

# THE CONSTITUTION OF UNEMPLOYMENT JOURNALISM AS A TECHNOLOGY OF CITIZENSHIP

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David Nolan

## Abstract

This article uses a case study of the representation of unemployment in two stories produced by Channel 9's *A Current Affair* (ACA) to suggest how an understanding of journalism as a 'technology of citizenship' might inform a practice of textual analysis. In doing so, it considers the particular implications both of this approach and this particular study for an historical understanding of journalism, and the relation between journalistic practices and the broader socio-political field in which they operate.

## Introduction

In recent years, it has become commonplace in media studies to engage in modes of criticism that assess practices of representation through the prism of the (variously articulated) concept of the 'public sphere' (Habermas 1989, Curran 1991, Robbins 1993, Dahlgren 1995). Such work is undoubtedly valuable insofar as it enables an assessment of the degree to which media practice brings various voices, perspectives and frameworks to bear in its representation of social and political issues. However, it may be argued that the public sphere concept provides a rather limited basis for analysing the role that the media in general, and journalism in particular, plays in cultural politics. This is largely because it tends to view journalism in its traditional guise as a means by which members of the public gain access to information about public affairs and participate in forms of mediated public debate. However, journalism can also be understood as a 'technology of citizenship': a set of resources through which members of the public not only access information, but also gain a sense of their membership within a larger community, as well as access to various forms of expertise that provide commentary on what constitutes laudable and/or inappropriate social conduct. In short, journalism constitutes an important site at which individuals draw upon and develop particular forms of 'critical literacy' that enable them to act as citizens (Sedorkin & Schirato 1998). Drawing on the work of Foucault (1977), journalism can also be understood as a 'discipline' in two senses: as a field within which journalistic activities are 'regularised' through routine (though historically and contextually variable) production

practices and professional ideals; and as a means by which members of the public actively engage in processes of self-formation and regulation in relation to various social issues and sources of expertise.

Using a case study analysis of media treatment of unemployment on Channel 9's *A Current Affair*, this paper draws on this understanding to consider the relation between the politics of journalistic practice and the broader socio-political field in which it operates. It is concerned not only to consider the possible impacts of journalism within that field, but also to track how journalistic practices can be seen to develop and change in relation to it. This analysis will use two further concepts developed by scholars who have drawn on the work of Foucault: 'rationalities' and 'problematizations'. Burchell (1996, p. 21) has defined rationalities as 'a rationally reflected way of doing things that functions as a principle and method for the rationalisation of governmental practices'. Here, 'governmental practices' fall under the definition of government as 'the conduct of conduct' outlined by Dean and Hindess:

In its most general sense, government is the conduct of conduct, where the latter refers to the manner in which individuals, groups and organizations manage their own behaviour. The conduct to be governed may be one's own or that of others: of the members of a household or of larger collectivities such as the population of a local community or state (1998, p. 3).

By providing the discursive means through which particular situations or phenomena are understood, rationalities provide the discursive grounds upon which particular responses come to appear as appropriate (or inappropriate) courses of action in relation to particular problems, ranging from questions of national policy to personal comportment. In this respect, Burchell suggests rationalities both emerge with and are characterised by particular forms of 'problematization', which constitute the 'historically conditioned emergence of new fields of experience' (1996, p. 31). For example, in recent times public service broadcasting has been problematised by critics on both the right and the left on the grounds that its programming priorities reflect the cultural interests of middle-class cultural elites. Since such critique has resonated with broader criticisms of state intervention in service provision, these critiques have, in part, served to support proposals that the state should retreat from the broadcasting sector. Thus, where previously the principle of public service posited broadcasting provision as an area that required state intervention in the public interest (cf. Scannell 1989), such problematisation has enabled international moves to deregulate, marketise or dissolve public service broadcasting (Keane 1991, Craik et al. 1995, Tracey 1996, Atkinson 1997). These measures have appeared a logical policy 'response' to a form of problematisation that links an apparent failure of representativeness with the absence of mechanisms of accountability.

Rationalities combine sets of discursive criteria through which particular forms of problematisation are undertaken with particular techniques that are developed and applied in response to these problematisations, which may in turn be deemed problematic on the basis of the same or another rationality. The relevance of such concepts to journalism becomes clearer if we consider that 'problematisations' emerge not in abstraction, but in the context of various concrete dilemmas. As Dean and Hindess point out:

Problematisations appear in definite social, institutional or professional locales and can be assigned a time and place. They reflect the difficulties facing an authority given a set of tasks rather than the application of a set of general principles (Dean & Hindess 1998, pp. 8–9).

