

# FACT OR FICTION?

Anyone who has been misquoted, reported out of context or been aware of incorrect information published in Australian newspapers will not be surprised to learn that Australia's media rated poorly in a major accuracy survey.

The Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, at the University of Technology (UTS), Sydney, recently released its first publication, *Accuracy in Australian Newspapers*, focusing on the accuracy of leading newspapers and their corrections policies.

Author of the 100-page report, Julianne Schultz, associate professor of journalism at UTS, commented: "By detailing the extent of inaccuracy in Australian newspapers we hope to prod the industry into accepting greater public accountability. This survey shows that people care about their newspapers and want them to be as good as possible."

Australian newspapers make many more mistakes than they acknowledge, although all the papers surveyed corrected at least one of their errors in November last year. In the first part of the three-part study almost 400 people who are frequently quoted – politicians, business leaders, unionists, lawyers, judges, academics, public servants, sporting champions and pop stars among them – were asked what they thought about the accuracy of the media. Seventy-seven per cent said they expected to find at least one mistake in each report about them. Only 10 per cent said mistakes were rare.

Most of these prominent people blamed the mistakes on reporters failing to ask enough questions of clarification to get the story right, and said an incorrect explanation was the most frequent mistake.

Schultz found that the prominent people, who rarely complained about mistakes, were understanding of the limitations under which journalists operate, but critical of their failings. One federal minister summed up the attitude of many high-profile individuals when he said he did not complain about errors concerning him because, "It's all part of the game."

In the second part of the study, Schultz and her assistants on the project, Stephen Long and Kitty Eggerking,

selected one day in November 1989 to analyse the accuracy of reports in four leading newspapers, *The Australian Financial Review*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*. They clipped every local news story in each paper and sent a copy to all the identifiable sources. One hundred and twenty five people responded and identified at least one error in half the stories published.

People quoted in *The Australian* identified an average of just over two errors in half the stories returned, whereas *Sydney Morning Herald* sources found an average of 1.8 errors in 64 per cent of the articles returned. *The Australian Financial Review's* sources complained of fewer errors (1.2 errors in 40 per cent of stories) than the readers of *The Daily Telegraph* (one error in 62.5 per cent of the stories). These people were most upset by the tendency to sensationalise, although the errors ranged from spelling mistakes to serious misrepresentation.

For anyone who seeks a correction in a major newspaper, the third part of the study shows that this might be more difficult than it should be. Only two newspapers have formal, written, corrections policies, and these are the papers most likely to publish corrections – *The Canberra Times* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Crispin Hull, editor of *The Canberra Times*, is quoted in the report as saying that he has been running a small campaign by a small newspaper to encourage other Australian papers to "correct when we are wrong not only when we are beat. If we published more corrections, the public would see newspapers in a far more benevolent light, and we would remove a rod from our own backs."

The report includes a table of the corrections policies of 13 major papers that shows that of the number of requests for corrections, only a small proportion are published. Another editor is quoted defending his decision not to correct small details by saying, "There is a tendency for people to think, 'look at all the corrections they run, they must make a hell of a lot of mistakes. That's only the tip of the iceberg'."

*Accuracy in Australian Newspapers* is a thought-provoking first publication from the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism. It may spur editors to aspire to higher standards of public accountability and provoke journalists into taking more care. It provides those in the public spotlight with well-researched data about the accuracy of the publications in which they are quoted.

*Accuracy in Australian Newspapers* is available from the University of Technology, Sydney and costs \$15. For more information or a copy of the report contact Julianne Schultz on (02) 20930 (ext 9810).

## ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

The University of Technology, Sydney, has established **The Australian Centre for Independent Journalism** to foster the production of journalism, of the highest standard.

The Centre will produce investigative journalism, defined as broadly as possible; commission research into journalistic practice and offer professional development services for journalists and journalism students.

It is based on the belief that journalism is a public service and that the journalist's task is to inform the community – accurately, in detail, and without fear or favour – about the way in which their society, including the news media, actually operates.

The Centre will also undertake research into journalistic practice. As the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education found, journalism is a notoriously under-researched area in this country.

By providing a structure which will encourage research into journalistic practice, and the news media, the Centre will address this inadequacy.

The research will be journalism-centred but broad-ranging and will encourage the application of the skills, techniques and insights of historians, political scientists, sociologists, textual theorists, psychologists, economists and others, to journalism and the work of journalists.