

Information Subsidies, Journalism Routines and the Australian Media: Market Liberalization versus Marketplace of Ideas*

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ABSTRACT *Information technology is invariably equated with liberalization and greater citizen access to knowledge. However, some economies of scale made possible by technology, together with contemporary information-gathering and distribution processes, may diminish rather than enhance democratic practices. Analyses of the contributions of journalists and sources to television news reveal some consequences of technological innovation and organizational behaviour in the Australian media that justify retention of existing cross-media ownership laws restricting media barons to being princes of print or queens of screen.*

Keywords: Australian media policy, economies of scale, communications research, information society, journalism, marketplace of ideas, news agendas, newsgathering, public relations, technology, television news.

Introduction

The Australian government has been criticized for failing to reform national media policy that prevents media proprietors from being both princes of print and queens of screen and limits the level of foreign ownership of the media.¹ Unsurprisingly, much criticism stems from media proprietors themselves, each of whom not only wants a larger slice of the pie but the whole pie. As global media magnate Rupert Murdoch said: 'We don't like licences ... we don't even like dealing with governments'.² Whilst the present Howard (Liberal-National) government has been accused of dumping media policy in the too-hard basket, the government's decision to postpone its review of cross-media ownership laws implemented by the former Keating (Labor) government is arguably prudent, given the centrality of the media to the political communication process.

The mass media fulfil a number of roles in Western liberal democracies providing their audiences with information, entertainment and a forum for political debate. However, there is a questionmark hanging over the media's willingness and capacity to function as a forum for a diversity of political viewpoints that is at the heart of the media policy review in Australia.³ The dilemma for the government is that diversity of ownership of media may not be synonymous with a diversity of viewpoints in the media. But nevertheless, perceptions that a greater number of media proprietors cannot be

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equated with greater diversity of views in the media does not fully explain the government's apparent reluctance to jettison policy that has arguably failed to realize its objective of providing information that enhances the capacity of individuals to make informed political decisions. As the government concedes, some media services, because of their reach, are arguably more influential than others and therefore the diversity of opinion in news and current affairs programs warrants careful consideration. Moreover, the government allows that there have been 'significant changes' in the communications environment since the *Broadcasting Services Act (1992)* was implemented and that deregulation of the television industry may have diminished rather than enhanced the diversity of viewpoints in the marketplace of ideas.⁴

Advocates for greater liberalization of media policy argue that there is no need for government regulation of news content or limitations upon foreign ownership of the media, given that the Australian media can hardly boast of a long tradition of being watchdogs of democracy.⁵ Moreover, proponents for further deregulation argue that foreign owners are unlikely to be more interventionist in the political process than domestic proprietors.⁶ These arguments apply considerable pressure to the federal government to relax cross-media ownership laws that prevent media barons being major shareholders in television stations and newspapers in the same Australian city and peg foreign ownership of Australian media at 15%. Indeed, foreign media barons including erstwhile Aussie Rupert Murdoch have found governments of different political stripes in Australia far less accommodating than governments in other countries.⁷ And whilst the Howard government has now appointed Professor David Flint, former chairman of the Australian Press Council, as chair of the Australian Broadcasting Authority, the government's attitude towards media barons appears far less conciliatory than that of Professor Flint.⁸ At the centre of the struggle for ownership and control of the Australian media is niggling doubt that technology can make fools of us all, and that competition law may not guarantee the survival of the marketplace of ideas if Australian newspapers and television networks wind up in the hands of just one or two global media corporations preoccupied with profiteering in a borderless communication environment rather than their social responsibilities.

Certainly there is some validity in the claim that the cross-media ownership laws constitute a threat to freedom of the media in Australia, however, the sheer reach of television and its capacity to influence individual perceptions of the significance of events and issues is central to understanding the philosophy underpinning Australian media policy. From the outset, television broadcasters in Australia were deemed to have a public responsibility to present their audiences with reliable information. Up until 1993, broadcast news program standards imposed a formal obligation upon broadcast licensees to provide audiences with 'accurate, fair and impartial' news.⁹ Following deregulation of the television industry in 1993, broadcasters became responsible for complying with new codes of practice governing the production and presentation of news. The new codes developed by the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations and the public broadcasting network, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), are virtually identical to earlier news program standards, however, violations are no longer subject to refusal to renew a licence.¹⁰

