

More mob rage after the break

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Matt White, host of the controversial *Today Tonight*, which reaches more than a million viewers.

OPINION

TODAY Tonight is a cancerous growth inside Australian broadcasting. The Channel Seven "current affairs" show, which regularly draws an audience of more than 1 million on weeknights at 6.30, is an amoral production house where the race to the bottom has been won with stories that begin as sensationalist and move towards the sordid. The notion that it's so bad it's funny is no longer applicable. It's so bad that it's a disgrace.

One of the unfortunate side-effects of the great current affairs satire *Frontline* was we saw just enough of the fictional television tabloid's antics to leave us knowingly amused; the reporters would do nearly anything for a yarn, while the host was a self-important boob. Since then we've shaken our heads and sighed with bemusement when *Today Tonight* and its adversary, Channel Nine's *A Current Affair*, periodically got caught out, as if the shows were the mischievous scamps of the television industry.

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But year on year the two rival camps have competed to lower their standards, so that ironic bemusement at what has transpired proves to be no longer acceptable. In the past year, *Today Tonight* has made a decisive break, combining an obsession about speed cameras and electricity bills with a xenophobic streak that has treated Muslims and refugees as divisive pawns. Imagine what kind of television show you'd have to produce to make *A Current Affair* look vaguely decent?

The ABC's *Media Watch* recently, and rightly, tore strips off a *Today Tonight* report about "the so-called refugee resorts", which managed to reuse footage more than a year old out of context, secretly film a former refugee who was now a visa holder and misconstrue his answers, and deceive an elderly pensioner about his remarks so that she criticised him. "Inflammatory nonsense" was the verdict of host Jonathan Holmes.

This approach, along with finding a Muslim on the periphery of his faith who will ludicrously demand the immediate application of sharia in Australia with a straight face, is the new norm for *Today Tonight*. The show has become addicted to fearmongering and the resulting rage - when a report singles out the most prolific speed camera in Australia, near Tugun on the Pacific Highway in Queensland - an inanimate object was rendered as a force of unspeakable evil.

Even the one area where commercial current affairs has done good work, as consumer crusader, has become infected. Several weeks ago *Today Tonight* spotlighted the nefarious practice of second-hand cars having their odometers wound back to increase their resale value. It was a solid report backed up with documentation and telling evidential footage of an ongoing racket and NSW Fair Trading investigators became involved.

But a week later that achievement was soiled when a follow-up segment collected a group of irate buyers

and followed them into the car dealership at the centre of the investigation. The angry mob, complete with a child holding an adult's hand, confronted staff and chased after their employer, who punched a pursuer. *Today Tonight* showed the blow and resulting bloody nose repeatedly like it was a trophy.

Some failings, such as the way "dramatisation" is flashed up momentarily at the start of a vivid re-creation, are minute and the odd human-interest piece still sits between corporate hook-ups and celebrity updates. But *Today Tonight* has in essence become what it covers: it's as devious as the renter refusing to move out; as lacking in judgment as the hoon driver. The show suffers from Stockholm syndrome.

The usual retort is that they're just giving viewers what they want but no one actually requested this tripe, which plays into the bitter divisiveness that's somehow become part of the national discourse in recent years.

Television's version of the Nuremberg defence has no place when it comes to *Today Tonight*. The edition that screens in Melbourne is overseen by executive producer Craig McPherson and hosted by Matt White and its downfall has become a story that no viewer can afford to watch.

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2. Informative
3. Rubbish
4. Dangerous
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Entertaining

2%

Informative

2%

Rubbish

53%

Dangerous

43%

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