

Part 7: Media panel

The changing media landscape in an election campaign

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This election will be one of the most interesting and unpredictable in Australia's history, and also one of the most important. Two very different approaches to meeting the challenges of the Asian century are on offer, each with different winners and losers both at home and abroad. And just when it seemed that the result was going to be a foregone conclusion, with Julia Gillard leading a dysfunctional ALP into electoral oblivion for a generation, now there are two credible candidates for prime minister leading two credible parties.

Regardless of the bizarre circumstances which brought Kevin Rudd back from the political deadzone — and no western democracy has ever shown such casual brutality to its elected national leaders as was inflicted on Rudd in 2010 and Gillard in 2013 — his re-emergence was a game changer, and no pollster can now reliably call the result.

That may change, but as of now, and the launch of this panel — set up to monitor and comment on the media campaign as it unfolds — both main parties are genuinely competitive. For that reason, the campaign will be aggressive and intense. Most campaigns are, but given the tight polling numbers and the personal animosity that seems to fuel the respective leaderships as they compete to be seen to be tougher than each other on asylum policy, more competent on economic policy, more or less

ambitious on education, disability support and broadband roll out, the 2013 campaign looks set to be a corker. Bad-tempered, coldly calculating, tricky — and wonderfully entertaining.

The Conversation's media panel will aim to capture those qualities, as well as taking a detached, non-partisan look at the substance of the campaigns as they evolve day to day, week to week. It will analyse the communicative strategies being employed to sell the competing programs to what is, by most accounts, a somewhat disillusioned and cynical electorate.

The focus of contributors will be on the established, mainstream media, for the simple reason that these remain the key points of entry for citizens who wish to be informed about Australian politics.

Social media will be more prominent in this campaign than ever before, used round the clock by the parties to organise and disseminate their messages, and by citizens to share and debate those messages. There exists a vast online commentariat of bloggers, tweeters, Facebookers and Youtubers who comprise a parallel public sphere running alongside the "big media" of the mainstream.

Increasingly, new and old media intersect, or collide, as they compete to set agendas and blow the whistle on each other's inaccuracies and flaws. In the future, social network and internet sources may come to dominate media coverage of political campaigns; their speed, ubiquity and decentralised nature endowing the citizen, or the amateur observer, with an unprecedented degree of access to the consumption *and* production of meaningful public discourse about politics.

But we are not there yet. In 2013, the key media of influence on the Australian people as they set about choosing their next government will be those with which they are familiar, and which, even as they decline in reach over time, retain the greatest degree of credibility as information sources. Even the 24-hour news channels of ABC and Sky command audiences of magnitudes

smaller than the mainstream outlets — free-to-air TV and radio news bulletins, prime time current affairs, mass circulation newspapers.

Work by Melbourne University’s Sally Young and others showed that in the 2010 election, online channels and networks were used by relatively few of the Australian population to read and talk about politics, and certainly not by the great mass of “ordinary” citizens. Legacy media, staffed by professionals and resourced to a level deemed necessary for what we might call “quality” political journalism — although that resourcing is at risk as never before in the emerging business models of News, Fairfax and their mainstream competitors — are the main source of news for most of the people, most of the time. It may be that in 2013 Australia will have its Nate Silver moment, in which an online upstart proves the traditional punditocracy to be full of bluster and hyperbole, as he or she correctly calls the electoral outcome on the basis of publicly available stats.

For now, however, the mainstream media and their army of commentators, reporters and analysts will be the first port of call for most Australians as they seek to follow the campaign’s twists and turns. This panel will act as a kind of filter on the coverage, sifting and sorting for trends, patterns and features of potential significance to the outcome.

Where is the scrutiny of “the greatest moral challenge of our time”?

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As previously observed on this blog, the greatest area of neglect in the mainstream media’s coverage of the election is climate change.

The most coverage it has had was during Sunday evening's debate between Rudd and Abbott, where just over 10% of the time was allocated to climate policy. Even then the quality of the climate change policy debate left a lot to be desired.

The importance of policies to prevent dangerous climate change has not been reflected in either the tabloids or the broad-sheets.

A Factiva search on all articles of the past week (commencing on day one of the election campaign) in the Australian press specifically dealing with "climate policy", "carbon pricing" and "carbon tax", has returned only seven articles. All of these articles are from News Corp and Fairfax newspapers.

The *Australian Financial Review* got off to a reasonable start with the most detailed comparison of the climate change policies put forward by Labor and the Coalition. However, this analysis failed to include the Greens' climate policies. The same day, the *Sydney Morning Herald* also had a snapshot summary of the two major parties and Greens climate policies. But since that, there has been scant coverage in the Fairfax press.

