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Media and democracy

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Key terms/names

Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), audience segmentation, convergence, digital disruptions, fake news, Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, fourth estate, global technology platforms, hyper-mediation, journalist–source relations, mediation, mediatisation, mixed economy, ownership, partisanship, public interest journalism, public relations and spin, regulation and self-regulation, remediation

News media is no longer thought of as a monolithic, homogeneous institution or actor reflecting the real world from a position of objectivity and authority. News still strongly determines and anchors public attitudes but the 'hypodermic needle' explanation of communication – which holds that mass media messages are simply transmitted from a sender to a passive receiver – is no longer persuasive. Consumers' characteristics (e.g. age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, literacy and so on), as well as the contexts of media consumption, shape audience reception. For media researchers and students, the key questions endure: who is speaking, to or for whom, through which conventional formats, on which platforms and for what purposes?

In transitional times for media, answering these questions is not easy because the material conditions under which media organisations once operated have altered with the advent of disruptive technologies. Widespread consumer participation, information abundance, hybrid content and converging platforms and

formats are only part of the picture. Harvesting of consumer data makes the targeting of specific demographics possible, for commercial and political purposes. Inevitably, political culture and journalism are changing, with questions regularly arising about Australian media's democratic role.

This chapter covers the transformation of media and its impact on political culture. Mediation and the pre-digital democratising communication technologies – print, radio and television – are the initial topics discussed. The chapter then maps the Australian media sector. The mixed economy approach that Australia takes to media policy and regulation is summarised, before the chapter returns to the free press concept, concluding with an overview of parliamentary media and the potential problems inherent in journalist–source relations.

Mediation

Mediation is the core of inquiry in media scholarship. It involves analysis of the whole or of selected aspects of the material processes of production, distribution and reception of media content, and the construction of specific audiences, institutions, practices and technology uses.

Mediation theory argues that representations of the world do not unproblematically reflect its realities. Representations are treated as constructs formed by sets of practices, codes and compositional conventions from which we, as consumers, actively make meanings. For example, different levels of familiarity with the basic television news format – authoritative 'talking heads' (hard news, sport, weather), remote vision, voice-overs – veil or partially obscure the myriad forms of agency and necessary elements that are required to construct a 'seamless' flow of news.

Viewers' cues about potential meanings are derived from camera positions, live reports versus automated feeds, or editing processes that, for example, truncate a serious policy announcement to give prominence to an amusing but tangential moment. News readers' modes of address are regularly fine-tuned by internal research on viewer profiles; thus the seemingly inconsequential interactions between co-hosts help audiences attribute significance to a story.

Mediating processes combine technical, journalistic, political, ethical, editorial, commercial and platform- or audience-driven elements. Whatever the technology (print, telegraph, camera, radio, television, satellite, the internet, mobile, smart), media are never just mirroring reality. Their forms are implicated in the existence and survival of cultural, economic and political systems. Thus, questions of power and agency in mediation processes are critical when considering media.

Mediatisation

Theorists of media argue about the nature and impact of mediation processes, and about the logics, rituals and patterns evident in what is called the mediatisation of politics. The concept is complex but useful. It focuses on media and politics as separate but interrelated domains that are directly and indirectly capable of shaping major societal change. Mazzoletti and Schulz discuss the usurping of political power, seeing media as a potential threat to democracy.[1] For Strömbäck, media logics compete with the logics of politics.[2] He defines four distinct stages in the power dynamic between actors. Mediatisation is also being explored by theorists in relation to other institutions. It requires more analysis than is possible here. Asking precise questions about how – specifically – media transforms political action is always useful.[3]

Technologies: from print to digital disruptions

Communication technology plays a generative role in anchoring normative societal attitudes in any era. Print technology commanded the flow of political information through centuries of development in Western democracy, just as, from the mid-20th century onwards, radio and television helped form mass political literacies – the ways people understand the world and understand politics. Now, digital and smart technologies are replacing or colonising heritage media.

The decline of print news

Print newspapers began to lose their advertising revenue, and then their audiences, to the internet towards the end of the last century. Print news' dominance has now gone, along with the shared ritual of reading the paper at set times of the day – a practice that had helped individual citizens in a nation-state to see themselves in a 'deep horizontal comradeship' with others[4] and to form civic competencies.