The aptness of these comments to a consideration of journalism can be illustrated if we imagine replacing the word 'authority' in the above passage with 'journalist' or 'editor'. As public authorities vulnerable to criticism, every story confronts journalists with particular problems regarding both their own conduct, and the potential impacts of their work on the conduct of others. In this respect, one element that may be considered to gain an historically informed view of journalism are the forms of problematisation in relation to which its practices are seen to provide a response, and the ways in which those practices are subsequently problematised themselves. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that this provides a basis upon which processes of development, change and reform of journalistic practice, as well as particular representations, may be better understood. To do this, I will present a case study analysis of two *ACA* stories produced in 1996 on the Paxtons, an unemployed family from Melbourne. A critical reading of the discourses mobilised in these programmes focuses in particular on the relationship between these stories and the manner in which unemployment has been problematised in policy approaches in recent times.

### A 'Reciprocity of Perspectives'

Although no detailed studies on the treatment of the Paxtons have been produced to this point, Graeme Turner has cited this coverage as an example of how, in commercial current affairs formats, 'the pursuit of entertainment...is facilitated by disregarding the lives of those whose stories are processed in this way' (Turner 1996, p. 79), a practice he (justifiably) finds disturbing. Rather than providing an analysis of the Paxton stories, however, Turner refers to them as illustration of his thesis of the emergence of 'post-journalism', whereby:

Journalism has become...a means of spuriously legitimating the excessive representational power available to a hybridised genre of entertainment. Journalism, for [*ACA* host] Ray Martin, simply supplies the rhetoric to defend the tactics of his pro-

gramme as fundamentally democratic; when that does not suffice, he invokes its popularity with the audience. I think we have reached a stage where we need to acknowledge the effective incompatibility of these two principles in practice (Turner 1996, pp. 88–9).

Here, Turner not only reproduces a mode of criticism which treats journalism as an ideal against which specific texts may be assessed, but relies upon an assumed ontological distinction between ‘journalism’ and ‘entertainment’. In addition to this distinction being both theoretically and empirically problematic (Winch 1997, Pieper 2000), such a definition of journalism ignores the degree to which almost all forms are dependent, to some degree, upon attracting audiences. More problematic still is Turner’s reliance on an implicit claim to have a privileged understanding of what ‘real’ journalism is, such that commercial current affairs can be disqualified by fiat. Thus (no doubt unintentionally) he performs the role of the knowing cultural critic whose superior moral insight licenses him to expose an apparently ignorant public to the folly of their ways. Indeed, Turner reiterates the terms of the moralistic critique of the Paxton coverage presented on ABC TV’s *Media Watch* (25 March 1996), in which host Stuart Littlemore suggested that ‘this is not journalism, this is show business’. For Littlemore, like Turner, what disqualifies *ACA* as journalism is its tendency to ignore ethical mores in its flagrant use of hidden cameras and chequebook journalism. While it is quite reasonable to argue that such acts should not be considered *acceptable* journalistic practice, such a stance fails to provide a basis for understanding how such programmes might be convincing to audiences precisely *as* journalism.

In this regard, it is notable that neither Turner nor Littlemore consider how far *ACA*’s coverage of the Paxtons drew upon established journalistic frameworks for representing unemployment. Furthermore, by criticising the Paxtons’ treatment *in toto* as representative of the faults of commercial current affairs, both Littlemore and Turner fail to emphasise that this treatment was significantly different in the two major feature stories *ACA* produced. Littlemore did, however, suggest what a ‘good’ example of journalistic coverage of this issue would entail. Noting that *ACA* had selected Shane and Mark Paxton because they had both previously been presented in the *Sunday Age* as unemployed youths who ‘couldn’t be bothered getting out of bed’, he remarked that ‘any self-respecting journalist would have seen that as the peg for a story of the implications—psychological, economic and political—of long-term youth unemployment’ (*Media Watch* 25 March 1996). Curiously, this suggestion of what a ‘good’ journalistic treatment would have been describes almost exactly the approach adopted in *ACA*’s initial story on the Paxtons.

The treatment of unemployment in the first story also bears strong similarities to its treatment on an ABC *Four Corners* programme eighteen years earlier, analysed in a study by Noel King (1983). King’s

study is characterised by its overt resistance to a moralistic form of critique, wherein the problems of journalistic coverage are attributed to the ethical failings of individual journalists. Thus, his approach stands in explicit contrast to that adopted by Turner (who suggests Ray Martin promotes an ideological 'rhetoric' of journalism) and Littlemore, who scathingly referred to 'that pack of nasty bastards at *A Current Affair*'. King is concerned to highlight how the documentary format employed in current affairs coverage itself works to determine the way in which the issue of unemployment is framed: as a 'social problem' that may be understood through a focus on individuals whose plight is representative of that problem. A second aspect which informs King's analysis is its acknowledgement that the nature of particular representations is not determined by journalistic practices alone, but also by other forms of knowledge on which journalists rely both to define and address a given issue. Rather than position journalism as either cause or effect of a broader field of social and political relations, he suggests this relation can be understood as a 'reciprocity of perspectives'. That is, conventions of journalistic practice determine which forms of expertise will provide support and substance for a particular story while, reciprocally, 'the journalist's account reproduces the propositions/interpretations provided by the experts' (King 1983, p. 46).