The Australian has had three articles: one looked at carbon policy from the standpoint of business modelling, and another at an ETS as an impost on the economy, which turns on climate change denial. On August 12, *The Australian* published an article by Queensland Nationals senator Ron Broswell, also on why an ETS could hurt Australia. The *Herald Sun* also had an article on why the carbon tax had to go, as it was hurting business.

Of course, beyond the fact that these papers take different sides regarding carbon policy, none have actually linked the policies of either of the parties to the reality of climate change. Even the economic arguments are without rigour. No-one is taking Rudd to task over his climate backflip from when he was last in power. What is also missing is any discussion of the economic cost to the global economy of not taking action, the impacts of climate change already being experienced by people

around the world, or our ethical obligations as a wealthy high-polluting nation.

As Andrew Glikson has pointed out, with only 0.3% of global population, Australia emits 1.8% of global greenhouse gases and our plans to quadruple coal exports over the next 10 years will put Australia's greenhouse gas emissions on par with Middle East oil.

Sex, gaffes and tits: Is the media dumbing down the debate?

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16 August 2013

Almost a fortnight into the federal election campaign some are despairing about the superficiality of the overall debate. One could be forgiven for viewing the media focus as being gaffe-driven and tittle-tattle-centric.

One Nation Stephanie Banister's alleged misspeak on "haram", Jews and Jesus went viral and evoked media castigation locally and abroad in spite of her claim that she was the victim of bad editing. Singapore's *Straits Times* reported the story under the headline "Australia's Sarah Palin quits election race after Islam gaffe".

The Liberal Party's Jaymes Diaz was among the first cabs off the gaffe rank, making the global stage when he referred to the Coalition's six-point plan to stop the boats. Despite saying he "can run through all the details of the points", he was unable to go beyond saying the plan was to "stop the boats".

For three days in a row, the national broadsheet *The Australian* had stories with all or some of the words "sex", "sex appeal" and "tits", and images to boot, on the front page.

Opposition leader Tony Abbott made generous contributions to the campaign gaffe store with his “suppository” malapropism and remarks on candidate Fiona Scott’s “sex appeal”. The media reported his “fashion of the moment” remark as being in reference to gay marriage, although Mr Abbott claimed it was a more general reference to social change.

The AusVotes 2013 blog, styled as aiming “to provide the observations, analysis and opinion that are missing in the traditional media’s coverage of the election”, noted:

The media train will continue to blandly report what is being said by the candidates, looking for amusing gaffes and the like, while actual news is left unreported and actual people are excluded. This is why our media coverage of this election will be as trivial, self-serving and narrow as it ever was in previous elections. All spin, all press release, little substance.

Although it is hyped, therein lies part of the explanation for the mainstream media campaign coverage menu.

Another explanation lies in newsmakers’ acute awareness of the “news-as-entertainment” imperative. Sally White, the author of a well-known introductory journalism text has noted:

The bizarre, the quirky and the novel are important elements in any newspaper or news bulletin. Happenings that deviate from the expected have high news value. Their unexpectedness makes them more dramatic and more apt to be talked about.... Odd news fulfils the essential entertainment function for the news media.... It helps balance relevant, more significant news with a little lightness.

Prominent media academic Professor John Hartley has noted that the newsmakers are “of course aware of the quality of ‘news-as-entertainment’”.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the entertainment imperative in the news, which some are complaining about, is allowing the politicians to evade scrutiny of their policy promises in the current election campaign.

We have access to an unprecedented supply of quality analysis from a multitude of well-qualified and experienced commentators speaking through a variety of outlets. The higher up the professional pecking order they go, the more well endowed they are to cut through the orchestration, spin and obfuscation that has come to characterise modern election campaigns.

The protracted campaign period accompanying a long period of political animation has produced an acute climate of disengagement among voters. Unusualness, conflict, antagonism and tension are age-old news elements that gain their legitimacy from the institutionalised, continuing and repetitive nature of politics and governance.

It should not surprise that the politicians and the media feel the need to employ more pronounced shock, awe and aberration tactics to be noticed or to take the heat off their own foibles.

Deeper debates beckon on the broader issues underpinning the gaffes, but an intense election campaign is an infertile environment for enlightened discussion on these matters.

Commercial TV, Murdoch and censorship

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4 September 2013

Such an irony: the commercial television channels, which ran a landmark free-speech case in the High Court to protect their advertising revenue during election campaigns, have now censored an advertisement criticising the coverage of the election by Rupert Murdoch's newspapers.

The ad, by the campaigning group Get Up Australia, shows a man opening a copy of Murdoch's Brisbane *Courier-Mail*. The

front page has a picture of Kevin Rudd's face and a big headline quoting Tony Abbott: "Does this guy ever shut up?"