Though many print mastheads vanished,[5] some survivors remain politically influential. *The Australian*, for example, has a relatively low circulation, compared to past years, but retains a capacity to influence Australian news and commentary. Roy Morgan recorded a rise in readerships for cross-platform news for the year from March 2017.[6] Sydney-based news topped the list: *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Melbourne's *The Age* and *Herald Sun* came next, followed

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1   Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999.
2   Strömbäck 2008.
3   Couldry 2008, 374.
4   Anderson 1983, 6.
5   Kirkpatrick 2012.
6   Roy Morgan 2018.

by the two national papers, *The Australian* (which, with a 4.9 per cent rise, had increased its Sydney readership) and *The Australian Financial Review*.

Digital disruptions

The internet changed everything for print and broadcast media. Media and consumers were finally free of the scheduling limitations imposed by print presses and analogue technology.

But the digital editions of print mastheads face severe competition for eyeballs from local, national and global online competitors, and especially from start-ups with no infrastructure renovation costs. Infotainment, clickbait and ads flourish, competing with front-page 'hard news' – stories on politics or international affairs. News rooms employ online content producers and use tracking tools to detect even minute changes in reader engagement, while journalists are decreasing in number. In hard economic times, investigative journalism is expensive. There are gains and losses to digital disruption. It can be generative and initiate innovation, but it can destroy legacy media and its workforces if they cannot rapidly adapt.

Across the hybrid digital platforms, media content is created, repurposed and often categorised as 'premium content' behind subscriber paywalls. Journalists adapt stories while events are unfolding or compete for a unique selling point after tracking interest in trending stories. The editorial capacity to add and withdraw digital content may also be partly responsible for the pressure on journalists to publish first and amend later. The volume and apparent liquidity of news content could potentially unsettle a reader's grasp of the chronology and significance of events.

Free digital newspapers, on the other hand, have increased the number and diversity of voices being heard. A tutelary attitude is discernible in the accumulation of hyperlinks to earlier or complementary news stories, and in reader aids such as the 'story so far' column. 'Opinion' writers no longer rely on prior knowledge or experiences shared with readers, as their arguments can be supplemented by links to supporting content. Journalists now also self-reference or draw attention to colleagues' work.

Hyper-mediation

Information flows 24/7 on free-to-air and subscription-only platforms, viewed in private on a range of fixed and mobile devices and as the background noise and vision in public spaces. The intense barrage of connected content (graphics, video, social media, hypertext) within even one story is inescapable and yet, despite media's ubiquity, consumption patterns are not shared as they were in the era of mass media. Fragmenting media organisations; innovating, inexpensive digital start-ups; the reduction of media workforces; and the segmentation of audiences

into ever narrower slices of the total audience 'share' are dramatically altering the landscape.

Individuals are adapting and easily navigating digital media even while mobile, but their choices are potentially isolating and lack significant points of contact with others. Governments and political parties, on the other hand, have found it hard to adjust their communications to hyper-mediation and to social media's empowerment of citizen-consumers. The scattergun approach of repetitive messaging across multiple platforms for comprehensive coverage easily backfires, but so too does data-driven personalised messaging.

Trust, blame, the 'Canberra bubble' and 'toxic politics'

A transforming media is blamed for the toxic nature of contemporary political culture in Canberra and for undermining trust in democracy. Dissatisfaction with democracy, as tracked by the Australian Election Study (AES) since 1997, has reached an all-time high among voters.[7] Fairfax reported AES findings, subsequently initiating a reader poll on reasons for the state of Australian democracy.[8] Blame was primarily directed at politicians, the electoral system and mainstream media.

Summarised poll comments from the AES identified four main concerns about media's contribution to the state of affairs: a focus on conflict and negativity, partisanship, clickbait and not holding politicians to account. The four concerns seem indicative of broader public judgement. The two terms 'Canberra bubble' and 'toxic politics' are used more frequently since the 2018 Turnbull leadership spill. The first works as shorthand for a self-interested governing elite perceived to be out of touch with citizens' concerns. The second term has become a recurring narrative in hard news and opinion commentary.

Partisanship

Media organisations are accused of permitting ideological bias to distort news coverage; of misrepresenting government policy and actions; of being stooges of or echo chambers for particular parties and politicians; of producing fake news; of fuelling social divisions; and of crossing the line into political activism. These assertions are not always supported by substantive evidence and may be put forward for political reasons, but their repetition contributes to a discourse of media's failure to perform its 'fourth estate' public interest role. Australian journalists have been subjected to threats, exclusions, online trolling, police searches and even violence.

