

The days of non-lycra journalism

The changing face of newsrooms creates a dilemma for the 'old school', writes **Chris Johnston**.

THE great Melbourne journalist Les Carlyon quoted Jack Nicholson in the 1974 film *Chinatown* yesterday while reminiscing about Graham Perkin's era at *The Age*: "I don't want to live in the past — it's just that I don't want to lose it."

That's the dilemma those from Perkin's reign — 1966 until 1975, transforming an unremarkable newspaper into a renowned one — must face. Is the default that it was better in the old days true? Was journalism more "real" then? Is type-writer, telex and newsprint a better way of preparing and dispensing the news than all that is possible now?

Even Carlyon, a wise and

battle-scarred sage to three generations of younger reporters, is conflicted. He edited *The Age* himself, twice won the sought-after journalists' award named after Perkin and won the Walkley. He's written amazing things about horses and sport and working people and two noted books about World War I, but even he isn't sure if it's exactly right to romanticise the past.

For one thing, he's not negative about the future. In a speech to help launch former Fairfax journalist Ben Hills' biography of Perkin at *The Age's* new Media House headquarters, Carlyon said the newspaper's classified advertising "rivers of gold" had turned into dry "creeks of lead

and zinc", but in his view the big newspaper circulation declines in the US will not happen here.

He maintains newspapers are still all about the writing. "The hard bit is getting the words right," he says. Not for him the editor concerned with strategic thinking about market placement and niche demographics. He said Perkin — among the "waggery and laughter" of the newsroom, "the chorus of a nightly opera with Perkin singing the arias" — would not fit in now.

The Age's editor-in-chief, Paul Ramadge, paid tribute to Perkin as an editor of "raw energy" but said in today's "hyper-connected" news environment, imperatives were different. He said the paper would soon be available in five ways — traditional print, online, on mobile phones, on e-paper



Les Carlyon yesterday.

PDFs and on iPads — in a bid to offer "the best journalism to readers on the platform of their choice at the time of their choosing".

Carlyon conceded media could be exciting now. "The journalism today is often better," he said. "But it is not as

much fun." The culture had changed. Early deadlines and notions such as "work/life balance" took the soul out of it.

He told a story about a recent dinner. He went outside the restaurant, in South Yarra, for a smoke. It was raining and a cyclist slid and fell off. Carlyon went to see if he was all right and the cyclist recognised him ("you're Les!") and told him he was an *Age* subeditor.

To Carlyon he was a symbol of change. He was young, he had finished work before 9pm, he was sober, he was carrying a trendy bag which "probably contained mung beans and a couple of headland speeches".

In Perkin's golden age, he said, 9pm was only the beginning. "None would ever have gone home on a bicycle," he said with a sniff. "And none would have worn lycra."