The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE3098

Grattan, Michelle

(1944 -)

Born	19440630, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Editor, Journalist, Print journalist

Summary

Michelle Grattan was the first woman to become editor of an Australian metropolitan daily newspaper. Specialising in political journalism, she has written and edited for many significant Australian newspapers. Her long and distinguished career in journalism began in 1970 at the Melbourne *Age*, where she enjoyed a stellar career as their political editor. She left that paper (for good!) in 2013. .

Details

Michelle Grattan studied politics at the University of Melbourne, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours). She worked as a tutor in politics at Monash University before joining *The Age* in 1970. From 1971, Grattan was working in the Canberra press gallery for *The Age*, and became the newspaper's chief political correspondent in 1976. She received the Graham Perkin Award as Australian Journalist of the Year in 1988. That same year, she delivered the Arthur Norman Smith Memorial Lecture in Journalism. The lecture, 'Reporting Federal Politics', examined the difficulties of being a senior political journalist. Political journalism, said Grattan, was deadline-driven. It meant 'dealing with instant history: catching the moment, making quick judgements'. The political journalist had to learn to work in the small, insular world of the press gallery; to penetrate bureaucracy; to avoid the tactics of propagandists, including press secretaries and ministerial staff; and to maintain the delicate relationships between themselves and the politicians who could make or break their stories. Above all, they had to avoid being pulled into the fray, being coerced, or taking sides: 'objectivity is an impossible dream', Grattan admitted, but at the very least 'we should think in terms of "fairness"… presenting the debate in a balanced way'.

In 1993, Michelle Grattan left her post at *The Age* to take up an appointment as editor of *The Canberra Times*, making her the first female editor of a metropolitan daily newspaper in Australia. She remained at *The Canberra Times* for two years before returning to *The Age* as political editor in 1995. With twenty-five years of experience then behind her, Grattan had much to say in debates around the perceived impending doom of the Australian newspaper. In September 1995, she delivered the Walter Murdoch Memorial Lecture – 'Headline, Deadline, Bottom Line: The Case for Good Journalism' – in which she acknowledged that newspaper circulation rates were dropping; papers were under threat from more technologically sophisticated forms of media; the roles of editor and marketer were increasingly blurred; newspaper companies were transforming from family-owned operations to major conglomerates; and, perhaps most critically, newspapers were not necessarily producing 'first-rate' journalism, 'the kind that tells people what they would not otherwise know, tweaks the tails of the power wielders, turns over rocks to stir the dark life beneath'. Though newspaper staffs had broadened, including more women, for example, they had also become more homogeneous. Newsrooms were inclined to be 'politically and journalistically correct', said Grattan, but too much 'sameness' was a danger.

Three years later Grattan was delivering another paper, this time to an audience at the University of Queensland's Department of Journalism, where she had accepted an honorary appointment as Adjunct Professor. Here Grattan openly criticised what she termed the 'ascendancy of commercialisation in Australian newspapers'. In contrast to the late 80s when editorial independence was 'the hot talk of Australian journalism', the late 90s were witness to a worrying degree of censorship and collusion. The country's newspapers were under the control of a small number of dominant men – most notably the Murdoch and Fairfax operations – and media companies were hand-in-hand with government and business. Of Murdoch's company, News Corp, Grattan observed: its 'national and international interests are so vast that no day can pass when one bit of the empire is not faced with the task of reporting on another section of the empire'. Large media companies had taken to employing 'high level political operatives' who held sway with the government. Meanwhile, some journalists were compromising themselves by accepting formal stakeholder status in the media companies employing them. Editors were being re-branded as publishers, responsible for appeasing advertisers, employers, and the readership: 'The modern editor thinks of his paper as a supermarket for readers, selling a guide to modern living, as much as a conveyor of news and views'. The 'journalistically brave' editor who offended a political power centre had far less protection than he once had: he could be (and frequently was) easily replaced.

As a respected journalist and household name, Grattan has played a significant role in influencing public opinion. She has published material on the Australian Labor Party specifically (*Managing Government: Labor's Achievements and Failures*, 1993), but critiques both major parties based upon policy and personal conduct (see 'Selfish cry from a man who no longer gives a damn' following Mark Latham's attack on the Labor Party, *The Age*, 19 June 2005), and she wrote the biographical chapter on former Prime Minister John Howard in her edited collection, *Australian Prime Ministers* (2000). Grattan approves of those who stand up for a worthy cause, and have the political gumption to bring it to fruition. In 1989 she co-published (with Margaret Bowman) *Reformers: Shaping Australian Society from the 60s to the 80s*, profiling fourteen Australian reformers from Gough Whitlam to Katharine West. The profiles, the authors hoped, would 'add a human dimension to abstractions like "social change" and "reform"'. In 2000, Grattan edited *Reconciliation: Essays in Australian Reconciliation*.

Grattan joined *The Australian Financial Review* as a columnist and senior writer in 1996. In 1999, she was appointed chief political correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, but returned to *The Age* once again as a political columnist in 2002. In January 2004, she was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for her long and distinguished service to Australian journalism, and in March of that year became political editor and bureau chief for *The Age*. In 2006, Michelle Grattan received the Walkley Award for Journalism Leadership.

In 2013 Grattan announced her resignation from *The Age*to take up a position as professorial fellow at the University of Canberra. She will also be the Associate Editor (Politics) and Chief Political Correspondent of *The Conversation.*

Events

2001 - 2001
Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

2006 - 2006
Journalistic Leadership, *The Age*, ABC *Radio National*

Published resources

Edited Book
Australian Prime Ministers, Grattan, Michelle, 2000

Reconciliation : Essays on Australian Reconciliation, Grattan, Michelle, 2000

Lecture
Reporting Federal Politics, Grattan, Michelle, 1988

Headline, Deadline, Bottom Line : The case for good journalism, Grattan, Michelle, 1995

Editorial Independence: An outdated concept?, Grattan, Michelle, 1998

Book
Back on the Wool Track, Grattan, Michelle, 2004

Reformers : Shaping Australian Society from the 60s to the 80s, Grattan, Michelle and Bowman, Margaret, 1989

Managing Government: Labor's Achievements and Failures, Grattan, Michelle, 1993

Can Ministers Cope?: Australian Federal Ministers at Work, Grattan, Michelle, 1981

Site Exhibition
The Women's Pages: Australian Women and Journalism since 1850, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2008, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/cal-home.html

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

AIATSIS Manuscript and Rare Books Collection
Papers of Michelle Grattan on Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders

Author Details
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