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7   Cameron and McAllister 2018.
8   Harris and Charlton 2018.

Accusations of political activism on the part of sections of the media have been voiced by, among others, Nine's chief political reporter;[9] the editor-in-chief at *Guardian Australia*;[10] and former Liberal[11] and Labor prime ministers.[12] Whether objective 'public interest' journalism, once the mainstay of mainstream news, can survive without government funding is a newer concern.[13]

Consumers' power

Streams of content originating in separate production processes blend at the point of consumption as end-users control the news feeds they receive, reproduce and annotate. Consumers become curators when blogs and social media give them the agency to select and prioritise the content forwarded to newsgroups and niche publics.

An individual's power to intervene directly in political debate exists and can be co-opted. A Facebook user in France posts her frustration about the cost of living and, 1 million likes later, French protestors, including the *gilets jaunes* or 'yellow vests', tune in to her drive-time live feed. A Twitter or Facebook user may be regularly annotating and forwarding texts to like-minded groups. Influencers emerge by remediating content, and the editing process on social networks is rarely as transparent as Wikipedia's.

Fake news

Fake news, when it is recognisably sensational clickbait, is familiar to most online users. 'Alternative facts' or covert political bias in a story can be harder to identify. Well-known individuals and organisations may be regular offenders. Anonymous content simultaneously emerging across several platforms is another red flag. Other telling signs relate to missing elements. A professionally produced news story carries the journalist's byline and contact details and is date-stamped. Revisions or corrections on subsequent iterations are recorded and disclaimers explain apparent bias or any other diversion from hard news protocols of even-handedness, such as the absence of comment from the subject of a critical story.

Fake news rarely carries such markers. Image altering software can make fakes on social media very convincing, and yet, perversely, content like this is trackable through reverse image searches or through more expert algorithmic analyses. A

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9   Knox 2018. Chris Uhlmann launched a passionate attack on the Liberal–National Coalition leadership plotters, and included News Corp, Sky News, and 2GB staff, arguing that the latter were no longer observers but 'players'.
10   Christensen 2014. In an interview with *Mumbrella*, *Guardian Australia's* editor, Katherine Murphy, commented on rival News Corp's approaches to public debate.
11   Elton-Pym 2018.
12   Kevin Rudd has continued forthright attacks on News Corp (Rudd 2018).
13   See 'Media inquiries' below for further discussion.

majority of Australians recognise and make their own choices daily about fake news.[14] In the USA, fake news has had a chilling effect on public trust of news as the 45th president, with partisan hostility, regularly uses the phrase to attack media as 'the enemy of the people'.

Publics

Belonging to a public, or many publics simultaneously, is defined by values, mutual visibility and shared interests and activities. Publics can be identified by the communications around an agent, a text or an event. The Institute of Public Affairs' Twitter feed is an example of a powerful conservative public with a record of climate change denial and radical commitment to freedom of speech. The operation of a horizontal public is exemplified by the *Guardian*'s live blog of the final day of Australian parliamentary proceedings for 2018. It attracted over 5,500 reader comments on 6 December.

Disrupters

Anyone who is digitally literate can become a disrupter on social media. The online interventions by Russian providers of fake news during US elections in 2016 are regarded as a high-stakes example of state information warfare, although one US party benefitted from their efforts.

An everyday example of disruption is provided by a user's response to a supportive tweet sent by Donald Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, which contained an unintended hyperlink – a hackable point for an inventive anti-Trumper, who took charge of the link, buying a domain. When Trump's supporters clicked through, they read unexpectedly negative messages.

Trump's Twitter feed best illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of a platform routinely used by Australian politicians and journalists. Social networks give already powerful politicians and their media advisers even bigger megaphones, with access to global audiences. Politicians circumvent mainstream media by speaking directly to those they perceive to be their publics on Twitter, Facebook or Facebook Live, ignoring journalists and escaping difficult questions.

Regular tweeting can appear to close the distance between government and governed, but it can cause uncertainty and accountability is limited. When he was prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull's Twitter account recorded political events. One morning he rebutted *The Australian*'s negative coverage of his post-spill actions.[15] Forwarded and receiving attention from other media, the tweet demonstrated social media's potential for unsettling dominant media influencers.

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14   Park et al. 2018.
15   See https://bit.ly/2mMJTuZ

Social media participation by politicians, under-resourced parties, activist groups and individual citizens undercuts, and provides copy for, conventional reporting of politics and public affairs. Social media is shared space for politics in action.

