

Australian Walkley Awards: Rewards for services rendered

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Media ownership in Australia is one of the most concentrated in the world, with Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, Kerry Packer's top-ranking Nine network and Fairfax Holdings dominating the local publishing and broadcasting scene. Australia's Walkley Awards, the annual trophy night for "excellence in the media", have always, therefore, been incestuous, cynical and toadying affairs.

Established in 1956 by Sir William Gaston Walkley, the founder of Ampol Petroleum, the 35 prizewinners are determined according to a two-stage process involving three-member panels for each category, with the final decision made by a 12-member Advisory Board. Apart from a couple of media union officials and one or two representatives from the government-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Special Broadcasting Service, the overwhelming majority of the judges are senior officers and journalists from the Murdoch, Packer and Fairfax empires. Not unexpectedly, most of the prizes are awarded to their employees.

Nevertheless, this year's awards, a lavish black tie affair on November 29 at the luxury Grand Hyatt Hotel in Melbourne, witnessed a new low. Melbourne *Age* journalist Andrew Rule won the Gold Walkley, the preeminent prize, and the "Investigative Reporting" trophy for his feature story "Geoff Clark: Power and Rape" and Sydney *Sun-Herald* journalist John Kidman was named as one of three finalists for the best print media "News Reporting" award for his article "Gang rape in Sydney's south-west."

Rule's story, published on June 14, consisted of a crude witchhunt against Clark, who is chairman of the government's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Rule alleged that Clark raped four women in the early 1970s and 1980s and was a

well-known bully who clawed his way into the leadership of the Aboriginal movement.

In addition to his job as senior journalist with the *Age*, Rule writes crime novels. Together with journalist John Silvester, he was responsible for editing and publishing the financially lucrative musings of the infamous Australian hitman Mark "Chopper" Read. Rule told the *Age* last year that he "tests the market" for future crime stories "with pieces of journalism". "I try to write things that 12 to 18 months later, people will pay to read," he said. "This is the most serious journalism of all." Hardly the comments of someone concerned with objectively reporting the facts.

Rule employed his crime writing "skills" to weave together unsworn statements from the four women claiming that Clark had raped them, together with malicious gossip against the ATSIC chairman and his parents. Two days after his story appeared, the *Age* published an editorial calling on Clark to quit as ATSIC chairman and demanding that Prime Minister Howard and former ALP leader Kim Beazley intervene in the issue.

Then followed a series of editorials and comments alleging that Clark and other Aboriginal leaders were covering up sexual abuse and domestic violence in their communities. The feminist lobby and various rightwingers joined in, intent on proving that these social problems were the product either of Aboriginal culture or evil men, not centuries of grinding poverty and racial oppression. All this played directly into the hands of the Howard government, which, in the lead-up to the federal elections, was seeking an issue to tap into the base of support of the rightwing, racist Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party.

It mattered little that Clark had been acquitted the previous year of a rape charge instigated by one of the

women and that the Victorian state police had decided not to prosecute the other cases due to lack of evidence. So serious was the journalist's attack on Clark's democratic and legal rights that his story was publicly condemned by the conservative Criminal Bar Association of Victoria. The civil rights group Liberty Victoria denounced it as "trial by media".

These issues were completely ignored by the Walkley Advisory Board, which claimed that Rule's article was "courageous", "very well written" and a "meticulous investigation."

John Kidman's "Gang rape in Sydney's south-west" published on July 29 played a similar political role. Kidman, the *Sun-Herald's* chief police reporter, alleged that groups of ethnic youth in Sydney were targeting white teenage girls, including some as young as 13, for gang rapes. These rapes, he wrote, had reached epidemic proportions, with 50 incidents occurring in the Bankstown area over the previous two years.

Like the smear story against Clark, the article was a crude "beat-up" designed to frighten parents and inflame rightwing and racist elements. The NSW Labor government, Sydney newspapers and radio talkshow announcers seized on Kidman's allegations to ratchet up the ongoing law and order campaign against working class and immigrant youth. State premier Bob Carr denounced the judiciary for being too lenient on young sex offenders and called for racial profiling of all suspects. Within days of the article's publication, Carr announced that his government would be introducing longer jail terms and a raft of so-called anti-gang laws aimed against young people.

Three weeks after Kidman's article appeared, the *Sun-Herald* published an editorial entitled "Rape, race and people in denial" in which it claimed, without a shred of evidence, that gang rape had become "a macho fad" among young Australian Muslim men.

Kidman's story and articles published by Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph* and other newspapers were so distorted that NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research chief Don Weatherburn felt obliged to issue a special press statement attempting to set the record straight. In his statement, which was buried by the press, Weatherburn said that factual evidence provided "no support whatsoever" for Kidman's claims. Sexual assaults in Bankstown were no higher than in any other part of the state, had not increased in the recent period

and had no measurable ethnic component. Kidman, refusing to let the truth get in the way of a good story, simply brushed these facts aside. While Kidman did not secure a Walkley prize, he received a clear nod of approval from the judging panel.

One of the grounds upon which entrants are purportedly judged is "adherence to ethical standards". Its decisions in regard to the articles by Rule and Kidman demonstrate that this "principle" is a sham. The prize-winners are being honoured, not for their ethics, but for services rendered.

This year's awards indicate just how far to the right the media has shifted and the key role that it plays in the escalating assault on democratic and legal rights. In 1999 the Gold Walkley was awarded to ABC-TV's *Media Watch* for its "Cash for Comment" program. The short news commentary program exposed how banks and other companies were making regular under-the-table payments to prominent talkback radio announcers for favourable on-air comment. Within a year of winning the prize, *Media Watch* compere, Paul Barry, was sacked after broadcasting a mildly critical interview with the chairman of the ABC board and a few weeks later the show was axed altogether.

At the time, the "Cash for Comment" exposure provoked lofty editorials and commentary in sections of the media, pontificating against the excessive influence of radio announcers and their promotion of racism and bigotry. Two years later, senior newspaper journalists are being openly rewarded for bringing the methods and politics of rightwing talkback hosts into the mainstream of the media.



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