This provides the basis for King's reading of *Four Corners*' treatment of the issue of unemployment in Australia in the 1970s, which focuses on the particular narrative framework mobilised in the programme. The major figure around which the story is constructed is that of 'depression', following a comment in the programme's introduction that 'there are now more Australians out of work than at any time since the Great Depression' (quoted in King 1983, p. 45). King notes that, having introduced this frame, the programme draws on literary and cinematic 'Depression narratives' in its presentation of the issue. Such framing, he suggests, might conceivably have provided the basis for a consideration of unemployment as a broadly socio-economic problem, which may have provided the grounds for an interrogation of the role of policy in contributing to this outcome. However, because the generic conventions of current affairs lend themselves to the portrayal of problems in terms of 'typical' situations and 'representative' individuals, the social problem of unemployment is conceived as an aggregation of individual problems, such that any resolution of the problem must itself begin with a focus on problematic individuals.

This contributes to the adoption of two predominant frames through which the issue is considered. On the one hand, the problem of unemployment is presented in terms of a set of risks to which individuals are prone, as socio-economic depression produces unemployment, which in turn leads to depression in individuals. This focus on the individual consequences of social malaise leads the programme to treat unemployment as a mental health problem whose visible symp-

toms emerge in aspects of behaviour, which calls for (and receives) diagnosis from the expert behavioural scientist. King cites one 'expert' interviewee who comments that, 'when people become unemployable then they really become the chronic people in society and that then perpetuates problems for everybody' (1983, p. 52). The definition of the unhealthy victim compared to the implied norm of the healthy, employed individual thus positions such problematic individuals as a 'social problem' which may require intervention in the interests of all. The specification of unemployment as deriving from the problematically unemployable also provides the grounds for a concern (which King locates at several points in the programme) drawn from discourses of eugenics: that unemployability may be a trait passed down through generations in a 'subculture destined to live on welfare and bequeath the same fate to their children' (quoted in King, p. 45). A more overtly individualistic frame emerges in the treatment of the problem of unemployment/depression as a motivational and behavioural one. This aspect of the programme emerges in repeated questions posed to unemployed people about their own behaviour, one of which explicitly asks a young man the difference between himself and a dole bludger. The moral nature of such interrogation works to position unemployment as a failure of individual responsibility, even as it is construed as a condition that disables individuals' capacity to behave as healthy members of society.

For a reading of *ACA's* treatment of the Paxtons, King's analysis is valuable for two reasons. First, it provides a prototypical example which *ACA's* initial story on the social problem of unemployment in many respects follows.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, King's suggestion that story frameworks of journalism exist in a contingent relation with forms of authority and expertise provides a means by which a subsequent shift in story framework in *ACA's* second story can also be understood. Thus, an examination of how unemployment has been 'reproblematized' in recent times enables a consideration of how its initial treatment may have been called into question by viewers and journalists themselves. As a starting point for this reading, however, we may note that there is a certain inconsistency in the story framework analysed by King, since the problem of unemployment is presented simultaneously as a problem caused by a socio-economic condition (depression) and by individual attitudes. Indeed, it might be suggested that while the problem of unemployment can be conceived and discussed in terms of the former explanation, the conventions of representation tend more strongly toward the latter.

### Story One: 19 February 1996

The tension between socio-economic and individualistic explanations is also evident in *ACA's* initial story on the Paxtons, and apparent in Ray Martin's spoken introduction to the feature:

Jobs, or the lack of them, haven't been getting much attention this election campaign, yet Australia now has more than 770 000 unemployed and, even more disturbing perhaps, around 100 000 have been out of work for more than 12 months. Another 130 000 have not worked for over two years. Now these people say that they want jobs but they just can't find them. Well, tonight Mike Munro looks at a long-term unemployment [sic] in one family in one neighbourhood where almost no-one works.