The challenges posed by global technology giants

Innovation by end-users is only one way that digital technology is changing Australian political culture. Mainstream news is also challenged by competition from non-traditional technology rivals and start-ups in the news and public affairs marketplace. The social media giants do not pay for the user content that attracts the growth of their subscription bases and profits, yet some content may be profoundly damaging to the public good. More importantly, democracy itself can be weakened by the self-regulated nature and commercial interests of the global platforms.

Calling social media giants to account for the poor quality of the information distributed on their platforms has proved difficult for nation-states. Governments have not designed effective checks, of the kind that uphold the civic rights and responsibilities of a traditional free press, for Facebook and Twitter. The technology companies do not consider themselves publishers; they are not subject to professional publishing codes or state regulations governing news and public affairs journalism.

As yet, Facebook has little accountability for the circulation of, for example, hate speech and fake news on its platform. Like the media organisations discussed in the next section, the tech platforms track and reward users by employing algorithms to measure their activity, find 'lookalikes' and predict consumer behaviour.[16] UK democracy watchdog Demos, reporting on political marketing, describes the algorithmic approaches Facebook uses to make audience segmentation more precise through tracking similarities in user profiles.[17] Facebook's data granularity makes it very effective and not necessarily a good thing. A cautionary tale is provided by the harvesting and exploitation of raw data from millions of unsuspecting Facebook users by the now-discredited political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica for targeted messaging in Trump's 2016 campaign.

In any case, avoiding engagement with different perspectives is detrimental to democratic openness to rational argument. The social media giants' operations encourage new social norms, yet they escape accountability: national legislation designed to protect users, and democracy, has no jurisdiction over them.[18]

Many kinds of 'free' information offered by social media platforms and by search engines such as Google come at a transactional cost to users. Data on media

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16 Tien 2018.
17 Bartlett, Smith and Acton 2018, 10.
18 Instagram has responded to UK activists, after media reports, by promising to redesign the automated forwarding of self-harm content to already vulnerable people.

consumers is premium information. The new political reality is that information about consumers, the creation of segmented publics or online clusters, and the adoption of sophisticated tools for managing that information all shape political parties' communication choices.

Mapping the Australian media and communications sector

Australia has a mixed economy approach to media – a combination of private and public enterprise. That said, the concentration of mainstream media ownership is very high, as the regularly updated maps and other information provided free by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) illustrate.[19] Every large Australian city has at least one daily newspaper, available in print and digital versions. Even in the bush, where broadband access can be patchy, consumers have a choice of free-to-air commercial channels, public channels and paid digital television channels, and sometimes community television. Radio is still important in people's lives. Local stations, some with small footprints and tiny publics, broadcast 'news and talk' about public affairs in every state and territory.

Commercial media

At the macro level, commercial, public and government media broadly define the sector in Australia. Dominant cross-media commercial corporations with significant concentrated holdings and different business emphases compete for market share. Two of these are based in eastern Australia – Rupert Murdoch's News Corp and Fairfax Media Ltd (now owned by Nine) – though both own media enterprises or interests across the country. Along with Seven West Media, Kerry Stokes' holdings and Bruce Gordon's family-owned assets, they dominate the commercial media world.

News Corp Australia

News Corp Australia's claim that it is Australia's number one media company is based on market share and diverse market offerings, with 16 million monthly consumers for its print and digital products.

Their 'Find your Audience' webpage is an excellent illustration of the niche market segmentation tools that advertisers, including political marketers, regularly use to match delivery of content to user profiles. News Corp advises that it can connect advertisers to, for example, a group of 1,756,000 consumers labelled 'Mums, 36, with kids under 18' or to a market segment of two million 'Executive Influencers'.

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19   ACMA 2018.

The *Australian* newspaper is the jewel in the News Corp crown. In terms of circulation figures, it has a combined print and digital audience of 2,787,000 over four weeks. This almost equals Fairfax's *The Age* and is just over half of the combined monthly totals for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.[20] *The Australian*, which uses paywalls for premium content, has no daily national agenda-setting competitor. *The Australian Financial Review*, owned by Fairfax Media (see below), is the only other national newspaper.

News Corp's potential capacity to set an agenda at the metropolitan level is indicated by the dominance of *The Advertiser*, first established by Rupert Murdoch's father. It is now Adelaide's only print daily newspaper. A small subscriber-based digital independent, *InDaily*, is the sole local competitor for *AdelaideNow*, *The Advertiser*'s digital version.