To date, the Australian Broadcasting Authority has found no overwhelming evidence to support perceptions that broadcast news programs lack editorial independence or that television news broadcasts lack fairness or impartiality.¹¹ Despite the broadcasting authority's identification of eight breaches of the new commercial television editorial codes in 1994 (compared to two in 1993), the ABA was reluctant to take action other than to remind broadcasters, especially news producers, of their social responsibilities.¹²

The findings of the ABA investigations into news content contrast sharply with evidence presented by strident critic of Australian journalism in both newspapers and television Stuart Littlemore whose remorseless critiques of contemporary journalism on his weekly program *Media Watch* (ABC) ruffle the feathers of the media. More recently, the doyen of Australian public affairs television Jana Wendt joined the crescendo of criticism of Australian media practices in a televised delivery of the Andrew Olle Media Lecture.¹³ In her address, Wendt charged media proprietors and producers of television news and current affairs programs with placing profits ahead of their obligations to their audiences, accusing media executives of operating with such distorted priorities that the citizenry is no longer able to access a diversity of viewpoints. In summary, there are widespread perceptions in the community and amongst media practitioners themselves that the Australian media and, by extension journalism practices, fall well short of providing the citizenry with anything remotely resembling a marketplace of ideas. To what extent is a perceived lack of news and views in the news media attributable to a concentration of ownership in the media or falling standards of journalism or are there other factors to which a perceived lack of diversity of political news and views in the media may be traced?

Prior to the mid-1980s, Australia's three free-to-air commercial television networks were de-facto networks of independently owned stations. The networks became formal networks by dint of ownership, shrinking the number of licencees in the Australian television industry to a small number of big media players notably Rupert Murdoch (Seven Network), Kerry Packer (Nine Network) and Canadian global communications giant CanWest (Ten Network).¹⁴ Advocates of media liberalization argue that television news proprietors have demonstrated a commitment to localism, as evidenced by retention of newsrooms in each capital city and the high level of parochial news content in news bulletins.¹⁵ It has even been argued that News Corporation's monopoly over the newspaper industry in Australia would be offset by permitting the Fairfax newspaper group to be sold to foreign owners, a move that would not further weaken the independence of the media overall, given the independence of the public broadcasting network, the ABC. Advocates for liberalizing cross-media ownership laws scoff at the idea that common ownership of print and broadcast media would lead to unacceptably high levels of uniformity of content, citing differences in content in the *Australian* and the Brisbane-based *Courier-Mail*, both News Corp publications.¹⁶

The preceding arguments nevertheless question the 'independence' of the Australian media, the degree of diversity of political news coverage in rival news media, and the adequacy of self-regulation of broadcast news editorial codes requiring broadcasters to provide their audiences with impartial news. Central to these arguments are the concepts of diversity and media independence. Whilst these concepts are multi-dimensional concepts, in this paper I am primarily concerned about the editorial independence of the media and diversity in the context of the degree of diversity in political content in the major daily news media. The role of the media as a fourth estate, functioning independently of government or any political entity, is fundamental to democratic practices. According to liberal democratic philosophy, the media function as one of the checks and balances upon political power.¹⁷ However, in recent years, there has also been criticism of the collective power of the media in overstepping their bounds, abusing their political power by acting as a political pressure group, functioning as active participants in, rather than observers of, the political process in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.¹⁸ Consequently, the government's reluctance to alter the status quo is understood. This paper identifies three factors contributing to the Australian media's alleged failure to function as a marketplace of ideas arising from the findings of

research into the origins of prime-time political news and newsgathering in 1991 and during the 1993 federal election. My findings highlight roles played by technological innovation, public relations and journalism routines in contemporary political communication.

Media Policy & Public Policy: Consensus, Concentration, Convergence, Competition and Conflict

Acknowledgment of public dependency upon the media, especially television news, for news and information, underpinned broadcasting policy in Australia from the outset, a position reaffirmed in subsequent reviews of broadcasting policy in the 1970s and 1990s.¹⁹ Indeed, there was bi-partisan agreement concerning the role of broadcasting as a central plank in a national information policy, acknowledging the importance of an independent media and public access to information as crucial to democratic practices. Beyond that point, however, there have been clashes over media policy, ranging from criticism of regulatory mechanisms to allegations of political interference that raise questions about the independence of the news media and the regulatory body, the former Broadcasting Tribunal, now the Australian Broadcasting Authority.²⁰

