Vice Chancellor, the Dean of Arts and Sciences, ladies and gentlemen.

We are gathered on Wurundjeri land where storytellers long understood their responsibility thousands of years before the invention of the printing press or any modern media.

Don’t be fooled by technology. The medium is not always the message. Choosing the right words truly matters.

It is the ethical thread of storytelling, the ethical thread of this degree that you are developing, that is of greatest importance.

True stories help us understand our real place in the Universe, they connect the human family and all living parts of Nature and they help us develop the value system that is like a map to guides us on our journey.

Journalism, to a large degree, is the Art of Listening, the Art of Understanding. It is what we mean by genuine empathy, the ability to put ourselves in the shoes of the other human being and to tell their story with an authenticity that renders the truth. This is more than mere portraiture. It is the truth that helps us all find purpose in life. It is the truth that gives us reason to believe. This value, the truth, is as precious as love.

In our Age of Violence, after quite possibly the most violent century in all of human history in which 180 million people were killed in conflict, you will need more than night vision goggles to find truth.

The late and great American playwright, Arthur Miller, once observed that strong political leadership in our time was characterized by a leader’s willingness to kill and to lie to his own people. This is an astute but deeply troubling observation. In my experience leaders who suppress or manipulate the truth expose us to far greater dangers. Arthur Miller was pointing to American Presidents like Roosevelt who lied about America’s secret project to build the world’s first atomic bomb and Richard Nixon who lied about Watergate.

While reporting on the impeachment process against Richard Nixon it became very clear to me just how much we need the truth, established in that case by a few reporters and some brave Congressmen and women who raised their voices and
crossed the political floor for the truth. It is the truth that gives a democracy the
ability to check the resort to violence by some leaders and their abuse of power.

I will leave it to you to judge whether the world was better off with Roosevelt’s Big
Lie in wartime about the first Atomic Bomb or whether revealing the truth and
perhaps opting for a comparatively harmless demonstration drop of that terrifying
weapon could have averted man’s irrational progression to nuclear arsenals now
capable of destroying all of humanity and much of life on earth.

You too must come to your own conclusions about whether the Big Lies pushed by
leaders such as Bush, Howard and Blair about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq
could ever justify that illegal and totally preposterous notion of pre-emptive war.

If you look critically at leadership and analyse carefully the information marketed by
mass media you will see that the politics of shock and awe go closely with
disinformation. The Howard Government’s shock intervention into remote
Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory is Australia’s most appalling Big Lie
in recent years, as it was based on the outrageous claim that the Army and Federal
Police were being sent onto Aboriginal land to protect Aboriginal children from
paedophile rings.

The American political strategist, Karl Rove, cynically claimed that his kind could
create a new political reality before most of us could even analyse and explain to the
public what was involved in the previous reality.

Remember those Big Lies about ‘babies overboard’ and the dangerous insinuation
that every asylum seeker posed a terrorist threat. After an initial shock
announcement the disinformation poses over time until many people have
forgotten how we got onto this path in the first place.

The global financial crisis also reveals just how much pain is inflicted on the entire
human family by the practice of lying on a massive scale.

In his book, THE ASSAULT ON REASON, Al Gore builds a convincing case that the
media’s inability to grapple with important truths and near obsession with sheer
nonsense has weakened terribly the effective functioning of democracy. Why?
Because if people don’t have the truth they are reluctant to act on the greatest
challenges of our age. Now you could draw up your own hit list of issues but I start
with dealing with the genuine social emergency in our country, the fact that
Aboriginal children are still born into deep deprivation and die at least seventeen
years before the rest of us for no good reason at all. I also agree with Al Gore that
trying to prevent new world wars and massive displacement of hundreds of millions
of people means we must come to grips with Global Warming, and securing water,
energy and food for a world population that will hit eight billion by 2025.
It is now almost thirty years since I began interviewing a number of the world’s greatest earth scientists who explained patiently what humanity needed to do to prevent the slow death of our bio-sphere.

It was their work that inspired so many first rate broadcasters including the ABC’s Robyn Williams and the BBC’s’ David Attenborough to set a higher standard on how media can engage and inform us. In this same tradition Al Gore and Tim Flannery have learned how to shatter the Matrix and give people the information we all need to act wisely, the information we may need for the survival of our species.

It is challenging then when so many of the true professionals such as David Attenborough come to the same conclusion that modern media rarely rises to its full potential and is principally only good at selling us things, great piles of junk food for the mind and the spirit.

When media is not selling it usually soft-shoe shuffles into entertainment. Performers, even those with an impressive intellect, get lost in a soap-opera they have helped create.

But here’s the truth, entertaining people, performing whole time slots full of babble is the kind of attention seeking nonsense that keeps our Democracy dumb and then numb.

As one of my all time favourite broadcasters, Edward R. Murrow observed, if a medium is just about entertainment it is not much more than a box of lights and wires.

It is the words that matter. Not the box of lights and wires. So choose your words wisely, truthfully. Use every breath and every day you will feel that your words have made a difference.

Thank you