

Celebration of the distinguished career of Professor Tom O'Regan (1956–2020)

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mia**Karina Aveyard**

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Abstract

Professor Tom O'Regan played an important role in the establishment and formalisation of media and cultural studies, especially in Australia and New Zealand. He had a long association with *Media International Australia*, serving on the journal's Editorial Board for many years and helping to guide *MIA* successfully through several key periods of significant change. In this special issue *MIA*, on behalf of its community of scholars, takes this opportunity to honour Tom, and to remember and celebrate his insightful and innovative work.

Keywords

Tom O'Regan, Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture, Cultural Studies, Australian National Cinema, Australian Television

Special issue: introduction

Tom O'Regan was a germinal thinker in media and cultural studies research, especially in Australia and New Zealand. He played a unique and rich role in the establishment and formalisation of these scholarly fields through insightful and innovative work in key areas such as Australian cinema and television cultures, national identity, technological materiality and affordance, and in the understanding of geo-cultural and economic dimensions of media production and consumption. Across these different fields of interest, Tom's scholarship was dynamic and progressive, informed by a rigorous and energetic engagement with a multiplicity of ideas and people. He had a remarkable capacity for collegial generosity and mentorship, expansive and lively conversation, generative conceptualisation and pioneering research.

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Tom was a central figure in the formative period of cultural and media studies during the 1980s and 1990s. His output at this time was prodigious, engaging diverse constituencies within academia and among cultural institutions and commentators more broadly – a feature of his work that remained in the decades that followed. Much of this found focus through the establishment of the journal *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* and in his editorial collaborations with Brian Shoesmith, Toby Miller and Alec McHoul during its first 7 years (1987–1994). As Albert Moran’s article in this issue reminds us, these early publications of *Continuum* were vast undertakings, regularly running into hundreds of pages with upwards of 20 or more contributors. The richness and heterogeneity of these volumes attests to the potency of this scholarly moment and to the way in which the then emergent frameworks of cultural and media studies encouraged important connections and cohesion between work that had hitherto been conceived of in more fragmented ways.

While the subjects of Tom’s research traversed a wide range of topics during his career, his interest in the formulations of cultural studies is a concern that is evident throughout. This can be traced explicitly from early publications such as his 1992 *Southern Review* article with Alec McHoul ‘Towards a Paralogics of Textual Technologies: Batman, Glasnost and Relativism in Cultural Studies’ (McHoul and O’Regan, 1992) which interrogated some of the complexities and self-limiting notions of the ‘political’ in cultural studies, an issue he was still actively debating in ‘What Matters for Cultural Studies?’ (O’Regan, 2013) over 20 years later. Concern with the theoretical and its applied practicalities was also a hallmark of Tom’s more empirically focused work, which consistently engaged with questions to do with the relationship of the conceptual to the material.

Tom’s passing has brought great sadness and an acute awareness of what he contributed – the distinctive and compelling nature of what his scholarly publications and voice conveyed, what was yet to come among his various unfinished investigations and writings and what will be sorely missed. His work and professional example provides a foundation from which to consider the contemporary dynamics and forms of media; culture and communications; the nature of academic careers; and the agenda and imperatives for research, institutions and policy – all areas in which Tom had long intervened in and reflected upon.

Tom had an extended association with *Media International Australia (MIA)*, beginning in the late 1990s. He served on the journal’s Editorial Board for many years and was closely involved in guiding *MIA* through several key periods of transition and renewal. He actively supported a succession of editors, board members and journal staff as they negotiated developments in convergent publishing and the impacts of university restructurings.

Tom was especially proud of his role as *MIA* Publisher – ‘guardian angel’, as editor Helen Wilson described him (Wilson, 2002). His thoughtful and persistent efforts gave the journal stability as it moved from the Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy and Faculty of Arts at Griffith University to the University of Queensland, where he and Graeme Turner put it on a firm footing. He remained highly engaged with the journal in the years that followed and was especially animated by conversations concerning *MIA*’s shift from an independent print journal published in Brisbane to embracing the opportunities of emerging commercial online publishing platforms. Tom’s contribution was significant in *MIA*’s passage from experimentation with transnational aggregators (Ingenta), through digitisation and distribution of its rich ‘backlist’ via RMIT’s Informat and to the eventual acceptance of the long-standing invitation of SAGE to publish *MIA*.

It is therefore fitting that *MIA*, on behalf of its community of scholars, takes this opportunity to mark Tom’s passing and honour him through the dedication of this special issue. In this customary way, we critically recall, engage with and valorise Tom’s work. Within this broad remit, contributors were asked to select a specific aspect of Tom’s work that had directly influenced their own scholarship and to critically reflect both on the significance of this idea or approach, and discuss its

application in their own research (unbounded by the context or field of the latter). The articles submitted were all peer reviewed and are significant works of scholarship in their own right.