The man says to the camera:

It was great when you could pick up a paper and get — well, news. Recently the *Courier-Mail* and the *Daily Tele* and have been using their front pages to run a political campaign instead.

Their owner, US billionaire Rupert Murdoch, has an agenda to get rid of our current PM. Fair enough. We all have an opinion. But political bias dressed up as news is — well, misleading crap.

At this point, the man squats down, scoops some dog poo onto the paper and drops it into a wheelie bin, saying: "Thanks Rupert, but Australians can choose their own government."

Channel Seven refused to run the ad, reportedly on the grounds that it was "distasteful" and "potentially offensive". Channel Ten, of which Mr Murdoch's son Lachlan is chairman, gave no reason, and Channel Nine, which initially ran the ad for four days, withdrew it, saying there had been a "coding error".

Fairfax Media refused to run the ad for money, but ran it uncensored as a video in its news coverage. The ABC also ran it in its online news service.

There is a lot of confusion in the media about the difference between editing and censorship. The key test always is motive: why was this published or not published?

There are proper motives — sparing the community genuinely distressing, sickening or grossly offensive material, for example — and there are improper motives — not wishing to offend rich and powerful interests, for example.

Channel Seven claims to be protecting its viewers from "distasteful" or "potentially offensive" material. Neither Channel Ten nor Channel Nine have given a motive.

Given the pallid nature of the so-called "potentially offensive" material — scooping dog poo on to a newspaper — it is

difficult to accept Channel Seven's motive as the real one, unless by "potentially offensive" they mean to Mr Murdoch.

In the absence of any stated motive from the other channels, it is open to conclude that their motive was likewise an improper one: to avoid offending a rich and powerful interest.

Where in all this is their defence of free speech, so evident when their advertising revenue was threatened by restrictions on television election advertising in the early 1990s?

The federal Labor government of the day had passed a law placing limits on television advertising during election campaigns in order to prevent the development in Australia of the extreme fund-raising pressures on political parties that so disfigures the American electoral process.

In what became known as the "TV ad bans" case of 1992, the commercial television industry successfully challenged the law in the High Court. The industry argued that it amounted to an abridgment of what they said was an implicit right in the Constitution to freedom of political speech.

This was the start of a series of what came to be known as the "free speech" cases in the High Court, culminating in 1997 in settled recognition by the court of an implied right to freedom of communication on matters of government and politics.

This principle was subsequently absorbed into Australia's defamation laws as an important additional defence to actions for defamation, when those laws were made uniform in 2006.

How ironic then that for what is obviously an improper motive, the commercial television stations are now exercising their market power to censor material of the very kind they fought so strenuously to protect 20 years ago.

Get Up! Australia says it will take the matter to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, alleging misuse of market power.

News Corp: It's not a conspiracy ... it's just business

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5 September 2013

An editorial in yesterday's *Australian* entitled "Independent and Irrelevant" was the latest in a trilogy where it has attacked just about every conceivable competitor to News Corp's operations in Australia for being biased.

It follows an *Oz* story of "a private experiment" by a "technologist", who found that:

... headlines for election stories on websites published by *The Guardian's* Australian arm and Fairfax Media are more biased than those of News Corporation sites.

But the story fails to mention that the survey methodology is based on a self-selecting poll, where the researcher had to add a note to rectify a serious flaw:

Because IP addresses are recorded with rankings, I have already noticed some interesting geographical trends. I would also suggest if you work for a publisher you should not be submitting 187 rankings in a row with the same bias (but thanks for caring so much).

Would it be hazardous to guess which news organisation might be spamming the results?

Yesterday's editorial made no mention of the poll, looking instead for the root causes of "bias". It argued that news organisations that "depend on other people's money" — the ABC, SBS and now even *The Conversation* — call themselves "independent" but actually have no accountability to their audience:

Independent journalists are answerable only to themselves ... private sector media companies are ultimately answerable only to the paying customer.

And of these private sector media, *The Guardian* is pilloried as a parasite on its “loss-making UK parent”, while the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* are accused of having failed their customers as their “survival is perilous”. So, who really is left standing out of all of this? Only the company that has dominated the newspaper landscape in this country for decades largely through the sales of its dog-whistle tabloids.

But there is more. The editorial lauds *The Australian* itself as being the only true source of independent journalism because it identifies itself as the reverse of the self-proclaimed left-wing “independent journalist”, that “it is immune from group think” and “free of political prejudice”. Its obligation to its customers “prevents a paper like *The Australian* straying too far from centre ground” where the “true mark of its independence is the quality of (its) journalism”!

