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Opinion

# Fortunes of war: Why the Australian media won't change how it writes about China

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Despite the recent sparring match between former Labor prime minister Paul Keating and Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong, the two do agree on one thing: Australia's media need to lift their game. Keating was scathing about many journalists; Wong, more diplomatically, stressed the need to 'lower the heat'.

Keating's responses to questions at his recent National Press Club talk offended many reporters, in his audience and beyond. But to those who have a growing sense of despair over what historian James Curran calls 'groupthink' in our media and public commentary — on the AUKUS agreement, defence policy and talk of a China threat — watching Keating tearing into journalists must have been almost as cathartic as it was for feminists watching Julia Gillard's misogyny speech.

But can Keating and Wong jolt journalists out of a groupthink mindset? Is a soul search by journalists likely soon?

If you look at how the media — from *The Sydney Morning Herald* to Sky News — reported on Wong's National Press Club address, focusing on the personal tension between the two personalities rather than an analysis of policy differences, you realise it's business as usual.

Why should we not expect the media to change quickly? There are several reasons.

First, as recent studies have shown, when it comes to reporting on foreign policy involving China, the Australian media are already well into a gradual but progressive paradigm shift to cold war journalism. Central to this form of reporting is what media scholars have called 'cold war-mindedness'.

American media scholar Barbie Zelizer outlines a few telltale signs of such a mindset. Cold war journalism assumes the 'unseen dimensions' of a war, even though that 'war' may be imaginary. It also adopts a view of geopolitical reality that relies on accepting 'certain strategic notions of enemy formation'. It reinforces certain understandings of who is 'us' (the free world) and who is 'them' (e.g. the communists). And, finally, cold war journalism reports the tension and conflict — the 'imaginary war' — using black-and-white thinking, polarisation and demonisation.

There has been a gradual but certain build-up of a securitisation discourse that manifests as a China-threat narrative over the past six or seven years in Australia. The perennial tropes of invasion, threat and influence have recently culminated in speculation about an imminent war with China. In 2021, *60 Minutes* warned that a war with China might be 'closer than we think'. A few months later, in case viewers were not scared enough, the program broadcast another investigation, 'Poking the Panda', which warned us to 'prepare for Armageddon'.

Not wanting to let the commercial media monopolise this war talk, the ABC's *Four Corners* simply called its reporting 'War Games', and asked what conflict with China would mean for us. Earlier this year, a Sky News special investigation announced that 'China's aggression could start [a] new world war'.

Blaming the *SMH*'s 'Red Alert' series for irresponsibly starting the war threat is giving journalists Peter Hartcher and Matthew Knott more credit than they're due. The red alerts have merely served to push the persistent war refrain into a dramatic, rising crescendo.

One only has to apply each of Zelizer's benchmarks in the analysis of these programs to see that our media are already knee-deep in a cold war mindset.

Given this, the media are unlikely to lift their game soon by giving space for 'policy contestability', by scrutinising political links to defence contracts, by getting to the bottom of what drove Wong to modify her tone on our foreign policy regarding China, or by asking whether there is a conflict of interest in Professor Peter Dean's co-writing the *Strategic Defence Review* since he, as a director at the US Studies Centre, concurrently leads two US State Department-funded public diplomacy programs on the US-Australia Alliance.

But we needn't assume the ideals of the fourth estate are dead. Instead we can see a bifurcation accommodating 'watchdog' and 'guard dog' models of journalism. In reporting on *domestic* politics, the watchdog is healthy and alert: it takes on politicians and powerful institutions. But when investigating *foreign* policy — on China and, to some extent, other 'rough nations' such as Russia — the blinkers are on. The media reverts to guarding the interests of the security and defence establishments.

The second reason we shouldn't expect the media to reclaim their critical role in relation to China is what has become of our media industry in an increasingly competitive digital market. Like it or not, warmongering may be a sound business strategy. In an attempt to stay afloat in a competitive sector, media organisations may simply be picking the lowest-hanging fruit by fostering talk of a possible war with China, with its sure promise of producing fear and anxiety.

Market logic may just dictate that 'bad China' indeed makes good news stories. Diplomats and many industries may want to 'lower the heat', but this doesn't make good business sense for the media.

The third reason for this pessimistic outlook is the moral psychology of individual journalists. Keating's frustration, even anger, with journalists is understandable, but most of them are striving to do their best under serious constraints: tight timelines, limited resources, the imperative to pitch stories acceptable to editors and palatable to intended readers — not to mention working within a system that increasingly rewards prolificacy and impact (positive and negative) and discourages time-consuming and painstaking efforts to become informed and literate in areas they're reporting on.

Moral psychologists have argued that our moral judgments arise not from reason but from gut feelings. Reason, argues social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, is important, but only because we deploy it to 'help us spin, not to help us learn'. So it would be unfair to accuse most reporters of deliberately fanning anti-China paranoia. They each have personal convictions, blind spots and pride. Self-respecting journalists who invest their professional identity in certain issues such as China would naturally feel a moral compunction to defend their convictions.

In academia, a blind peer-assessment regime is meant to ensure that academics who let their gut feelings run amok don't pass the review process. Scholars can be ruthless when reviewing the work of their colleagues.

As Haidt argues, we're much better at spotting the flaws in others' reasoning than in our own. But this is not how journalism operates.

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