Here, a lack of jobs is framed explicitly as a political problem evidenced through the quotation of statistics. Unemployment, in this sense, is unequivocally linked to a 'lack of jobs'. An equivocation emerges, however, where Martin states that 'these people say they want jobs'. While this does not explicitly cast doubt on the desire of long-term unemployed people to work, it positions it as a claim that may or may not be true. The gradual shift from a broad political problem to one that is framed in terms of individuals is completed in the final sentence, where we are returned to the framework of the 'representative' case study. While this framework remains largely predominant however, a socio-economic discourse which presents unemployment as a macro-political problem continues to surface at various points in the story, though the possible causes of this problem remain unexplored.

In the story that follows, the theme of 'depression' again emerges, though on this occasion strictly as an individual risk rather than as a trope for a wider socio-economic condition. The story opens with a shot of Shane Paxton reading a poem in which, Munro's voice-over tells the audience:

[He is] once again contemplating, and writing about, suicide.  
At 18 he's never had a job, and can't see himself getting one in the near future.

Thus, the story links unemployment to youth suicide, another large-scale social problem. The mental health implications of long-term unemployment are also highlighted where the programme suggests that 'it's the same story for Shane's brother Mark—there's just no reason to get out of bed'. The suggestion that the Paxtons are the victims of long-term unemployment is, indeed, reiterated throughout the story, though often in a rather equivocal way. For example, at the close of the story Munro frames the problem thus:

In the last 20 years long-term unemployment has worsened because there are far fewer full-time jobs—and welfare benefits have doubled. Many analysts say that for families like the Paxtons to survive they must become better educated and more skilled.

Again, in the first statement Munro unequivocally links unemployment to a decline in the number of jobs available. In the second, however, the question of whether the Paxtons' lack of skills and edu-

cation arises as a result of their own failure to gain such capacities or through lack of opportunity to do so is not clarified, while the imperative that they gain such skills is presented as a personal one.

It is here that a blurring of the 'social' and the 'individual' is again evident, such that it is not clear whether the long-term unemployed are victims of the system or the source of the problem. Indeed, I would argue the programme has it both ways. For example, while Munro's voice-over may state definitively at one point that it is not through choice that more than half the residents of the Paxtons' suburb of St Albans are unemployed, at another point footage of the Paxtons sitting together watching television is accompanied by a pop song in which the following lines are clearly audible:

No sitting round on your butt, the world don't owe you

No sitting down in a rut, I wanna show you

The notion that a subculture of unemployable people has developed is also canvassed in this programme. After quoting statistics that the average length of unemployment is fourteen months and that one in five are out of work for two years, Munro suggests it is 'little wonder that in these areas unemployment is being passed down from generation to generation'. While this issue of 'unemployability' is treated here and at other points as a cultural problem, it is nevertheless also presented as a congenital one through a focus on the family. This is clearly apparent where Munro states that:

In fact, the whole family is unemployed. Their mum Dawn is on a sole parent pension and hasn't worked for the last 20 years, and while the youngest is still at school the three oldest have never worked and are on the dole.

The story also refers to a source of expertise: Professor Bob Gregory, an economist who is described as 'one of the country's leading experts on our labour market and long-term unemployment'. Gregory's remarks also work to support the framework through which the programme constructs the issue, to the extent that he adds 'that's right' at the end of a statement in which he affirms that unemployment may be passed down through generations. At the same time, he frames this problem as a 'culture of unemployment': 'We've got large numbers of youths who can't find jobs so they group together and behaviour patterns change, dress patterns change—in a way that makes it even harder to find jobs'. Here again the shift between a macro-political problem of a lack of jobs is connected to a focus on individual behaviour, conveyed through a paternalistic discourse that expresses concern about delinquency. Notably, the figure of the delinquent is articulated as 'our' youth, eliciting a moral-governmental concern regarding the behaviour of young unemployed people. This moral focus becomes explicit as Gregory switches from an explanatory mode to one that directly offers 'citizens advice':

I think it's very important to get in contact with the labour market as early and as quickly as you can—so, in a way any job



will do to begin with, and once you've got a job it will be much easier to get the next job, so if you're a young person it seems to me you shouldn't be too fussy, you should take whatever you can.

Whatever value such advice might have for young unemployed people, its inclusion nevertheless serves to position the problem of unemployment as one of individual responsibility and self-motivation. The effect of this is to frame the Paxton family as a figure of social, moral and governmental concern on the one hand, and of moral disapprobation on the other.

Of course, the importance of any single textual representation of an issue should not be exaggerated, and any consideration of the potential impact of such a representation must consider how it relates to a much broader body of discourses through which 'unemployment' is made thinkable at a particular historical moment. Indeed, there is little doubt that the way in which *ACA* framed the issue in this first story on the Paxtons would have been seen as problematic by many of its viewers. On the next day's programme Ray Martin publicly acknowledged this, albeit in a way which evaded any potential criticism of the programme itself:

...most viewers believe the Paxtons are unfairly blaming the system for holding them back, saying that the younger members of the Paxton family would have had a much better chance of getting a job if they changed the way they look and the way they dress (*ACA*, 20 February 1996).