The news media are critical to the political communication process. To date, more than 100 separate studies have demonstrated that the public take their cues as to the pressing issues of the day from the news media.²¹ The role of the media in policymaking is less clear, however, a 1986 British study found that pressure groups seeking to influence government policy actually monitored events in Parliament by monitoring political coverage in the news media.²² Whilst the policymaking process appears far less democratic than text book models of rational decision making imply, perceptions that greater concentration of media ownership run counter to democratic practices warrants investigation.²³ Although the executive government may be the engine room of national policymaking in Australia, the Prime Minister and senior Ministers should not dominate debate of political issues in the news media to the extent they do in Parliament. Nor should the major political parties dominate coverage during an election campaign to the extent that other voices are not heard. In a pluralist society, the media would ideally canvass opinions from political sources outside the Parliamentary framework between elections. This would especially apply to television news which must comply with broadcast news program standards or editorial codes demanding accuracy, fairness and impartiality. Yet critics including the former chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Mark Armstrong have argued that the political agenda in the media is pre-set by a mixture of media releases and set-piece interviews, and that journalists rarely seek out sources located outside the theatre of Parliament and the two major political parties, arguably reflecting the reality that policy is formed within a small group of ministers, ministerial staff and senior government officials.²⁴ Allegations that the Australian media are dominated by any particular group of political players are grave, challenging the liberal democratic concept of a free and independent media.

We lack an all-encompassing analysis of contemporary policymaking in Australia, partly because researchers are unable to observe the activities of various participants in the political communication process. As the government noted, there have been many changes in Australia in the past two decades that have arguably made a significant impact upon political communication and policymaking. Three key changes are technological innovation, a dramatic increase in the number of political communication professionals working inside and outside government, and changes in journalism routines in response to technological innovation. Arguably, the emergence of a sophisticated

public relations industry and concentration of media ownership are very significant. This paper attempts to shine some light into contemporary information-gathering and information-distribution practices in Australia that bear upon the capacity of the citizenry to participate in the policymaking process.

Diversity of Content: A National News Agenda or Many News Agendas?

The major daily news media in Australia are not national institutions as is the case in the US and the UK. Unlike in the US and the UK, with the exception of the Special Broadcasting Services network, prime-time television news that reaches the largest audiences in Australia is not networked nationwide from a central point. As mentioned previously, whilst the four free-to-air television networks are networks in terms of ownership, each network maintains a newsroom in every capital city that functions autonomously. Moreover, there are only two daily newspapers with a national readership in Australia, neither of which can boast of a significant public following. And as far as I am aware, neither the *Australian* nor the *Financial Review* are agenda-setters for other media such as newspapers like the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* in the US. Consequently, it is somewhat fanciful to talk of a 'national news agenda' in Australia.

Nevertheless, the introduction of satellite technology has enabled the television industry to network programs and other materials including news, thereby arguably enhancing the likelihood of a phenomenon such as a national (political) news agenda.²⁵ Electronic newsgathering technology that permits videotaped images to be sent from camerapersons in the field to a central processing location instantly also contribute to the likelihood of a national news agenda. And computers, faxes and fibre-optics make it possible for information to be despatched and retrieved worldwide instantly, not only promoting the likelihood of phenomena such as national and international news agendas but also generating economies of scale for news organisations. Clearly, technological innovation has created the conditions whereby governments can communicate with vast audiences or electorates on a scale and speed undreamed of two decades ago.

Indeed, back in 1975, the first major content analysis of television news broadcast by rival stations in four state capital cities in Australia produced no evidence of a prime-time news agenda in any Australian city.²⁶ Likewise, comparative analyses of campaign news broadcast by rival stations in four state capital cities during the 1980 federal election campaign produced no evidence of a phenomenon such as a metropolitan news agenda in any of the cities in the study, let alone a prime-time national news agenda, prompting researcher Murray Goot to conclude that technology had not yet converted Australia into an electronic Athens.²⁷ In stark contrast, the findings of my analyses of one week's prime-time news broadcast by four rival networks in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne in November 1991 and again during the fourth week of the five-week long 1993 federal election campaign reveal the presence of what could be described as an east-coast prime-time news agenda, characterised by common coverage of events or issues.