News Corp routinely opposes the current proliferation of online platforms when the opportunity arises to make public submissions. It has argued that the diminishing revenue streams create redundancies and make public interest journalism unsustainable.

Fairfax Media

News Corp's major commercial competitor, Fairfax Media, merged with Nine Entertainment in late 2018, after High Court approval. At the time of the merger, Fairfax had a comprehensive set of media assets, formats and platforms. Its newspapers include one of the highest-circulation metropolitan 'broadsheets', *The Age*, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian Financial Review*. Fairfax publishes regional agricultural papers and community newspapers and has continuously innovated, developing websites and tablet and smartphone apps. In the Australian capital, digital paywalls have been instituted for *The Canberra Times*, once freely available under Fairfax.

The Fairfax business was the subject of news and comment in 2018. Reports described massive job losses and business strategy issues. The merger with a different kind of media business generated concerns about the potential loss of a 177-year-old news tradition. Print and digital newspaper mastheads remain in place, with stories now unobtrusively branded by Nine. The impact on public interest journalism is currently unknown.

Public media: Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC or 'Aunty') has a national network of metropolitan and regional stations and offers a range of digital news, entertainment, sports and specialist channels, such as those for children's

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20   EMMA 2018.

programming, youth radio and rural communities. Government funding of about $1 billion annually makes it a significant national enterprise. Commercial media's criticisms of platform proliferation and defence of private enterprise are arguably thinly veiled attacks on the ease and speed with which the national broadcaster has embraced the digital. At the ABC and elsewhere, workforce contractions and a proposed digital transformation project ensure that controversies over management, funding and direction continue.

A controversial period in 2017–18 ended with the removal of the ABC's managing director by the board of directors, and then the resignation of the board's chair. Its own journalists investigated board struggles in the *4 Corners* episode 'Bitter End'.[21]

The ABC Charter,[22] specifically legislated to safeguard the corporation's independence from government interference, sets high standards for professionalism and fairness. It outlines the broadcaster's national remit to inform, educate and entertain, and thus animate democracy. Nevertheless, accusations of bias periodically arise. Though the ABC has outspoken commercial rivals and political critics, it remains one of the most trusted institutions in Australian life, as evidenced by regular independent polls. It has a strong supporter base and a distinctive culture.

Public media: Special Broadcasting Services (SBS)

SBS is Australia's multicultural, multilingual channel. It is a 'hybrid' public broadcaster as its funding comes partly from direct grants and partly from advertising revenue. SBS television attracts 13.1 million people monthly and the downloads from radio are high.[23] The SBS streaming service, On Demand, is available more widely than that of any other broadcaster in Australia and makes hundreds of international and Australian movies and programs freely available.

SBS is distinctive in its commitment to Australia's cultural diversity and strongly promotes intercultural awareness. In 2013, it merged with the media company National Indigenous Television (NITV), that's largely Indigenous staff produce free-to-air content of local and national interest. Reportage of Indigenous perspectives has deepened and diversified, for example, on the preservation of Uluru as a sacred site and on the actions of the first ever Indigenous minister for Indigenous Australians.

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21   First broadcast on November 12, 2018.
22   *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* (Cth).
23   SBS 2018.

Free press in a democracy

Though media operates under pressure within regulatory safeguards, the dynamics of the sector might make the 'fourth estate' concept seem archaic.[24] But, in fact, it still resonates broadly in the community and powerfully with many journalists, despite the challenges of redundancies and industry change.[25]

The 'fourth estate' view of media rests on the principle of freedom of speech. The 'fourth estate' view holds that the role of a free media in a democracy is to inform electorates, interpret political events and speak truth to power. Liberal democracies place high value on a fair, strongly independent media – free from censorship or political influence or attack – that willingly acts as a guardian of the public interest.

