

China's leader takes a turn for the particularly stupid... and ours is no better

Michael Pascoe – *The New Daily* - 9 September 2020

It's a dark time for journalism on any number of fronts, a dark time for trust in institutions, for promoting an informed polity.

You never expect much of totalitarian regimes when it comes to media freedom, but Xi Jinping's Chinese Communist Party has taken a turn for the particularly stupid and self-defeating by expelling foreign journalists.

Since the ABC and *Australian Financial Review* correspondents flew out of Shanghai on Monday night in [extraordinary circumstances](#), Australian media has no representation in China for the first time since 1973.

(At least Bill Birtles and Mike Smith were allowed to leave. Australian citizen [Cheng Lei has been held in jail](#) for more than three weeks without charge – and she worked for China's state broadcaster.)

Purely from the point of view of Beijing's self-interest, retreating behind a bamboo curtain is damaging.

Countries gain from knowing about each other, from being known, from having fewer secrets in situations short of war.

A journalist on the ground can do something official communiqués never can: Humanise the concrete facade a government presents.

Foreign correspondents can see and report people. They are capable of not confusing the nation with the government.

As the Australian government's relationship with the Chinese government continues to hit new lows, it's more important that Australia's people can see China's people and vice versa.

At the same time, Beijing and Canberra both gain from whatever greater understandings are available of each other's thinking, sometimes even via the other country's espionage activities.

With Australia blindly following Donald Trump into another cold war, it's a particularly good time to read Ben Macintyre's *The Spy and the Traitor*.

Aside from John le Carré calling it “the best true spy story I have ever read”, it demonstrates in one instance how crucial and in another how mutually beneficial it can be for enemies to know each other's thinking.

Insights at that level are not possible for foreign correspondents in China, given the very close watch the CCP maintains on them, but their work adds depth and flavour unavailable through official channels.

Expelling Australian correspondents won't keep China's crimes in Xinjiang secret, won't tear Scott Morrison away from Donald Trump's side, but it does expose the Chinese leadership as immature and insecure.

And simply stupid.

The obvious reaction to a regime that doesn't want to be questioned or observed is to wonder what terrible things they must be scared of becoming public.

Heck, we already know Winnie the Pooh is banned.

Which brings to mind Scott "Stunt" Morrison's achievement this week in adding another phrase to his evasion armoury.

Joining "on water matters", "gossip", "family matters", "Canberra bubble", "I just reject the premise of your question", "you can have an editorial on it", "[I've dealt with that](#)" and "[that's your view](#)", we now have, "I think we're going to stay with the health of Victorians today" as a means of running away from a scandal.

Of course, there is a world of difference between Xi Jinping's media "management" and Scott Morrison's, but they stem from the same desire: To impose the government's view on mass communications, to dominate the news cycle and to avoid embarrassing issues.

We've seen that this federal government, like Xi Jinping's, is capable of mounting police raids on journalists' homes and offices, and hold secret trials to intimidate journalists and punish whistle-blowers.

That is at the extreme – well, it's the extreme until they start jailing journalists – but the government's very professional control of the news cycle is more insidious.

Keep in mind that the federal government now employs more spinners, PR people, media advisers and sundry communications types than work in Australia's remaining daily newspapers.

The key political aim is to set the daily news agenda and "win the day" by denying the opposition air.

Parts of the media management plan have become predictable.

Key parts of announcements are handed out the day before, giving the government two bites of the cherry through the headlines of its choosing on the evening news and morning newspapers ahead of the speech and then another go with vision on the night with more details to be covered by the press.

There isn't much room for subtlety in the average television news story of a minute or so. The government provides the news and it's reported, maybe with a five-second grab from the Opposition for "balance".

The game has been on full display over the past week with the Prime Minister's official media releases and press conferences only part of it.

There were the various seeded stories about what Scott Morrison would be expecting of Friday's national cabinet meeting, followed by Scott Morrison's interpretation of that meeting dominating other views, leading into Monday's press conference to attack the Victorian government and topped off by re-announcing the COVID vaccine stunt.

Scott Morrison's media conferences are controlled and limited – unlike the endless free-for-alls Victorian Premier Dan Andrews puts on daily.

(No politician will ever make that mistake again.)

Monday's hit job on Victoria's lockdown plans was a classic, plenty of churn in the water before it, the agenda clearly set by Team Morrison, complete with backup from the Health Minister and a compliant senior public servant.

There was the stunt/excuse of re-announcing a vaccine deal, but the politics was all about Victoria and the press gallery is composed of political journalists.

When the *Guardian's* Paul Karp attempted to ask about the [#sportsrorts smoking gun tabled by the ANAO](#) last week, a gun that had Scott Morrison's and Bridget McKenzie's fingerprints on it, he only got as far as saying "Prime Minister, officials told the Senate inquiry" before he was batted away by Mr Morrison saying "I think we're going to stay with the health of Victorians today" and moving on.

And the other journalists let him, dutifully sticking with Mr Morrison's planned agenda, asking questions that went nowhere in particular and elicited little, if anything, that added to our store of knowledge

(Staying with Victorian's health didn't stop Mr Morrison taking a question about his plan to force Google and Facebook to give money to private media companies – but that's not an embarrassment for Mr Morrison, he has nothing he wants to hide on that count.)

There were only six questions allowed after Mr Karp.

That's the way the show is run. Individual journalists tend to be awarded a single shot and, in the limited time available, often come to the show with their own question they are prepped to ask.

Bedevising journalism is the "not invented here" syndrome. If one outlet has a story, there's a reluctance of other outlets to follow it unless it's a particularly big and juicy one that has landed with a public splash.

It's a myopic attitude – journalists read each other's papers and watch each other's bulletins, but most readers and viewers don't. Readership crossover is small.

Part of the attitude flows from journalists' natural dislike of doing "a follow". The culture is to want to be first with a story, not to bring up the rear.

It serves each organ's readers and viewers, the public, very poorly.

This is not a matter of political stories. A quick example from far enough back to be academic:

The Firepower "magic fuel pill" fraud in 2008 was an outrageous and very public scam. Gerard Ryle went at it in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (and won a Walkley) and I plugged away in Crikey, but aside from a single column Michael West wrote in *The Australian*, by my memory, that was it.

Oh, *Four Corners* turned up [after it was all over for a post mortem](#), but it was otherwise pretty much ignored by other media until it was over.

And that was before journalism was gutted by loss of advertising revenue.

Now, controlling the political news cycle has been made easier for #Scottyfrommarketing by there being fewer journalists expected to do more, by the country's biggest newspaper group becoming pretty much a Coalition cheer squad, by the country's biggest television and newspaper group taking a step to the right, and the ABC is under constant financial and political pressure.

Yet the scandals won't go away.

Instead of being dealt with honestly and dispatched, they'll fester.

Meanwhile, it's not China. Scott Morrison can go a bit Trumpy and say things that are patently untrue (to put it mildly) about his office's involvement in #sportsrorts, he can favour tame outlets with access, he can get away with evading and refusing to answer questions, but he's not expelling journalists.

He doesn't need to.