Methodology

As part of a major study of news and sources of news,²⁸ I videotaped the prime-time (main evening) news bulletins broadcast by stations affiliated with the four free-to-air television networks in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne during the second week of November 1991, a week coinciding with sittings of state and federal Parliaments, and again during the second last week of the 1993 election campaign. After excluding foreign news stories produced overseas and sports stories, the sample contained 698 stories

produced in Australia and broadcast by four network affiliates in the three cities in 1991 and 772 stories broadcast by the same stations in 1993. I also gathered metropolitan daily newspapers in the three cities for the same two weeks, together with morning editions of the nationally distributed newspaper, the *Australian*.

Key objectives of my study were to identify the production origins of television news stories and to ascertain how journalists gathered information from every actor cited or appearing in the news. This was achieved by gathering newsroom records such as media releases, nightly bulletin rundowns from each of the 12 stations in the study, and interviewing journalists who assembled the stories and their chiefs of staff. Using this procedure, it was possible to identify how every story came to be in the news and to identify sources who generated news coverage of particular issues. Timing of the study was important, I deliberately selected weeks when political sources would seek to maximise news coverage of particular issues. Because studies overseas revealed that television and newspaper news agendas tend to converge towards the end of election campaigns, I anticipated a degree of convergence of Australian campaign news agendas also.

Findings

Bulletin rundowns (the running order of stories in a bulletin) are a mine of coded information immensely helpful to researchers. Because some television news coverage is presented in the form of wraps whereby several stories gathered from different locations are edited together to make a seamless entity, rundowns are helpful because they invariably identify the origins of videotaped footage gathered from network affiliates interstate or network news bureaux at Parliament House, Canberra. Analysis of the production origins of all Australian-produced news stories in prime-time bulletins broadcast by each of the 12 stations in the study revealed strikingly similar patterns of newsgathering under different conditions in the political communication environment and a high level of local news content in each city. Each of the stations in the study gathered approximately 70 percent of all stories broadcast in their prime-time bulletins in 1991 and 1993 locally but relied heavily upon network affiliates for news from interstate and upon network news bureaux in Canberra for coverage of federal politics.

Tables 1 and 2 reveal a very high level of uniformity of content in prime-time news broadcast by the four networks in each city whereby journalists covered the same events or issues. However, analysis also revealed a much higher degree of differentiation in general news than political news. Analyses of explicitly political stories in the news revealed coverage in common of a small number of issues of national significance, effectively making up what I describe as east-coast prime-time issue agendas in 1991 and 1993.²⁹

How Journalists Gathered Political News

Analyses of the methods used by television news organisations to gather political news in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne in 1991 and 1993 revealed strikingly similar patterns. The data in Table 3 show that in 1991, when federal and state Parliaments were sitting, between 20 and 30% of all political news stories derived from journalists observing Parliamentary activities.³⁰ However, journalists gathered as much information again from press releases and attending press conferences and other events staged by sources for the purpose of maximising media coverage. By issuing press releases, convening press conferences or *door stops* (informal press conferences) to which they invite all media,

Table 1. Uniformity of content in prime-time news bulletins in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne (11–15 November 1991)

	All news stories	All news stories	All news stories	Political stories only	Metro political agenda	East coast agenda
Brisbane						
CH 10	79	22	34	15 All stn	Top 7	
CH 9	45	Stories	Stories on	23 stories	issues	
CH 7	47	in	3 out of 4	3 out of 4	State &	
CH 2	51	common	stations	stations	Federal	
Sydney						
CH 10	82	29	34	18 All/	Top 7	3 Federal
CH 9	45	Stories	Stories on	20 stories	issues	issues
CH 7	52	in	3 out of 4	3 out of 4	State &	all
CH 2	49	common	stations	stations	Federal	stations
Melbourne						
CH 10	90	23	38	11 All/	Top 7	
CH 9	54	Stories	Stories on	15 stories	issues	
CH 7	47	in	3 out of 4	3 out of 4	State &	
CH 2	57	common	stations	stations	Federal	

N = 222 stories Brisbane (122 political); 228 stories Sydney (122 political); 248 stories Melbourne (118 political).