The work of a great many fine journalists at the *Oz* is betrayed by this editorial, which does not even pass the most rudimentary analysis. One only has to look at *The Australian's* own poor readership figures, the fact that it has been running at a loss for many years, has by its own admission been acting editorially as an unabashed megaphone for the Right, and which has been accused of excessive groupthink by former staffers.

This begs the question: why is it bothering with such editorials at all? Does the *Oz* feel it has to defend the entire News stable for its Col Allan-led political assassination of Labor? Does it sense that Abbott is already in the Lodge and with the LNP in its pocket, it can hit out at every news source capable of critical and objective journalism?

Of course, with a debt still to be called in, News might well be in the box seat for future media reforms. More aggressively than Fairfax, News continues to entice customers online, but with its news behind paywalls, its main competitors become independent but free news services, no matter how small, such as *The Conversation*, or the ABC with its vast resources of multi-media news delivery.

As Bernard Keane and Glenn Dyer have argued, we can expect to see *The Australian* ramp up its attacks on the ABC (and doubtless *The Guardian* and *The Conversation*) as being biased “group thinkers” who are dumping news that rips readers away from News Corp websites. Fairfax is also in the sights here, as it has made online-only newspaper forays into the Brisbane and Perth markets. So, in calling in that debt from Abbott, would a reform to speed up a takeover of Fairfax be too much to ask?

On the very first night of this election campaign, many might have overlooked an interesting exchange on Q&A. In a perfect display of “our enemies talking to our friends” as John Howard once described the ABC, host Tony Jones asked former Howard chief of staff Grahame Morris: “What do you think Col Allan [who Jones also described as Murdoch’s ‘headkicker’] is out here to do?” Morris replied:

I have heard all these conspiracies that he is out here to run election campaigns ... I suspect Rupert has actually said [to Col Allan] ... my long time enemy the Fairfax organisation is in trouble and I want to make sure that the *Telegraph* and others are strong in this period in which *The Age*, the *SMH* and *Financial Review* may be in trouble ... Col Allan is the man I would send out to have a fight like that.

Morris’ prediction about the trouble Fairfax is in were confirmed when its annual results were published on August 22, with revenue and profit both down from the previous year.

What might be construed as Morris’ feeble attempt to defend News Corp’s now notorious tabloid front pages may well have pointed to the real agenda behind Allan’s sabbatical in Australia.

Only two days after Q&A on August 7, the *Oz* ran an extraordinary editorial attack on *The Age*, which Nick Leys revealed was written by Chris Mitchell. It jumps to the defence of the *Telegraph*’s “Kick This Mob Out” edition by holding *The Age* in contempt for targeting a newspaper “to argue against the re-election of a Labor government”.

Well, the *Tele* didn't really have an argument so much as a stunt, but *The Age* is castigated as having outdone Jehovah's Witness publications that are much more "fair-minded, liberal delights", because *The Age* (along with the *Financial Review*) itself ran a front page editorial against re-electing Labor, albeit with an argument running through it.

The Age is outdone by *Watchtower* — but also by the *Tele*, which "understands its readers, unlike *The Age*, which has long held the general public in contempt; its puritanical intolerance has turned it into an opponent of free speech". It is no wonder that "*The Age* is a less substantial publication than it once was. Its shrinking dimensions, shrinking readership and shrinking relevance have taken their toll".

So where could we find a News Corp-linked document that really calls in Abbott's debt to Murdoch, and a way for Murdoch to do to Fairfax economically what the editorials are doing ideologically? Well, perhaps a good place to start is the Institute for Public Affairs' wishlist for radical conservative reform. It's not easy to find on their website, as it is titled "Be Like Gough", an appeal to Abbott to be as radical a conservative as Gough Whitlam was radical on the Left.

It is not evident whether the majority owner of Fairfax, Gina Rinehart, who sat next to Murdoch at the 70th anniversary dinner to mark the co-founding of the IPA, had any input. But the 75-point list is a chocolate box for mining and media magnates alike.

Among the best picks are:

27. Eliminate media ownership restrictions.
14. Abolish the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).
15. Eliminate laws that require radio and television broadcasters to be "balanced".
43. Repeal the mining tax.
50. Break up the ABC and put out to tender each individual function.
51. Privatise SBS.

There are many other reforms even more radical than these. But Abbott will doubtless need to listen to his own party and keep his distance from the IPA if he is to remain a paid-up member. Even Big Oil companies like Shell and ExxonMobil have recently had to withdraw their support from the wealthy private think-tank, as it is only a matter of time before the IPA's aggressive denial of climate change could damage their ability to one day defend themselves for their role in global warming.