis of learning throughout life is that you improve your understanding as you receive more acceptable testable information.

Juvenile minds take time to develop from knowing things than can be seen, touched, tasted, smelled or heard ... towards more abstract concepts such as ideas, emotions, principles and values.

In adult life, the priorities of people in their twenties can be driven by the fundamental needs of hormones, career and relationships while steadily starting to relate to the breadth of global ideologies and the dynamics of world tensions.

Then, as adults mature and experience the subtleties of living on the planet, their views and opinions might well develop differently from their earlier years. **That's a normal process of development.**

Scientists operate on **the certainty of doubt**. While they experiment, learn and improve on world understanding, they always expect improvements on their theories will be discovered.

No theory or position is considered to be absolute.

So, why does the media engage in dredging up earlier comments to criticise public officials who have changed their views in the light of new information or evolving contexts?

The panel asked '**Is it just to pillory people in positions of authority ... to suggest that they are inconsistent and less than**

honest? Shouldn't politicians be applauded for having the courage to review their past opinions or standpoints?'

Some in the audience replied that, in a healthy open society, it is the **role of a free press to hold power to account**. They are entitled to ask questions and receive justifications for changing views.

Others audience members were against the '*gotcha*' questioning technique. They saw it as **commercial media grandstanding** to attract listeners/viewers/readers who want their prejudices confirmed. They felt that such behaviour **devalued respect for people in public service** and would dissuade future good candidates from putting their names forward.

So, there is a grey zone between perceptions of trust and distrust of public officials. Why might that be so?

Probity is the term used to describe the expectation that people in public office will perform their duties in a fair, balanced, non-partisan, moral, decent and honest manner.

The law has a number of mechanisms to investigate **and prosecute breaches of that honourable expectation** ... because examples of corrupt behaviour have been proven in many societies.

Breaches can range from minor ill-informed breaking of regulations ... through to deliberate improper use of power ... to serious corrupt conduct, dishonestly and prejudicially affecting members of public for some form of gain.

Official investigations can be conducted by corruption commissions with the power to compel witnesses to give evidence. The police can follow up with respect to advancing criminal charges.

So, while education and sanctioning are means of proactively alerting all the public to the requirement for honest behaviour in positions of public trust, there have been serious breaches of that community trust in recent memory that have cost lives and livelihoods.

The public have become quite sensitive that lies have been told to disguise improper behaviour and some are happy for the media to be very aggressive in ensuring that truth is being disclosed.

If that is the sharp end of the media investigations, what about the lesser sport of trying to catch out officials with half-smart '*gotcha*' questions ... for entertainment.

That can have the consequence of reducing the respect for people who serve the public ... such as politicians, public servants, police,

nurses, emergency service personnel ... and arguably that is **not in the interests of a well-run civil society.**

Compare the difference between a laugh at the expense of a politician ... to innocent people being charged with serious fraud because of **computer systems knowingly set up with wrong assumptions.** Investigative journalism identified the injustice in those serious cases.

A free press to probe and inform is an important part of an open civilised society. But, decision-makers ... being prepared to change their stated positions rationally ... based on either changed circumstances or developing wisdom ... **should be applauded.**

That leaves us with **truth versus lies.** If the '*gotchas*' are identifying lies or corruption then the press are doing their job ... but if it is just money-making sensationalism, promoting social disenchantment, then **it needs to be reined in by public opinion.**

So, asked the polemicist, '**Should deliberate provable lying and disinformation be made a crime?** Is that the follow-on from the media tracking flip-flops?'

He was smiling as he questioned. 'What if the lie is published or broadcast ... for sensation? Is that a breach of free speech in the sense that it is designed to hurt others? The USA First Amendment removes protection if the speech is fraud or inciting imminent lawless action. In Australia, defamation, vilification and encouraging violence are not protected ... as free speech.'

Deliberate lies, then? What do **you** think?

'That's basically where the discussion ran out of time,' Sue says. 'There was a lot of pondering going on ... and requests from the audience for a chance to go away and think about it all.'

'Hopefully, also, to test the truth of what has been said?' the editor adds with a chuckle. 'So, how would you expect our readers to react to this piece? It's perhaps less provocative than some others you've written.'

'I would hope that they would **support the importance of strong investigative journalism,**' she says, 'chasing corruption and crime ... through monitoring what people in power have said. I would also hope that they would **condemn the sensationalists** who are just in it to get a trivial headline or to make a dollar at the expense of the vulnerable.'

The editor gives an owl-like peer 'And as to making lying or disinforming the public a provable crime?'

She grins. 'If you'll pardon me, the jury is out on that one.'

He responds with a laugh. 'Let's print your article then and await the reaction.'