Table 2. Uniformity of content in prime-time news bulletins in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne (1–5 March 1993)

	All news stories	All news stories	All news stories	Political stories only	Metro political agenda	East coast agenda
Brisbane						
CH 10	85	19	33	16 On all/	Top 7	
CH 9	47	Stories	Stories on	18 stories	issues	
CH 7	55	in	3 out of 4	3 out of 4	State &	
CH 2	54	common	stations	stations	Federal	
Sydney						
CH 10	85	26	38	15 On all/	Top 7	4
CH 9	57	Stories	Stories on	17 stories	issues	Campaign
CH 7	67	in	3 out of 4	3 out of 4	State &	issues
CH 2	50	common	stations	stations	Federal	all stns
Melbourne						
CH 10	90	24	40	18 On all/	Top 7	
CH 9	62	Stories	Stories on	20 stories	issues	
CH 7	66	in	3 out of 4	3 out of 4	State &	
CH 2	54	common	stations	stations	Federal	

N = 241 stories Brisbane (110 political); 259 stories Sydney (134 political); 272 stories Melbourne (137 political).

Table 3. Primary channels of news gathering in political stories in prime-time news in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne (11–15 November 1991)

Channel	Brisbane	Sydney	Melbourne
Official proceedings	28.5	20.0	22.0
Press releases	21.5	23.0	22.0
Video news releases	–	–	–
Press conferences	18.0	17.5	9.0
Other staged events	16.0	17.5	18.0
Interviews initiated by sources	3.0	5.0	3.5
Non-government proceedings	6.0	3.0	3.5
Leaks	–	8.0	2.5
Doorstops	–	–	2.5
News reports	3.0	6.0	10.0
Opinion polls	–	–	–
Interviews initiated by journo	4.0	–	7.0
Spontaneous events	–	–	–
TV phone polls	–	–	–

Statistics expressed as percentages of each city's primary channels for all political stories on a combined-stations basis.

N = 122 primary channels in Brisbane; 122 in Sydney; 118 in Melbourne.

sources seek to project issues of their own choosing onto the news agenda. From Table 3, it can be seen that sources were proactive in building prime-time news agendas in each of the three cities in my study in November 1991.

The data in Table 4 reveal how journalists gathered campaign news during the week prior to the 1993 federal election campaign. In contrast to the pattern of newsgathering in 1991, very little news derived from coverage of official proceedings

Table 4. Primary channels of news gathering in prime-time campaign news stories in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne (1–5 March 1993)

Channel	Brisbane	Sydney	Melbourne
Official proceedings	3.0	–	–
Press releases	11.5	13.0	9.0
Video news releases	–	–	–
Press conferences	14.5	7.0	7.0
Other staged events	59.0	58.0	64.5
Interviews initiated by sources	3.0	–	4.5
Leaks	–	–	–
Doorstops	–	–	–
News reports	1.5	1.0	1.0
Opinion polls	1.5	1.0	–
Interviews initiated by journo	3.0	4.5	5.0
Reporter analysis	1.5	11.0	8.0
Spontaneous events	–	3.0	–
TV phone polls	1.5	1.5	1.0

Statistics expressed as percentages of each city's primary channels for all campaign news stories on a combined-stations basis.

N = 69 stories in Brisbane; 72 in Sydney; 67 in Melbourne.

because Parliaments had risen and the election campaign was in full swing. What differentiated the patterns of television newsgathering in the weeks studied in 1991 and 1993 was a higher level of staged events (other than press conferences) covered by journalists in 1993, a channel of newsgathering accounting for the emergence of approximately 60% of stories in prime-time campaign news. Another numerically small but politically significant difference was the slightly higher level of stories initiated by journalists during the election campaign than was the case when Parliaments were sitting in 1991. This was attributable to journalists generating special reports on campaign issues. However, in the main, television stations relied heavily upon Canberra-based journalists following the leaders of the major political parties around the nation for campaign coverage. In some cases, stations relied totally upon coverage generated for distribution throughout their network, producing little or no supplementary campaign coverage. Consequently, in contrast to prior studies of news in 1975 and during the 1980 federal election, my findings point to probability of the presence of a national prime-time news agenda in Australia in 1991 and during the 1993 federal election campaign.

Who Sets the Prime-Time News Agenda—the Turkeys or the Chooks?