Bearing in mind King's argument regarding the reciprocity between forms of expertise and journalistic frameworks, this response may be considered in relation to other discourses regarding unemployment deployed in debates around public policy, in which media play a major role as fora through which such discourses are both circulated and contested. In order to provide a broader framework for understanding the Paxton stories therefore, I will draw on the overview of Australian 'welfare rationalities' provided by Harris (2001).<sup>2</sup> Harris defines a 'welfare rationality' as a species of governmental rationality that involves a claim to be directed toward the 'welfare' of a people, and argues that the particular welfare rationalities related to unemployment can be specified in terms of their 'social', 'moral-behavioural' and 'economic' components (p. 6).

In Australia, policies relating to employment in the period following the second world war were grounded in the idea that appropriate government management would serve to stimulate the economy and facilitate full employment, and that where it failed to do so assistance should be provided.<sup>3</sup> To achieve this end, economic and social policies were seen as closely interlinked, as a broadly Keynesian focus on stimulating demand (though one tempered by a neo-classical emphasis on the primacy of the economy) was coupled with a concern for welfare as a means of securing both the social and economic order

against the risks of unemployment and depression. This welfare rationality, which Harris characterises as a synthesis of neo-classical and Keynesian economic principles, began to be displaced in the 1970s as the principle of full employment was largely abandoned. In the period following the sacking of the Whitlam Labor government, Harris argues, the issue of unemployment tended increasingly to be framed in terms that shifted from a discourse of the social rights of the unemployed toward a theme of 'mutual obligation'.<sup>4</sup> The economic dimension of this discourse centres around promoting 'flexibility', understood as 'the conditions in which the workforce will respond to the demands of capital in as economic and competitive way as possible' (Harris 2001, p. 20). Thus, an increased faith is placed in the market as the capacity of state institutions to manage the economy is questioned in a globalising environment. While it is accepted that a certain level of unemployment is an inevitable by-product of a healthy economy, it is imperative that this is kept at a minimum level as unemployment is viewed as a burden upon, and hence a potential threat to, the economy. As a consequence, in social terms there is an increased concern that government ensure that citizens take responsibility for their own circumstances by engaging in forms of activity seen to maximise their chances of securing work, and by not falling into a state of dependency. The moral-behavioural aspects of this rationality stem from this onus on the responsibility of citizens, such that the unemployed in particular are made increasingly subject to particular requirements in order to demonstrate that they are deserving recipients of assistance. As Harris points out, the increased prevalence of this discourse has entailed a shift in focus that has resulted in a trend for successive governments to produce policies that are 'increasingly less "social" and increasingly more "moral"' (2001, p. 18).

In light of this analysis, the *ACA* story discussed above can be understood to combine elements of a 'social' discourse on unemployment, based around social rights, and a 'moral' discourse based on responsibility. Indeed, given the direction of the shift in discourses of unemployment, it is perhaps of some significance that a certain discrepancy is evident within the story. On the one hand, it appears overtly concerned to highlight the risks caused by the socio-economic phenomenon of a 'lack of jobs', and the manner in which this scenario creates an 'underclass' within which young people are subjected to risks of depression and, potentially, suicide. At the same time, the individualistic framework of the programme tends toward a more direct association between the 'social problem' of unemployment and the unemployed themselves, and may even tend to elicit forms of moral disapprobation. Where such an association is made, it is but a short step to a form of critique that suggests that *ACA* is giving too much airtime to whinging dole bludgers, who are a burden on society and should be told to get a job. As I discuss below, such a critique was both made by *ACA* viewers themselves and presented in discussions of the Paxtons in other media.

### Story Two: 4 March 1996

In the terms of a discourse of mutual obligation, the requirement that unemployed people conduct themselves in such a way as to maximise their chances of getting a job is positioned as a duty that corresponds to the duty of governments to pursue policies that will produce conditions that will best facilitate this outcome. The moral nature of this duty is highlighted in Ray Martin's introduction to a subsequent story on the Paxtons presented a fortnight later:

Few stories on this programme have sparked more reaction than the item we ran a few weeks ago on long-term unemployment and the Paxton family of Melbourne. Most viewers thought the Paxtons were not—were, rather, using and abusing the system, not doing nearly enough to get a job and get off the dole. But some callers offered to help the family and we promised to pass those offers on. Well, Mike Munro has been following that up with an extraordinary result.

