

Graham Perkin's biography recalls a revolution that kicked the stuffing out of newspapers

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What would Graham Perkin make of the internet and today's corporate, colourless industry?

FORTY years ago, Graham Perkin remade The Age and it made him a journalistic star. It also killed him at the age of 45 and thereby instantly elevated him to the status of legend.

Perkin was a breath of fresh air that tore, tornado-like, through the staid and stuffy columns of Melbourne's morning broadsheet. He was one of many new-breed newspapermen and women who reinvigorated their craft in the 1960s and 70s, and many would argue that he was the best.

Ben Hills certainly does. Hills has captured the heart and much of the soul of Perkin's time in *Breaking News: The Golden Age of Graham Perkin* (Scribe), as befits his status as one of Perkin's top guns from those times.

Hills brings to life a past era and taps in this reader, who lived and worked through the same times, a deep well of reminiscence along with regret that the newspaper industry has lost much of its character. Corporatisation and homogenisation have taken their toll of personal flair and individuality.

It also poses some unanswerable questions, such as: How would Perkin have confronted the second revolution of our times, the internet? And do the lessons we draw from his journalistic philosophies have any relevance today?

Perkin joined The Age as a cadet in 1949 after growing up in the Wimmera region of Victoria, the son of a baker. He cut his teeth as a reporter on the shipping round, but whatever signs of brilliance he showed were dulled by the paper for which he wrote. The Age was moribund. Once the fire-breathing, campaigning, take-no-prisoners voice of David Syme, who owned and edited the paper for a half century before his death in 1908, it had become a tired, lazy, shoddy and a financially failing shadow of its former self. It reflected the attitudes of those who ran it: old, grey men (never women).

In the mid-50s circulation had drifted down to fewer than 130,000 a day; its management was a Dickensian-era joke, its editorial policies a subservient echo of the Menzies establishment and its content devoid of life. It was a subs' paper: reporters were harangued into writing to a deadly-dull, just-the-facts formula; the editor was a god-like figure whose sole contribution to any edition was limited to the editorial, while the editorial columns were filled by sub-editors who shovelled copy according to its availability, rather than its worth. Former Age chief-of-staff Michael Macgeorge says the motto of Sid Mitchell, chief sub in the 50s, was simple: "Get the paper to press on time."

"If a good story about a murder or assassination came in early and there was space on the back pages, which had to go to press first, he'd put it on that page," Macgeorge tells Hills.

"The last news to arrive would go on page one, but the last news might be about a minor accident."

Perkin railed at the hidebound stupidity of it all. He was champing at the bit in part because he had spent a year in London on a scholarship that took him to the heart of newspapering in the English-speaking world, Fleet Street. Here he learned the philosophies he would put in place when, in 1959, he became news editor of The Age, and later editor.

Instead of limiting the scope of his publication to the who, what, when and where of news, he added why. "We have got to get into the journalism of analysis and interpretation," he said in an ABC radio interview.

"It is no longer true that you can satisfy an intelligent reader with just telling him what's happened. You've got to extend this now; you've got to point out the possibilities that ensue from those facts -- who does it affect and what are people going to do next. [At] The Age we take a view that we're not there as spectators; we've got a responsibility to our readers and to society in general. I think newspapers have got to expose society to some sort of pressure all the time, as new ideas emerge, as new people emerge, and if they've got an argument let's hear the argument and let society test it and decide on it. I think the columns of newspapers are not a bad place for that to happen -- a much better place than out on the footpaths."

But Perkin was not alone in this thinking. He was one of many; in fact, it could be argued he was late in expressing this view. The 60s were a time of convulsion, when a post-war generation threw off the shackles imposed by their Depression and war-weary parents. Television had arrived in Australia in the mid-50s and, by opening a window on the world, changed the dynamics of news consumption and understanding.

Broadcasting arrived in Australia just in time for the 1956 Olympics and the public discovered if they could watch Dawn Fraser win a gold medal live on TV it was old news by the time the presses cranked up. Foiled at being the first with reporting events, newspapers began doing what TV couldn't -- allocating time and space to question why events occurred and what they meant.

Perkin's appointment as editor of The Age in October 1966 was hurried along by the arrival of The Australian in July 1964. Despite near-crippling production difficulties brought about by its location in Canberra, The Australian under foundation editor Max Newton quickly began to revolutionise the newspaper industry.

Perkin applied his newspapering philosophies with flair and vigour, but his ability to do so rested on the reluctant understanding of The Age's board, urged on by young tyro Ranald Macdonald, that if it didn't act to bring on change it was a dead duck.

Hills lists the key people behind Perkin -- Creighton Burns, Cameron Forbes, Les Carlyon, Claude Forell, Chris Forsyth, to nominate a few -- which is fine in context of The Age. But, in other cities, others were making similar contributions. On The Australian, for instance, Ian Moffat, Robert Drewe, Peter Smark, Bob Duffield, Sam Lipski and Maria Prerauer spring to mind. And while Perkin can now be seen as pre-eminent in his field, a vote at the time would almost certainly have seen that accolade go to Adrian Deamer, editor of The Australian. Deamer was admired, even revered, by staff during his tenure in the 60s until he fell foul of proprietor

It would be fair for Hills to respond to this by saying his book is about Perkin, not Deamer or any other editor. Breaking News at times comes close to hagiography but Hills, like the good investigative reporter he is, plumbs the other side for balance. The darkest clouds he can muster surround the question of whether Perkin was close to ASIO and Australia's other spooks, a question given added piquancy by the assertion that his secretary was a contact for ASIS.

Perkin died of a heart attack in October 1975, just after writing an editorial urging prime minister Gough Whitlam to resign and an appearance on the ABC's This Day Tonight, where he commented on the mounting constitutional crisis caused by the opposition's blocking of supply in the Senate. He was, by all accounts, days away from accepting the job as managing director of John Fairfax and Sons, now Fairfax Media, which had taken control of The Age.

This raises tantalising what-ifs. Could Perkin, by the strength of his personality, logic and journalistic skills, have changed the course of newspaper history? Could he have steered the group through the convulsions of the 80s that saw Fairfax lose its radio and TV interests and culminated in the madness of young Warwick Fairfax's failed takeover? What would he have made of the strutting blackguard Conrad Black, who briefly controlled the company?

We'll never know. And we'll never know how Perkin might have approached the second great post-war newspaper revolution. The internet has left newspapers doubting their future. Yet Perkin might say it is but another delivery system and the same journalistic principles applied in the past are still valid. But newspapers have changed. There are fewer of them and fewer proprietors, who brought their foibles, fixations and obsessions to their front pages. Some, such as John Norton and Frank Packer, were quite mad, yet their madness gave their papers a compelling character.

Closures, mergers and corporatisation, where proprietors have been replaced by boards of grocers and real estate promoters, have led to a blandness and predictability. Editors have largely given up on claims of independence in favour of toeing the corporate line. Neither readers nor advertisers may be offended, to the point of The Sydney Morning Herald refusing to endorse either side in the 2004 election, arguing it was not its job to tell readers what to think. A newspaper refusing to have an opinion? Perkin would have turned in his grave.

The Age in the 60s and 70s reflected Perkin's restless, relentless energy. His principles of journalism -- to afflict the powerful and pretentious -- are still valid but the issue has moved on to a different level: do modern generations care about newspapers and journalism? Do they matter in a new world of communication?