In a liberal democracy, the *news agenda*, defined as a list of issues that appeared in most, if not all, the daily news media in a given region, ranked in order of their overall prominence in the media, is the outcome of the interaction of journalists and their sources. I had anticipated that government officials, especially executive high profile government officials such as Ministers, would employ communication tactics devised by their media advisers to build prime-time political news agendas when Parliaments were sitting. This proved to be the case. The data in Table 5 reveal that federal government politicians made up the largest single category of sources who achieved news coverage during the week in 1991, principally using press releases and press conferences to generate coverage of selected issues. State government politicians made up the second highest category of sources to successfully generate news coverage in each of the three cities in the study, using press conferences rather than press releases to initiate coverage of issues of their own choosing. Most staged events other than press conferences in 1991 that successfully generated political coverage on television, for example protest marches, were initiated by political actors outside government. Clearly, federal and state government expenditure upon public relations returns a handsome dividend in terms of exposure on television news.

The pattern of television newsgathering during the fourth week of the 1993 federal election campaign was somewhat different to that in 1991, given that more campaign news derived from journalists attending staged events (other than press conferences) than from press releases. Most of these staged events, accounting for approximately 60% of all campaign news stories in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, were generated by campaign managers employed by the two major political parties, being events on the itineraries of the party leaders as they criss-crossed the nation touring marginal electorates. Consequently, with the exception of special reports generated by journalists, prime-time campaign news during the fourth week of the 1993 federal election campaign week was dominated by the leaders of major parties. Between them, the leaders of the major political parties accounted for between 70 and 90% of all political actors in campaign news. However, these findings should not be construed so as to assume that the major political parties therefore ‘set’ prime-time campaign news agendas. The way journalists shape news agendas is far more complex than most media researchers have acknowledged in the past.

Table 5. Categories of initiators using press releases, press conferences and staged events to initiate prime-time political news stories in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne (11–15 November 1991)

Category of initiator	Press releases %	Press conferences %	Staged events %
Brisbane			
Federal Executive Govt	42.0	18.0	16.0
Federal Opposition	—	—	—
Qld Executive Government	23.0	32.0	26.0
Qld Opposition	—	23.0	—
Local Government	4.0	—	—
Non-government	31.0	27.0	58.0
Sydney			
Federal Executive Govt	32.0	14.0	10.0
Federal Opposition	—	—	—
NSW Executive Govt	24.0	66.0	10.0
NSW Opposition	10.0	10.0	—
Local Government	10.0	—	—
Non-Government	24.0	10.0	80.0
Melbourne			
Federal Executive Govt	50.0	10.0	5.0
Federal Opposition	—	—	—
Vic Executive Government	30.0	55.0	5.0
Vic Opposition	—	—	—
Local Government	4.0	—	—
Non-government	16.0	35.0	90.0

Statistics expressed as percentages of each category of initiators in each city's total number of primary newsgathering channels on a combined-stations basis.

N= Stories initiated by Press Releases: Brisbane 29; Sydney 29; Melbourne 26.

Stories initiated by Press Conferences: Brisbane 22; Sydney 21; Melbourne 11.

Stories initiated by Other Staged Events: Brisbane 19; Sydney 21; Melbourne 21.

The relationship between politicians and the press swings precariously between dependency and interdependency, depending upon conditions in the political communication environment. Former Queensland Premier Sir John Bjelke-Peterson used a quaint barnyard metaphor—'feeding the chooks'—to describe his relationship with the Press Gallery whereas former Prime Minister Paul Keating preferred a medical metaphor—'the drip'—to describe his government's provision of information to the Canberra Press gallery.³¹ However, such crude assessments of a complex power relationship belie the power journalists have to shape news agendas in different ways, not least of which is the power to include or exclude information from stories and to ultimately determine which issues will be given more prominence in the news. Such discretion, together with their capacity to extend coverage of particular issues, gives journalists enormous power to influence individual perceptions of the significance of particular issues.

There is also a high degree of contact between journalists employed by rival news organisations that must be factored into the equation, generating an unobservable element of inter-media agenda-setting. This was generally higher in 1993 than in 1991, with evidence of television reporters borrowing more stories from radio and newspapers during the campaign than was the case between elections in 1991. Whilst most campaign news generated by the major political parties on the campaign trail was designed to

Table 6. Prime time metropolitan political issue agendas (11–15 November 1991 incl.)