This introduction shows how easily a discourse that places an onus on unemployed subjects to maximise their chances of employment can intersect with one that deems particular subjects responsible for their own unemployment. The treatment of unemployment as a burden on the economy also contributes to a situation in which such attribution of responsibility is moralised as blame, since the unemployed person who fails to fulfil their duty is seen to be 'using and abusing the system', and in so doing exposing the entire community to unnecessary risk. Significantly, this critique is again attributed to 'most viewers'. This may be a rhetorical means by which the programme positions such a critique as issuing from 'the people' *ACA* claims to represent. However, it is not inconceivable that *ACA* did receive a flood of calls expressing such a view, particularly given the high level of discussion the Paxton story provoked across various media outlets (a point highlighted by Bessant 2000, p. 26). *ACA*'s attribution of a moral critique to viewers may, however, also be read as a product of conventions of 'objectivity', through which the journalistic agency upholds the distinction between reporting and expressing opinion (Schudson 2001). In this instance, the professional imperative to withhold judgement also informs the narrative that follows, since it is precisely the validity of this 'common-sense' judgement that will be tested. Indeed, that testing is framed in terms of a problematic that arises directly from the previous story produced by *ACA*, as Munro's voice-over commentary makes clear:

That story had a huge reaction. Opinion was divided as to whether the three Paxtons were really trying to find work, or just relying on their \$170 dole cheques every fortnight. So when Kevin Collins rang *A Current Affair* to offer all three jobs on South Mole Island, we decided to fly them there.

It is evident from these comments that what will be tested is not only the veracity of viewer response, but the bona fides of the Paxtons' claim to be genuine job-seekers.

As I am mainly concerned to analyse the form of this narrative, it will suffice to briefly recount its content. Having been flown to the Whitsundays, the Paxtons are 'interviewed' by Collins. When it emerges during this interview that to take the jobs offered to them Shane and Mark will be required to cut their hair, they turn the offer down. Their sister Bindy Paxton initially accepts her job offer as a waitress, but subsequently also declines it, claiming she does not like the uniform she would have to wear. The story draws to its conclusion with all three having 'headed for the beach', with shots of all three in the water accompanied by Munro's closing commentary:

Kevin Collins says the Paxtons are perfect examples of what happens when you're unemployed for years as they have been—that not even a paradise island could entice them to work.

It would merely reproduce the moralistic framework presented by the programme to comment here on the actions of the Paxtons and it is, in any case, clear that they were placed in an extraordinary position. Of far greater interest is the question of how this narrative is told, and the relation between this presentation and the logic of 'mutual obligation'.

In order to consider this question, it is worth examining how Munro's initial voice-over serves to introduce the story that follows:

South Molle Island—a tropical paradise on the Great Barrier Reef—smack bang in the middle of the Whitsundays where thousands of tourists flock to take it easy. But Mark, Bindy and Shane Paxton are not here for a holiday. All long-term unemployed, they're here to turn their lives around... And it's Kevin Collins, general manager of the island resort, that's offering all three that start—their first jobs.

Again, a socially concerned discourse on unemployment is mobilised: long-term unemployment is, at least provisionally, associated with a cultural environment, as Munro reminds us shortly afterwards when he remarks that the Paxtons come from a suburb 'where hardly anybody works'. Collins, on the other hand, is presented as a benevolent, philanthropic figure that is sympathetic to their plight and prepared to offer them a helping hand.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a scenario is outlined in miniature whereby essentially benevolent employers are prepared to offer jobs to anybody, provided they are prepared to conform to the requirements of the marketplace. The role of the programme in this scenario will be to facilitate and monitor, rather than intervene in, negotiations between employer and potential employees.

While it may already be quite evident that this example of *ACA* reporting practice is directly informed by a discourse of mutual obligation, further elements in the narrative substantiate the terms of that contract. A scene in which Collins interviews the three Paxtons is of

particular significance. While it is obvious that the scenario is quite contrived, this nevertheless provides a functional mechanism whereby any suggestion that *ACA* has simply arranged jobs on behalf of the Paxtons can be countered, such that the principle of journalistic non-intervention is sustained. In this 'interview' (at which Munro is present, but remains silent), Collins presents the Paxtons with a number of résumés that, he states, have been sent by people eager for work:

[Collins:] It's all about selling yourself, it's about the product that you sell...and now you have to sell me and tell me why I've got to be choosing you over one of these people.

