

What price chequebook journalism?

SYDNEY — Rumors of offers up to \$250,000 for the Chamberlains' exclusive story, following Lindy's release from jail in Darwin, have again raised the thorny question of chequebook journalism — should the media pay for news?

For a dedicated journalist whose whole *raison d'être* is to get the story, the most frustrating thing in the world is being pipped at the post because someone bought the source.

But for the journalist whose organisation paid for the exclusive — few things beat having a scoop and knowing no one else can get it.

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By Debra Bull

Nonetheless, most journalists would feel their glory tarnished by the knowledge that the story was bought.

Maybe that is one reason why the Australian Journalists' Association (AJA) and the Australian Press Council (APC) oppose what is colloquially termed "chequebook journalism" — the payment of money for a story, generally with exclusive rights.

Exclusives help outsell media competitors, and thus newspaper

proprietors and television producers look upon "chequebook journalism" more warmly.

Professor Henry Mayer, a visiting professor at several universities, said there was no doubt — the media had no inherent right to free information.

"Freedom of the press does not consist of the right of the media to get free stories," he said.

"It's a convention that has grown up that journalists get their stories for nothing.

Chequebook journalism invokes an ethical question, involving discrimination, freedom of the press,

the public's right to information and potential distortion of facts.

It is becoming more prevalent in Australia, and offers of payment to the Chamberlains were expected.

The editor-in-chief of Sydney's Sun, Ron Ford, opposed paying criminals but did not include Lindy Chamberlain in that category, since she was a "special case".

Willesee and Nine's 60 Minutes are the major current affairs programs involved in purchasing stories.

Yet 60 Minutes executive producer Gerald Stone said he could count

on the fingers of one hand the number of times he had paid for a story.

Ronald MacDonald, former managing director of the Age said you could draw a line, however: public institutions, elected representatives and people in public positions should provide free information as part of their public accountability.

But business organisations which incurred a genuine cost in providing the information, should be reimbursed by charging for the story.

His rule was that if a story was newsworthy and of interest to the public — not just in the public interest — payments could be made.