An impartial press watches over the operations and probity of other institutions, often prompting political action. Stories in 2017–18 about customers' treatment by Australian banks pressured an initially reluctant government into holding a royal commission into the financial sector. Media pay close attention to the administrative arm of government, tracking allegations of misconduct. *The Australian*'s 'Teacher's Pet' podcast, an investigative account of the cold case of missing woman Lyn Dawson, might have encouraged new witnesses to come forward and led to the subsequent arrest of a suspect and the reopening of criminal and judicial processes. Excessive media attention can, however, damage the presumption of innocence.[26]

The important role of a free media is highlighted during election periods. Choosing a government that best serves citizens' interests depends on accurate information being circulated in a timely, transparent and accountable way. Journalists use a raft of presentation techniques to refresh people's memories about the past performances of parties and politicians: slogans, file footage, report cards, policy chronologies, infographics, interactive maps and, of course, cartoons. Political cartoonists normally operate outside the defamation framework. Comment is robust. For instance, 'Stab…ility', Matt Golding's conga line of prime ministerial backstabbers, encapsulated a decade of unedifying conduct in Australian politics.[27]

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24 The other three 'estates' describe the checks and balances appropriate for democratic governance. In secular Australian governance, the three powers are the executive, the administration, and the judiciary.
25 New Beats 2018.
26 Fedor and Cooper 2018.
27 The Museum of Australian Democracy's annual exhibition is online at https://bit.ly/2lfzV4B

Limits of press freedom

Absolute freedom of expression for the press does not exist anywhere. Even in polities considered liberal democracies, there are nuances. Defence of the principle of free speech was turned into a weapon that several politicians and journalists on the right of politics used to try to silence opposition to proposed amendments to the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth), specifically to section 18C. The proposed wording aimed to neuter the regulation of racially based hate speech. In 2011, columnist Andrew Bolt controversially, and unsuccessfully, tested 18C in the High Court.[28]

Analysing the fine details of regulatory frameworks and media operational practices is important when defining a liberal democracy. Details to be considered include: journalists' training and citizens' expectations; security restrictions in investigating a government, judiciary or administration; freedom of information processes; defamation law; the existence of legislation protecting journalists; and a government's informal practices in dealing with journalists' dissent. Compared to regimes where journalists are censored, imprisoned or assassinated, the conditions for a free press in Australia are generally good, though vigilance is always necessary.

Media inquiries: monitoring the state of public interest journalism

In May 2018, the report of the Senate Inquiry into the Future of Public Interest Journalism was published. It first assessed changes to news and public interest journalism since the Finkelstein Inquiry five years earlier, before turning to the questions of government funding and a new statutory body with oversight of media – the latter suggestion largely unpopular with media organisations.

The Senate report focused on changes to news caused by the move to a predominantly digital environment. Since Finkelstein, the Senate report noted, the pace of change had exponentially accelerated and, despite the proliferation of new players, the sector's capacity to fund public interest journalism was being negatively impacted. Challenges included the collapse of advertising revenues and business models, and job losses. Despite recognising media's challenges, government funding was not recommended. Government thus reaffirmed its reluctance to intervene directly in the mixed media economy.

State regulators and self-regulation bodies

Government sets the regulatory framework for the media and communications sector, and various statutory and self-regulation bodies monitor compliance.

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28   An ABC report on the High Court decision summarises the case: https://ab.co/31Vv8FT

Government regulation

The ACMA is the government regulator for broadcasting, the internet, radiocommunications and telecommunications. It recognises the 'diversity and complexity' of the Australian media and communications landscape and describes its remit as protecting community interests and promoting industry growth.[29]

In addition to handling complaints and monitoring industry compliance, ACMA publishes resources about media. It provides infographics and Word documents showing the ownership of the multiple corporations and organisations operating in Australia, tracing cross-platform networks of corporate holdings. Its work informs federal legislation to prevent the formation of media monopolies.

A full list of legislation, other regulatory bodies like the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission (ACCC) and the Ombudsman, bodies such as the Press Council of Australia and advocacy groups like the Advertising Standards Bureau can be found in the guide to media and resources on the parliament of Australia's website.[30]

Self-regulation bodies

The Press Council of Australia, set up in 1976 and funded by volunteer member organisations, is among the various regulatory bodies dedicated to ensuring that standards of good practice are upheld, complaints are adjudicated and informed advice is available on media policy areas. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), established in 1992, introduces its detailed code of journalistic ethics by emphasising the rights of the public and journalists' responsibilities.[31] In addition to a strong statement of 'fourth estate' purpose, the MEAA website provides professional codes and resources for media workers and the general public. The MEAA runs campaigns to protect press freedom, critically engaging with policy that threatens journalists' pursuit of the truth.