Thus, to use the language adopted by employment agencies in Australia and elsewhere, the 'job-seekers' are asked to show that they are 'job-ready'. The requirement that unemployed subjects take steps to be 'job-ready' entails the demonstration of a willingness to adapt to the demands of a competitive marketplace. In practice, this may manifest itself in various ways: the employment of technologies (such as diaries) via which job-seekers demonstrate their ongoing attempts to find work in order to remain eligible for their benefits, the suggestion that unemployed people move to areas where they will have more chance of getting a job, or the moral expectation that they take steps to ensure that their appearance and comportment conforms to standards potential employers might expect. Such requirements are not regarded as contrivances, but as dictated by a marketplace to which the individual must adapt in order to survive, as Collins makes clear when he explains why haircuts are a necessity:

These are the grooming standards everybody meets. I can't have exceptions. What you've got to understand is we're here for the guests, they expect that our staff are neat, tidy and well-groomed. So do I.

It is notable that, on this occasion, there is no appeal to any academic figure who might provide a commentary on the behaviour of unemployed people. Rather, Collins himself constitutes a source of expertise who comments on the behaviour of the Paxtons in interview segments, and is even quoted by Munro. Collins's qualification to speak stems not only from his position as a player in this particular scenario, but also from his status as a successful businessman who understands the forms of conduct required by the market. The story also serves as confirmation of the 'common-sense' response of 'most viewers'. This common-sense view is included in the report, in the form of a moralistic rebuke a resort worker directs at Bindy:

You know, you've got everybody giving you a chance and you're going to turn it down because you don't like the uniform. I think that's very unfair and I think that's very selfish.

The alignment of the programme as agency with 'common sense' is finally completed when, at the close of the story, anchorman Martin

'responds' to it with the incredulous question, 'Can you believe that?' He goes on to provide the following postscript:

And despite knocking back those jobs it seems the Paxtons will still get their dole because those jobs were arranged by us and not arranged by the C.E.S.

This last comment is a particularly interesting one, since it clarifies the role that the programme has adopted in this story: that of a social agency of government.

### **Conclusion: Journalism and the Constitution of Unemployment**

To conclude this reading, I will draw upon the analysis of Australian unemployment policies developed since the 1980s provided by Dean (1998) to argue that this textual practice closely resembles policy initiatives. Perhaps the most obvious sense in which such an argument might be made is through a suggestion that *ACA*, by acting as both a commercial enterprise and (albeit one-off) job agency, can be seen to adopt a role that is strikingly analogous to that which commercial employment placement enterprises (EPEs) are called upon to play in a market newly contrived by the Howard government (Dean 1998, p. 96). Simultaneously, *ACA*'s audience is recruited to indirectly monitor, and even regulate, the performance of this agency, just as mechanisms are employed to indirectly monitor both EPEs and job-seekers to ensure that they fulfil contractual obligations. *ACA*'s production of a moral framework in which the unemployed must demonstrate their willingness to work in order to be seen as deserving of benefits also bears a striking resemblance to the relations that would later be formalised in the establishment of 'Work for the Dole' schemes under the Howard government. This is not, however, to infer that *ACA* simply produced an account that was in overt sympathy with the philosophical stance of the then newly elected Federal government. Indeed, the neo-liberal problematisation of unemployment as 'dependency' crossed party political lines, as it has been mobilised by successive Australian governments. It is in light of this fact that, in reference to 'Work for the Dole', Dean suggests that 'this rather astute political manoeuvre had its conditions in the recent history of the "problematisation" of the government and, indeed, self-government of the unemployed in Australia' (1998, p. 88).

At this point, it is perhaps necessary to clarify the point of making such connections. My argument is not that *ACA* provides a mirror on political life, reflecting governmental activity undertaken elsewhere, but that the programme *itself* constitutes a technology of citizenship. In this regard, the programme not only produces a particular form of problematisation, but also itself constitutes a form of 'response' to a problematic of government, concerned with 'the shaping and self-shaping of conduct' (Dean 1998, p. 91). It does so by producing a

morality tale about citizens who fail to conduct themselves in an appropriate (job-ready) manner. It also serves to naturalise relations of contractualism and a neo-classical model of the economy, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that it is the responsibility of the individual citizen to insure against risks (of unemployment, dependency, depression etc.) to which they might be subject. The programme could even be construed as an 'active initiative' which, through its own agency as moral teacher and indirectly by eliciting forms of moral approbation within the community, provides a 'responsibilising' technology by which the conduct of unemployed people may be directed in particular ways (Rose 1999). The manner in which such media governmentality works in conjunction with state policies is highlighted by Davis's observation that shortly after this episode 'the government introduced a diary-surveillance system and a "dob in a dole bludger" campaign' (1997, p. 13). Indeed, both then Social Security Minister Jocelyn Newman and John Howard directly commented on the morality of the Paxtons' behaviour *and* cited community response to the episode as justification for setting further conditions on the payments of benefits.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, just as *ACA's* second story relayed a discourse of mutual obligation to viewers, journalism served as a means by which this was constituted as a common-sense policy rationality. A Melbourne *Herald Sun* leader column, responding to a letter written by Shane Paxton that referred to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's suggestion the resort had no right to make a haircut a condition of employment, provides another clear example of this:

Certainly the Paxtons have rights. But they also have an obligation to contribute to the community that has been keeping them. When they refused to take the jobs offered them, the community in turn exercised its rights by taking away their dole payments (*Herald Sun* 14 March 1996, p. 18).

