

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE2756

Bacon, Wendy

(1946 -)

Born 1 January, 1946

Occupation Journalism trainer, Journalist, Print journalist

Summary

Associate Professor Wendy Bacon is a widely-acclaimed investigative journalist. Her articles in the *National Times* on the attempted bribe and murder of Detective Michael Drury in the 1980s formed the basis of the ABC television series, *Blue Murder*. Bacon received a Walkley Award in 1984 for her exposure of official corruption in New South Wales. She has worked for Channel 9 (*Sunday Program* and *Sixty Minutes*), John Fairfax and Sons (*National Times* and *Sun Herald*), and SBS (*Dateline*).

From 1991 to August 2012 Bacon was an academic at the University of Technology, Sydney, where she taught journalism at the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ). She continues to write as a freelance investigative journalist.

Details

Wendy Bacon grew up in Reservoir, Victoria, where her father set up a medical practice. Hers was, she says, a very suburban upbringing. The Bacon family had no television, but the children were given many books. Wendy was educated at the Presbyterian Ladies' College. Though her grandmother was a Presbyterian, her parents were agnostics, and even while she worked as a Sunday School teacher she was taught to question the existence of God and was not religious herself. Wendy's political education began early. Her grandmother was one of the founders of the League of Nations in Australia and believed, somewhat controversially at the time, that China should be included in the United Nations. Wendy's school speech to this effect created an uproar among parents and teachers.

In the mid-1960s, Wendy Bacon enrolled at the University of Melbourne and lived at St Hilda's College. Here she was part of the anti-Vietnam War campaign – her mother also campaigned, as part of Save Our Sons – and became strongly aligned with progressive, anti-authoritarian (including anti-Communist government) movements. By the late 1960s, Bacon had moved to the University of Sydney, where she joined the Sydney 'Push'. She was still drawn to radical social movements, and enjoyed the open enquiry and discussion in the group. At Sydney, Bacon edited the student newspaper, *Tharunka*. With fellow students, she was involved in distributing the Little Red Schoolbook to teenagers, offering advice on all number of matters including how to deal with teachers and how to find out about sex. The Little Red Schoolbook generated enormous controversy, and Bacon was interviewed by Mike Willessee on *A Current Affair*. The whole episode was marked on her record. On the grounds that she had created a furore in Australia, Bacon was not permitted to enter the United States until the mid-1980s when she was working as a journalist for Fairfax.

Over the course of her student and professional career, Bacon has been arrested approximately eighteen times. Her willingness to critique oppression and expose corruption, and her preference for investigative journalism, has come at a price. At just 23 years old, during an anti-censorship protest, Bacon was found guilty of exhibiting an obscene publication and jailed at Mullawah Women's Prison for eight days. She was later imprisoned at Darlinghurst for a similar amount of time. Following her release, Bacon wrote an article for George Munster at *Nation*, based upon her experiences. She co-founded the support group, Women Behind Bars, in Sydney.

In prison Bacon encountered police corruption first-hand, from bribery to the raping of women prisoners. She encountered it again, specifically the link between organised crime and corrupt police, during protests against developments in Victoria Street, Sydney. One of the protest leaders simply disappeared, while Bacon herself was sent a bullet in an orchid on Valentine's Day. In later years, police corruption became the core focus of her investigative journalism.

In the mid-1980s, Bacon wrote a series of articles for the *National Times*, bringing to light allegations that Detective Sergeant Roger Rogerson had attempted to bribe Detective Michael Drury, following an attempt on Drury's life. Her stories were used in the ABC television series, *Blue Murder*. Bacon was also involved in publicity around the case of Lionel Murphy, the former Labor Attorney-General who was appointed to the High Court and brought to trial for perverting the cause of justice. Murphy had connections to organised crime. It was Bacon who obtained information from Murphy's friend, Jim McClelland, but her policies on confidentiality meant suppressing the information, and McClelland perjured himself. Bacon broke the story with David Marr. She also investigated the case of New South Wales Premier, Neville Wran, who faced the Street Royal Commission in 1983 over claims by the ABC's *Four Corners* that he tried to influence the magistracy over the 1977 committal of Kevin Humphries, charged with misappropriation of funds. Bacon received a Walkley award in 1984 for her exposure of official corruption in New South Wales.

As well as investigative journalism, Bacon maintained her interest in politics and activism, and produced a number of feature articles for the *Australian Society* journal. In March 1988, she published 'Voices of Dissent Around Sydney Harbour', expressing frustration at the lack of criticism around Australia's bicentennial celebrations and reacting with distaste to the kitsch of it all – the dressing up, the re-enactments, the plethora of Australian flags: 'When on the 27 January', wrote Bacon, 'I suggested to the editor of one newspaper that something more critical of the official line as well as a more qualitative account of the Aboriginal protests might be written, she dismissed the notion as raking over what was already history'. Later that year, Bacon wrote on private hospitals, asking 'where does the buck stop?', and discussing the corruption and tax evasion behind ownership of private hospitals.

Today, Wendy Bacon teaches investigative journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney. She has a special interest in the reporting of humanitarian and environmental issues. Bacon teaches freedom of information law for John Fairfax and Sons. She is a board member of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, and a contributing editor with the *Pacific Journalism Review*.

Events

1984 - 1984

Best Feature (newspaper or magazine): 'The Briese Affair: Neville Wran's Crisis Deepens', Published in the National Times

1980 -

Published resources

Journal Article

Journalism as Research, Bacon, Wendy, 2006

A Case in Ethical Failure: Twenty Years of Media Coverage of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Bacon, Wendy, 2005

Private Hospitals: Where Does the Buck Stop?, Bacon, Wendy, 1988

Voices of Dissent Around Sydney Harbour, Bacon, Wendy, 1988

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>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

The University of New South Wales Archives

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