In one example, members organised a petition against sections of the *National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017* (Cth), proposed by the Liberal–National (Coalition) government led by Malcolm Turnbull. If passed, the legislation would have criminalised the unofficial receipt and handling of government information and undermined journalists' time-honoured protection of their sources, and even safeguards for whistleblowers. Journalists were quick to call the proposal an attack on press freedom. In 2019, chief executives from the ABC, Nine and News Corp united in calling for better protections for journalists following federal police raids on the Canberra home of a NewsCorp journalist and ABC offices in June.

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29   ACMA 2018.
30   Jolly 2017.
31   MEAA 2018.

Parliament House: government and media

Hansard is not the only public record of proceedings in the Australian parliament. Media is ever-present. But there are different kinds and motivating forces. In the chambers and committee rooms, parliamentary audio-visual recordings are published every day without additional interpretation or analysis. Multiple media organisations operate out of Parliament House; the press watches proceedings from closed galleries or live feed in media offices. Government ministries and agencies run policy information campaigns and regularly engage citizens through mainstream and social media. Party media offices attempt to take control of the news agenda through press releases, doorstops, supplying talking points and so on.

All this activity and access upholds transparency and accountability. However, media's focus and agency are increasingly seen to be tainting politics with the apparent need to spin and the negative aspects of public relations. The following section discusses potentially problematic areas.

Controlling the message

Australia's top political office, Prime Minister and Cabinet, is served by a large staff dedicated to publishing the government's good news, burying its bad news, blocking opposition stories that are seen as 'cutting through' with the electorate and other forms of media management. At party headquarters, staff monitor the clippings supplied by news aggregators, with circulation figures attached. Talking points are supplied for spokespeople. Staying rigidly 'on message' can be counter-productive as politicians work from scripts with repeated phrases. Some politicians leave speech writing, image management and social media outreach to their media-savvy staff. The rise and fall of governments are shaped through a public relations-style handing of government information and citizen engagement.

Parliamentary recordings

Details of the business of government are available for forensic scrutiny through official parliamentary media recordings. Both chambers and committee rooms are televised, and date-stamped proceedings are viewable online on the Australian Parliament House website. Strict rules govern what may and may not be recorded in the private areas of Parliament House. Information on the parliament of Australia website is available for fair re-use.

The televising of parliament has many critics among older public servants and political observers. Although its contribution to the transparency of government is acknowledged, it is also thought to exacerbate some of the worst aspects of politics – for example, the combative point scoring and insults thrown in question time and the gradual development of opportunities for representatives to play to the cameras, rather than pursue the details of policy effects.

Journalists and sources

The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery

The parliament of Australia makes swathes of information available to watchdogs (journalists and the general public) and provides offices and services to media organisations. Journalists are visible everywhere in parliament. Their conduct is governed by rules and conventions, with the sergeant-at-arms, the usher of the black rod and officers from Parliamentary Services overseeing compliance and ensuring media balance.[32] Both parliamentary chambers have an enclosed gallery, where Australian and international journalists photograph, live tweet and write copy about the day's events. The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery offices are co-located on the second level of Parliament House, on the Senate side. Accredited journalists number over 250 and, as the official website notes, since the first days of Federation journalists have shared their resources with colleagues. Despite the news imperative to break stories first, televised news can often include 'vision' – either footage or stills – gifted to the station by another journalist.[33] The phrase 'Canberra bubble', mentioned earlier, is used when referring to the shared assumptions, conventions and shorthand said to be shaping political news produced by and for an elite separated from the concerns of the public. Rather than acting independently of politics, in a public interest role, media has been compromised by its focus on the theatre of emotions, rather than the substance of policy discussions, or so the argument goes.

Co-location

The working lives of political journalists, elected representatives and media officers are intertwined and mutually dependent. Journalists are hired as media officers by politicians or stand for election, and politicians are employed by media organisations. The National Press Club is a short walk from parliament.

Politicians seek media attention to make themselves and their parliamentary record known to constituents and other party members, and they use media outlets to promulgate policy to as wide an audience as possible. From the moment they nominate for public office, politicians can expect to have every part of their lives examined. During election periods, they may be subject to a personalised 'dirty tricks' campaign, as Kerryn Phelps and Dave Sharma were, simultaneously, during the key loss of the Liberal seat of Wentworth in the 2018 by-election. Managing media coverage of pertinent questions of eligibility and moral fitness to serve became a particular problem for some MPs and Senators embroiled in the controversy over dual citizenship in the 2016–19 parliament.

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32   Parliament of Australia 2008.
33   Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery n.d.