In assembling this issue, we approached a varied range of Tom's colleagues and collaborators giving attention not just to publications (both recent and historical) but to the diverse teams Tom worked with on grant-funded projects and across other scholarly networks. Not all were in a position to commit to writing for this issue. Important partnerships not able to be represented in the list of contributors (and not already mentioned above) were with Ben Goldsmith and Susan Ward, as well as notable collaborations with Huw Walmsley-Evans, Alfio Leotta, Mark Ryan and Lisanne Gibson. As evident in the 'Guide to his Published Work' in this volume, Tom regularly wrote with male co-authors. However, to read this as bias in his work or outlook would be a mistake, but rather perhaps reflects the gendered nature of some of the academic sub-fields he worked in.

As editors, we express our huge thanks to each of the contributors, for the assiduity of their approach in addressing key aspects of the depth and breadth of Tom's academic life, and for their enthusiasm, collegiality and support for us and each other. During the preparation of this issue, we met online to discuss the structure and the content of the contributions. However, most of this meeting was spent recalling memories and anecdotes about Tom and sharing the experience of his loss – underlining the important function of memorialisations such as this not just as acts of remembrance and respect, but also as negotiations of grief and processes of mourning.

We are very grateful to the peer reviewers who took the time to read and offer feedback on the articles contained here and to *MIA* editors Matt Allen, Adrian Athique and Craig Hight for their guidance. Karina thanks Toby Miller for his helpful advice and kind support.

Finally and most of all, we offer our sincere condolences to Tom's family who live now with the profoundly sad loss of a much loved partner, father and recently grandfather. We very warmly thank Rita Shanahan for her support and various assistances with the preparation of this special issue.

Guide to this special issue

The issue begins with *Stuart Cunningham, Graeme Turner and David Carter's* thoughtful and expansive overview of Tom's academic career, written for the Australian Academy of the Humanities and generously reproduced here. This is a detailed and nuanced account of Tom's work that highlights his scholarly achievements and key interventions, as well as his academic leadership, professional integrity and collegiality. This is followed by *Albert Moran's* article which examines in more depth the formative period of Tom's career in the 1980s and 1990s through the lens of shared collaborations on their ground-breaking edited collections *The Australian Screen* (1989) and *An Australian Film Reader* (1985), and the overlaps between these projects and the establishment and consolidation of *Continuum*.

The following two contributions look in turn at the work associated with two of Tom's outstanding individual book publications from the 1990s – *Australian Television Culture* (1993) and *Australian National Cinema* (1996), authored by *Anna Potter* and *Deane Williams*, respectively. Anna Potter's analysis of the enduring significance of *Australian Television Culture* focuses in particular on the industrial frameworks of media ownership, regulation and policy, both in terms of their importance at the time this book was published and as areas in which she and Tom would later very productively collaborate. Deane Williams examines the contexts of the emergence of the concept of 'national cinema' and Tom's key role in the international development of this particular frame of cultural analysis. Highlighting its enduring relevance, Williams further places this work within contemporary post-national theorising.

Vijay Mishra's article is based on the methodological and interpretive challenges of his recently completed investigations of historical material at the V S Naipaul personal archives held at the University of Tulsa. Having known Tom since his early days at Murdoch, Vijay pays tribute to the rigour of Tom's empirical approaches, which were informed by materiality *and* a deep engagement with theory as a means of balancing the researcher's approach to organisation and analysis. This article is a powerful reminder that there is much more to a scholarly life than expertise and knowledge in singular fields. Tom's command of broad interdisciplinary interests is further highlighted in *Keyan Tomaselli's* contribution centred on his interactions with Tom and collaborations on matters of media and culture in the context of South Africa. This article also attests to Tom's scholarly generosity, and his capacity to recognise, support and value diverse avenues of academic connection.

Julian Thomas and Ramon Lobato take a broad ranging view of Tom's scholarship, bringing it together around an analysis of the spatial formulations and organisation of his various research projects. In particular, they highlight that while Tom's work tended to foreground the Australian situation, it was also always engaged with global contexts as a means of more fully comprehending the patterns, influences and exceptionalisms of the national. Former student and later colleague of Tom, *Terence Lee*, follows on from this in detailing more of the specifics of cultural policy and Tom's long-standing engagement with the mechanisms that mediate the exercise and regulation of power of cultural institutions. Terence also pays a warm tribute to Tom as a mentor and advisor.

The final two articles in this special issue explore two areas of Tom's contemporary work. *Mark Balnaves* writes about a joint research project with Tom looking critically at the challenges, both ethical and practical, for the collection, analysis and use of audience and other consumer media measures by new 'super aggregators' (media corporations). As Mark notes, this work builds upon more than a decade of collaboration and multiple publications on the processes and politics of audience ratings and measurement. Finally, the issue comes to completion with *Nic Carah's* extended and thoughtful analysis of work on social and online media advertising cultures and forms, that was ongoing with Tom at the time of his passing. Its concern with the implications and effects of the growth in advertiser-supported media and the associated challenges to public accountability is another clear and compelling demonstration of Tom's career-long concern with culture and hegemony.

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