Brisbane		Sydney		Melbourne	
Issue	Prom score	Issue	Prom score	Issue	Prom score
Foreign Policy—Indonesia	66	Unemployment	65	Foreign Policy—Indonesia	72
Liberal Party Agenda (Qld)	43	Foreign Policy—Indonesia	60	Unemployment	46
Federal-State Tax Policy	39	Federal-State Taxation Policy	38	Federal-State Tax Policy	41
Unemployment	28	Tobacco Advertising (NSW)	24	Local Govt Corruption (Vic)	16
Prostitution Policy (Qld)	24	Compensation Policy (NSW)	17	Industrial Relations (Vic)	14
Judicial Reform (Qld)	21	Harbour Bridge Traffic (NSW)	15	Arms Policy	12
Hawke Leadership	10	Law Reform (NSW)	14	Parliamentary Procedures (Vic)	11

Note: State political issues are indicated in brackets.

Table 7. Political issue agendas of four Australian newspapers (11–16 November 1991 incl.)

<i>Courier-Mail</i>		<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>		<i>The Age</i>		<i>The Australian</i>	
Issue	Prom score	Issue	Prom score	Issue	Prom score	Issue	Prom score
Liberal Party Agenda (Qld)	28	Unemployment	48	Foreign Policy—Indonesia	60	Unemployment	52
Judicial Reform (Qld)	25	Foreign Policy—Indonesia	37	Unemployment	49	Foreign Policy—Indonesia	36
Foreign Policy—Indonesia	20	Federal-State Taxation	19	Federal-State Taxation	17	Federal-State Taxation	17
Women's Issues	15	Tobacco Advertising (NSW)	17	War Crimes Policy	9	Judicial Reform (Qld)	14
Federal-State Taxation	12	Judicial Reform (Qld)	17	Taxation—GST	9	Liberal Party Agenda (Qld)	9
Prostitution Policy (Qld)	8	Taxation—GST	12	Judicial Reform (Qld)	7	Women's Issues	6
Unemployment	5	Conveyancing (NSW)	8	Industrial Relations (Vic)	7	Taxation—GST	6

Note: State political issues are indicated in brackets.

maximize prime-time news coverage, journalists exercised more influence upon the ultimate appearance of prime-time news agendas in 1993 than they did in 1991, generating stories about campaign issues and commissioning telephone polls as the data in Table 4 indicate.

My method for extrapolating news agendas from news content was based upon the rationale that readers or viewers attach the most significance to lead stories in newspapers or television news bulletins.³² Thus, I allocated a prominence score to each news story according to its placement in a bulletin, the maximum score for a lead story on television or front-page story in a newspaper (accompanied by a photograph) being 5 points.³³ Each story was also classified according to any issue that was the major focus of the story. Using this procedure, it was possible to make some comparisons between television news agendas and newspaper news agendas, and to detect the presence of any overall news agenda arising from common coverage of specific political events and issues in each of the three cities in the study.

Tables 6 and 7 permit comparison of the prime-time television news agendas in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne with the agendas of three metropolitan daily newspapers and the *Australian* in 1991. There were striking levels of similarity in the issues given prominence in the various news media in each city, with a very high degree of correspondence between the newspaper and television news coverage of national political issues. Because so much coverage was generated by political sources using tactics aimed at building news agendas, it was possible to identify those sources who exercised a very high degree of influence upon the appearance of news agendas in 1991 and 1993.

From the data in Tables 6 and 7, it can be seen that three issues subject to federal government jurisdiction dominated the news in mid-November 1991—foreign policy, specifically Australia's relationship with Indonesia, federal-state financial relationships, and unemployment. Whilst unemployment was a major issue by any index—statistical, legislative or in accordance with community concern—the issue of unemployment was eclipsed in the news media in November 1991 by the Dili massacre. Only in Sydney was the issue of unemployment more newsworthy than the Dili massacre. This was extraordinary, given that there were no pictures of the massacre, and that Cabinet was meeting in Canberra to finalise decisions to bring forward the commencement date of major public works in order to alleviate unemployment. The controversial proposed third Sydney airport runway project was subsequently given the green light, accounting for a

Table 8. Prime time metropolitan campaign issue agendas (1–5 March 1993 incl.)

Brisbane		Sydney		Melbourne	
Issue	Prom score	Issue	Prom score	Issue	Prom score
Taxation—GST	90	Taxation—GST	100	Taxation—GST	94
Economy	60	Economy	70	Economy	57
Unemployment	48	Unemployment	36	IR	52
IR	18	IR	17	Unemployment	37

N = 69 stories

N = 72 stories

N = 67 stories

Note: Prominence scores based upon all prime-time campaign stories about individual issues covered by all four stations in each city.

