

Case study 10

Kerry Packer and a plea for privacy

On 6 October 1990, Australia's richest man, the late media mogul Kerry Packer, was playing polo at Sydney's Warwick Farm racecourse when he suffered a massive heart attack. His heart stopped for eight minutes, but he was revived by an ambulance crew using a defibrillator (which produces an electric shock to restart the heart's normal rhythm). Just six days later he was involved in a heated confrontation with television news crews and photographers at another polo match (Sutton 1990). He is alleged to have grabbed a camera from a Murdoch newspaper photographer and torn out the film. The photographer was punched twice by a Packer aide. Mr Packer reportedly scuffled with TV crews, including a crew from his own Nine Network. From the comfort of a white BMW, the 'big fella' was watching his (then teenaged) son James playing polo, until reporters (surprised to see him there less than a week after a serious heart attack) approached and asked about his condition. At first the car pulled away, but it stopped seconds later and Mr Packer walked back towards the news crews. During the following confrontation he attempted to cover the lens of a television camera, saying: 'Go away. Leave me alone' (Sutton 1990). Days after recovering from the heart attack, Mr Packer donated \$2.5 million to split the cost with the New South Wales Government of fitting defibrillators into most of the state's ambulances (Cromie 1997). The defibrillators are now affectionately referred to in NSW as 'Packer Whackers'.

Issues and questions raised by case study 10

- 1 Does it surprise you that the owner of the Nine Network that produces several gossip magazines, the daily current affairs program *A Current Affair*, which regularly invades people's privacy in the name of a good story, and *The Bulletin*, whose columnist Laurie Oakes released details of the Cheryl Kernot/Gareth Evans affair, should be pleading for 'privacy'?
- 2 Shouldn't he, of all people, realise that the media is always going to follow newsmakers, and Australia's richest man almost dying and then appearing six days later to watch his son play polo has got to be a story well worth chasing?

- 3 Wouldn't the opposition—the other TV channels, and the Fairfax and Murdoch press—have loved it when he reacted as so many others have to unwanted attention from the media?
4. Aside from the amusing thought of some form of payback, what reasons were there for the media to be interested in the well-being of Australia's richest man?
- 5 What would be the reaction be, do you think, of those who have been on the receiving end of *A Current Affair's* unwanted attention?
- 6 What would be the reaction on the stock market of Kerry Packer reportedly being seriously ill?
- 7 What was the reaction when rumours that Kerry Packer had died of a heart attack in London swept Australian stock exchanges in June 1998?
- 8 Did Kerry Packer deserve special treatment from the media?
- 9 Would your opinion about this story be different if you worked for the Nine Network?

Bibliography:

- Cromie, Ali. 1997. 'Australia's Most Generous.' *Business Review Weekly*, 1 June, 36.
- Sutton, Candice. 1990. 'Packer, TV News Crews in Scuffle.' *The Sun-Herald*, 13 October, 2.