

## Don Burke story reveals the pernicious culture of men protecting each other in the media

Written by Gael Jennings, Honorary Fellow, Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

---

It was such a cliché. At the office Christmas party of the national TV show where I worked, I emerged from the loo out the back to find one of my bosses straddling the doorway, blocking my way and waiting to pounce. I was shocked, not so much by his sexual harassment (that was de rigueur in the newsroom cultures of the day, the 1990s), as by the extent of his male entitlement and misogyny. At the time I was still breastfeeding my baby daughter, who was next door at the party with her dad and my colleagues.

This week's [revelations](#) that TV's darling of nearly 20 years, Don Burke of Burke's backyard, was allegedly 'a "psychotic bully", a "misogynist" and a "sexual predator" who indecently assaulted, sexually harassed and bullied a string of female employees comes as no surprise to women in Australian media. According to last year's [Women in Media Report](#), nearly half of us have been abused, intimidated or harassed in our working lives.

Once [sexual assault allegations](#) against Hollywood boss Harvey Weinstein exploded in the media, the open secret of male abuse of power over women was out. Social media was awash with [#Metoo](#); in France, [#BalanceTonPorc](#) ("expose your pig") flooded Twitter with [stories](#) of sexual harassment and assault.

[New allegations](#) appeared almost every day against other powerful men in various industries, including head of Amazon Studios Roy Price, political director at ABC News Mark Halperin, editor at NPR Michael Oreske, Hollywood screenwriter and director James Toback, actors Ben Affleck and Kevin Spacey, comedian Louis CK, reinforcing the seeming incongruity of a [self-described grabber of pussies](#), Donald Trump, being elected President of the United States.

Donald Trump's 'Grab her by the pussy' comments caught in this leaked recording. **A rising swell**

It feels like a rising swell, a great wave of truth-telling gathering force and breadth, the crest white and flickering, teetering at the top, ready to curl and roar down upon us all, washing away thousands of years of male power and privilege. But is it? Or will it peak, then withdraw and ebb away, diluted back into the ocean of sexist norms dominating the world and responsible for the

## Don Burke story reveals the pernicious culture of men protecting each other in the media

Written by Gael Jennings, Honorary Fellow, Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

---

perpetuation of sexual violence against women?

Some journalists are hopeful, because at last, in the Burke case, [even some blokes](#) have broken ranks and ratted on him. Journalist Juanita Phillips is

[optimistic](#)

that “two industry veterans — David Leckie and Sam Chisholm — went on the record to condemn Burke in no uncertain terms. He was a disgrace, they said. A horrible, horrible man”. She found it significant that industry executives – the very keepers of the gates of male privilege - spoke out against one of their own.

---

**Read more: [Behind media silence on domestic violence are blokey newsrooms](#)**

---

It's true the endemic abuse of women in media and entertainment has been enabled over all these years by the collusion of the men in charge. Until now, executive men have largely closed ranks and protected the perpetrators of abuse, harassment and assault against women colleagues.

This is not only because, like Burke, some harassers were cash cows for the companies and networks involved. It was also, and I believe mainly, because these perpetrators were part of the club; part of the same culture that saw the executives themselves rise to the top and stay there. They not only had a vested interest in maintaining the cultural norm, it was their norm.

Peer reviewed [global literature](#) clearly proves that men perpetrate violence against women when there is masculine dominance in society, when they identify with traditional masculinity and male privilege, believe in rigid gender roles, have weak support for gender equality, and hold negative attitudes towards women.

Our [research](#) at the Centre for Advancing Journalism at the University of Melbourne and that of Women in Media indicates these norms are rampant in the media industry. Men almost exclusively own, run, and give voice to the industry. Murdoch's NewsCorp, Fairfax and APN own

---

## Don Burke story reveals the pernicious culture of men protecting each other in the media

Written by Gael Jennings, Honorary Fellow, Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

---

92% of print media in Australia, with women owners being only 15%.

[Men run nearly all of it](#), with only 17% of executives female, and [new research](#) shows women to be similarly underrepresented as editors (30.8%), specialist reporters (9.6% - 30.2%), as experts (24.6%) and as authoritative sources (26.0%). Only 27% of AM and FM radio Breakfast and Drive programming hosts are female.

The rate of sexual harassment of women in media (48%) is over twice that of other workplaces (22%), and far exceeds that of the rightly criticised rates in the Australian Defence Forces, at 25% (Human Rights Commission) and Vic Police at 40%, yet has not been reported widely.

Up until now, the male-centric culture of media made it a non-story.

### Will we see long overdue change?

Are we seeing a change now? The Blokes have broken ranks with Don Burke? Is public discourse about to change? Has social media enabled a coalescence of power from LGBT people and people of colour, to join with outpouring from women who've been bullied, excluded, harassed and assaulted, to reach a tipping point for the wave of change? I think not yet.

I think The Blokes who sacked predatory men in the US did it because women, LGBT and people of colour now have economic power and will use it. I think The Blokes who turned on Burke did it to protect themselves.

---

***Read more: [From Public Confessions to Public Trials: The Complexities of the "Weinstein Effect"](#)***

---

They were there; they oversaw the reign of terror and did nothing; now that the women and their

## Don Burke story reveals the pernicious culture of men protecting each other in the media

Written by Gael Jennings, Honorary Fellow, Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

---

coworkers are testifying, the (Old) Blokes are running for their lives and distancing themselves from every aspect of this (now) “horrible, horrible man”. Their successors are perpetuating the same workplace cultural norms that we know lead to violence against women.

When a Trump becomes a Macron, we could be more confident. The French President this week [swore](#) “It is essential that shame changes camp”, and he is putting his money where his mouth is, with a 2018 draft law to criminalise street harassment, a massive public education program about sexism and changes to police and courts to help victims.

In the meantime, as Lindy West of the New York Times [writes](#) :

not only are women expected to weather sexual violence, intimate partner violence, workplace discrimination, institutional subordination, the expectation of free domestic labour, the blame for our own victimisation, and all the subtler, invisible cuts that undermine us daily, we are not even allowed to be angry about it.

We women are angry. Our anger has led to finding ways, around the rule of men in the newsroom, through social media and each other, to document the scope of the crimes against us. The question is whether our anger, and collaboration with powerful men, will be enough to turn that teetering crest into a massive, roaring wave of change.

*Gael Jennings does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

Authors: Gael Jennings, Honorary Fellow, Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/don-burke-story-reveals-the-pernicious-culture-of-men-protecting-each-other-in-the-media-88240>