Journalists vigilantly stay abreast of dynamic events in order to make sense of them. Ethical issues arise when career success could depend on being the first to publish stories that are important to readers. Reporters risk being manipulated when acting on leaks from staffers or politicians with agendas. Relations between journalists and politicians often become heated, and payback is known to occur. Controversial decisions made by journalists in 2018 include revealing details of Barnaby Joyce's private life and releasing information that confidential government documents had been found in a second-hand store in Canberra, while the news organisation concerned (the ABC) perused the documents, presumably to assess their news value.

Co-location supports anonymous leaks. Politically motivated leaks, while sometimes revealing inappropriate activity, have an overall tendency to contribute to distrust in political processes. They lead to instability, can be vexatious and in some cases may even be criminal; however, even under legal pressure, journalists remain reluctant to identify their sources.

Conclusions

Media content creates narrative meanings that are never 'just what happened'. Some content is manipulated, other stories fall into conventional narrative patterns; attempts to change the news agenda may go badly wrong, but sometimes, in the hands of a media-savvy and quietly angry politician, the opportunities presented are too good to miss.

When former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop wore red shoes at a press conference outside parliament, she generated media columns during the penultimate sitting week of parliament in 2018, and, periodically, the red shoes continue to do so. The following context suggests the significance of the Museum of Australian Democracy exhibit shown in Figure 1.

After Scott Morrison won the leadership ballot, the new Coalition team struggled to manage the public's hostile reactions. Reporters continually speculated on the details of Turnbull's removal and persistently questioned why Bishop, the most popular Liberal politician and a moderate, had not been supported by her colleagues. On the obvious slight, Bishop was silent, until Julia Banks resigned from the Liberal Party, fuelling a belief that both women had suffered from sexism. Banks and Bishop went public with their assessment of the politics – in their different ways – on the same day.

The chain of events demonstrates that attempting to manage media depends on skill, judgement and an element of luck. The day began with two senior ministers starting a 'presser', hoping to switch off negative media coverage of the new government with good news about the economy. During the press conference, they (and those in attendance) were alerted by mobile phone that Julia Banks was beginning a resignation speech in the House of Representatives, citing a sexist party

Figure 1 Julie Bishop's red shoes displayed at the Museum of Australian Democracy. Source: author.

room and culture as major reasons for her departure. Press crews captured the surprise and immediate dispersal that this information occasioned – with some participants televised running back to the House. News images followed of women from the backbenches and the crossbench warmly empathising with Banks and supporting her, confirming the view long held by many that the Liberal Party had a gender problem, even with its successful, experienced female members.

Bishop's flamboyant shoes at her own 'presser' later that day might be read as a light-hearted prop chosen by a senior female politician with an interest in fashion that was familiar to the public. Nothing is so simple. In a disastrous week for the Coalition, the shoes worked as a complicated sign with fluid (not infinite) meanings: Bishop's implicit support for Banks' struggles; her silent comment on being marginalised by a sexist Liberal party room; or the West Australian seizing a pertinent moment to remind her constituency that she remained a potential prime ministerial candidate, despite receiving only 11 votes during the Turnbull spill. Bishop's later tweet about the 'surprising' attention the shoes attracted carried a red heels emoji. Bishop is an enthusiastic emoji user with over a quarter of a million followers on Twitter, and an excellent manager of her personal 'brand'.

Turnbull's tweet direct to *The Australian* was also a comment on the spill and on conservative wrath at failing to install a preferred leader. Turnbull used the right

of reply on a social media platform against a story attacking his reputation and legacy. Like Bishop, he is not an ordinary citizen. Prior media and public interest in the senders' political status was required to give both tweets the significance they acquired.

This chapter has touched on mediation processes, old and new players, the challenges of transformation and public concerns. It is encouraging that, despite the loss of trust in contemporary politics, Australians' interest in political events remains strong. Nielsen digital ratings show that time spent reading online news spiked to 44 per cent more than the daily average on the day of Turnbull's removal, 24 August 2018, with Australians accessing news across all platforms and devices.[34] However, trust in media fluctuates. During the Turnbull spill, Chris Uhlmann's accusation that some right-wing journalists crossed the line to become 'players in the game' in the ousting of a prime minister is a compelling and timely warning against such abuses of the privileges enjoyed by journalists. A perceived focus on click-worthy political content, rather than policy discussion, is also a legitimate criticism of media.

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