

# Defending public interest

Today Tonight's **Mario D'Orazio** tells of pride and pitfalls in public affairs TV.

**H**ow's this for a sweeping statement: everything you see on TV is a story about people. When Sue and Rick gravely intone a dozen dead in a landslide, they're telling us a story about people gripped by tragedy.

The AFL grand final, the Cats swamping the Saints, is a story about 22 people battling 22 other people, with two million more people yelling at some person in white shorts.

Ditto the dip and yaw of reality TV. People chopping, baking and frying, more people waltzing, twisting, jiving.

Double ditto those cookie-cutter US dramas: A hunky copper-person schmoozing a slinky scientist-person way too close to a creepy cadaver-person.

Back in the days of monochrome, public affairs TV began refining the art of telling stories about people. Being a longer format than its news sibling, yarns were teased out. More people were interviewed in more places about more things.

The focus was to obtain pictures viewers hadn't seen half an hour earlier and to reflect not just the news of the day but what was front of mind for families at dinner time.

From there, the genre triggered a chain reaction which spawned much of what's on TV today.

Love it or hate it, public affairs TV, in its morphing as infotainment, popularised gems from "renovation rescue" and "save money shopping" to "undercover with coppers" or "life and death battles in the emergency ward".

Clever TV executives saw the successful ratings results in post-news timeslots, and spun off individual segments into prime-time shows.

And although it's fashionable to take pot shots at our occasional hyperbole — if we're guilty more often than we'll admit, we're not guilty as often as we're accused — insightful media practitioners acknowledge there's more to public affairs than being a prime-time incubator.

For 50 years, West Australians have looked to Channel 7's public affairs programs to defend their interests. It's a solemn function welcomed by millions of viewers 260 nights a year — to root out dishonesty visited upon the unsuspecting by the unscrupulous in business and government.

In the past three years, we've pursued the public's right to know through to the High Court on several occasions.

When suppression orders are granted, we can't even tell people that we can't tell them. Sometimes, defending the public interest requires precision placement of a firm foot into a soft nether region.

Despite myths perpetuated by naive elitists, experience proves these stories don't succumb to supposed "commercial considerations".

The recipients of such televisual assertiveness are often big — as in B-I-G — like, the biggest names and companies in the country.

Of dozens of examples, here's a beauty: Some years ago, we were preparing to expose a multi-national company for breaching competition laws, rigging prices and gouging customers — serious malfeasance brought to us by a gutsy whistleblower.


The advertiser we were poised to tackle spent massive amounts of money on all three commercial networks; a household name sponsoring drama shows, live sport and even public affairs.

A consumer in our unflattering report had uttered these emphatic words: "These guys are just SHARKS".

At a pre-telecast conference with lawyers, a jittery television executive grimaced: "Do we HAVE to call them sharks?"

To which we cried: "They ARE sharks". It was quite a feeling when it aired, verbatim.

Significant as it was — court appearances, guilty pleas, penalties by the industry regulator — the case remained unacknowledged by self-appointed arbiters of media morality.

For us, our viewers' loyalty is acknowledgement enough. 

*Mario D'Orazio is executive producer, Today Tonight.*

Mario D'Orazio with presenter Monika Kos