Another concern of this study has been to suggest how such an understanding of journalism as a technology of citizenship may inform description and analysis of journalism texts that avoids textualism and locates such texts as integral elements in social relations. It has been argued that the value of such textual analysis is not to discern whether a given example of journalism is 'representative' or 'unrepresentative', 'ethical' or 'unethical'. Rather, it is to make visible the particular *ethos* embodied in the frameworks through which specific problematisations are presented, the political role such problematisations might be seen to play, and their social and material implications. In the case discussed above, *ACA* journalists were confronted by the practical question of how to 'cover' the issue of unemployment in a particular context at a particular time. In negotiating this problem, they relied upon existent journalistic models for treating this 'social problem', forms of expertise, and discourses through which unemployment is understood. Of particular note, however, is that the

second Paxton story can itself be read as a problematisation of the first. In the first story, the problem of unemployment is, at least partially, presented as a responsibility placed upon governments to facilitate the right to work of individual citizens. The story thus served as means by which the failings of government are criticised and, simultaneously, the personal, social and economic dangers of that failure were highlighted. In the second story, the problem of unemployment is conceived as the failure of individuals to act in an appropriate manner. While the moral, social and economic costs of unemployment continued to be presented in both collective and individual terms, the primary responsibility was thus placed more squarely upon individuals and the government of self. In this case, government should not expect the market to conform to its demands, but rather the market itself will dictate the terms of appropriate government. Importantly, in this rationality the neo-liberal principle of 'mutual obligation' applies no less to journalists than it does to job-seeking citizens. Thus, if the market of viewers (measured, in this case, through feedback provided by letters, opinion polls and ratings) shows that the majority of citizens do not 'buy' the idea that the Paxtons are victims, unemployment must be refigured in order to conform to the predominant view. Furthermore, the second story can be read as a response to a moral critique of ACA's own complicity in the production of welfare dependency in the more sympathetic first story.

While the contrast between these stories provides evidence of the rapidity with which contemporary commercial television responds to consumer feedback, there was something particularly symbolic about this shift occurring on either side of the federal election that brought the first Howard government to power. Not only did the second story directly mobilise that government's unemployment policy framework, but this election also marked the moment at which a version of neo-liberalism compromised by its retention of particular 'social' elements was displaced by a more emphatic (and in this respect perhaps more consistent) neo-liberal policy framework (Johnson 2000). Perhaps the most notable element here was the positioning of the Paxtons as an internal threat to the security of the nation, a threat that was ambiguously positioned through discourses of culture and, by implication, eugenics. Howard would go on to successfully deploy a series of such external and internal threats alongside his evocation of a particular, traditional image of the national community. Indeed, it could be said that, as an Australian colloquialism, the 'dole bludger' constitutes the dangerous counterpart of the heroic figure of the 'battler' (Greenfield & Williams 2001).

<sup>1</sup> This is not to infer that the *Four Corners* text provides the original for which the ACA story is merely a copy. Indeed, King's argument is that 'far from being an analysis of unemployment...[*Four Corners*] in fact activates



- already existing modes of constructing “the social problem called unemployment” (p. 52), and its familiarity as a framework arises partially from its reiteration in other media treatments.
- 2 The following discussion is also informed by the broader discussion of advanced liberal discourses on employment policy provided by Rose (1999, pp. 156–65).
  - 3 Harris notes, however, that during this period the right to unemployment benefits varied, particularly since the norm of full employment was articulated in terms of the white male worker (2001, p. 12), such that women as wives and mothers were excluded from its definition.
  - 4 While discourses of ‘mutual obligation’ did not emerge in official policy discourse until the 1980s, Harris dates their emergence as a critical framework in discussions of policy from the mid-1970s and notes they became increasingly influential in the formation of official policy frameworks (2001, pp. 15–19).
  - 5 The irony of such a presentation has been highlighted by Davis (1997), who notes that Collins later admitted he initiated the stunt in order to gain publicity, his company having gone into receivership six days beforehand.
  - 6 Paxton Job Refusal Sparks Rethink, *Herald Sun*, 10 March 1996; Howard Blasts Job-Refusal Trio, *Herald Sun*, 12 March 1996.

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**Author/s:**

NOLAN, DJ

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