

Killing Fairfax: Packer, Murdoch and the ultimate revenge

by Pamela Williams. HarperCollins, 2013, 352 pp,
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David Clune

David Clune is an Honorary Associate in the Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney

Pamela Williams' account of the 1996 Federal election, *The Victory*, is a classic of Australian political history. She has now written *Killing Fairfax*, another classic about an equally ruthless and bloody arena, the Australian media. It is basically the story of the ignominious decline of the once mighty Fairfax empire. Steeped in tradition and a sense of superiority, Fairfax's weakness was that it rested on one pillar, classified advertising which provided 56% of its revenue in 2004. With the rise of the internet, Fairfax was in a similar position to a medieval walled city with the advent of artillery.

Williams gives a fascinating account of the humble origins and subsequent huge growth of three internet 'pure play' companies: SEEK, carsales.com.au and realestate.com.au. While Fairfax was slow and inept in responding to the challenge of technology, the scions of two media dynasties with hatred of Fairfax in their DNA, James Packer and Lachlan Murdoch, could see its potential. All of this combined to kill the slumbering media giant by destroying its classified advertising revenue. The stock prices tell it all: in February 2013 SEEK was worth \$9.70 per share, carsales.com.au \$9.00, realestate.com.au \$25.80 while Fairfax was down to \$0.53.

Williams' book is extremely well-researched, with much use of first hand accounts from insiders. It is also superbly written – one can almost smell the sweat beneath the dark blue bespoke suits in accounts of critical encounters. The intricacies of the business world are lucidly but not condescendingly explained. *Killing Fairfax* also provides intriguing vignettes of key players – especially James Packer's troubled relationship with his overbearing father Kerry.

Killing Fairfax has one crucial message. All institutions – whether they be the 'paper of record', political parties or parliaments – need to be very aware of the phenomenal growth of technology so they can master it rather than have it master them.