GST: (Goods and Services Tax); IR (Industrial Relations).

much higher level of coverage of the issue of unemployment projects in the media in Sydney. However, the anecdotal evidence bears out the danger of making tight connections between media coverage and the state of the nation. In fact, the ship of state was wallowing in very heavy weather in mid-November 1991. Prime Minister Hawke was being challenged for the leadership by Paul Keating. Locked into the power play behind the scenes, federal Cabinet Ministers were leaking like proverbial sieves (see Table 3).

Has Technology Opened More Windows of Opportunity for Participation in Policymaking?

It is erroneous to correlate news values with community values.³⁴ Opportunities for the public and other non-government actors to influence policymaking through the media are compromised because the window of opportunity is only open for a very short time before the media spotlight shifts to other issues. Some windows in the media are non-scheduled but mostly they arise from scheduled events. Whilst the Dili massacre itself was technically an unscheduled event, Timorese residents in Australia had pre-planned demonstrations in reaction to the massacre that captured headlines around the country and worldwide. Not only did the window of opportunity on initiatives aimed at addressing unemployment for many Australians slam shut due to the Dili massacre preoccupying the mass media, many Australians were arguably unaware of the gravity of the problem.

Herein lies the problem of news values whereby the capacity of the citizenry to participate in the policymaking process is diminished. Whilst some newspapers gave unemployment high exposure, citizens who primarily relied upon television news for information may not have been aware of the magnitude of unemployment in Australia in 1991 principally because metropolitan television newsrooms relied upon Canberra news bureaux to cover the issue. Whilst all 12 stations in the study covered the Prime Minister's scheduled address to Parliament on Thursday 14 November, only a handful of stations covered the impact of unemployment in their home state or took up stories about unemployment in other states that were distributed around networks.

Unemployment is not a telegenic issue, that is, it is difficult to access unemployment with a camera and to generate pictures of anything other than talking heads. Thus, for viewers in most states, the scope of unemployment in 1991 was what sources in Canberra said it was on television news. As few stations supplemented Canberra bureau coverage of the issue with additional coverage of unemployment in their own state, so too their knowledge of reaction to federal government initiatives was limited to the opinions of sources based in Canberra. By March 1993, unemployment was at its highest since World War II. However, as the data in Tables 8 and 9 reveal, unemployment was not the key issue on campaign news agendas in the fourth week of the 1993 federal election campaign. The data show that two issues dominated campaign news agendas in newspapers and in prime-time television news bulletins in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne towards the end of the election campaign—the Coalition's proposed Goods and Services Tax (GST) and other economic issues. Despite unemployment being a key issue on the Coalition's policy agenda, unemployment ranked well down television and newspaper news agendas.

When I asked television news journalists why they regarded the GST as more newsworthy than unemployment, they said that there were more people in work than out of work whereas the GST would affect everybody. Moreover, they said that the GST was what people wanted to know about. On the surface, their arguments seemed logical but

the logic is spurious. First, it is not just unemployed people who are directly affected by unemployment. Second, opinion polls showed that more people rated unemployment as a more serious issue than the GST.

By 1997, unemployment had the media status of a legitimate 'crisis', with radio stations running free job advertisements, one commercial television network hosting a job telethon and newspaper editorials berating the government for failing to address the issue sooner. It is ironic that so many critics were the same journalists who refused to give the federal Opposition leader John Hewson the opportunity to debate unemployment in the media during the 1993 election campaign. It may be argued that politicians are out of touch with community values, however, my research findings suggest that journalists are more out of touch with the community than politicians. This is arguably because journalists may have become too dependent upon politicians and their press secretaries for their daily bread between elections and dependent upon the major political parties for news during election campaigns. The major daily news media are central to the political communication process but they are demonstrably unreliable as guides to the state of the nation. What are the implications of my findings for communications research, for policymaking in general, and in particular, for national communications policy in Australia?

Conclusions

Studies like mine have been conducted in other Western liberal democracies, confirming that the major issues in the media may not be the same as the issues the public regard as important.³⁵ Nevertheless, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that the media exert a significant influence upon individual perceptions of the issues between elections and during elections. Where there is a discrepancy between the media agenda and the public agenda, this may be attributable to public ignorance, given that the public do not have access to many events. On the other hand, it may be attributable to a high level of intervention in the political process by journalists or media organisations. Journalists are not elected officials nor are they an unofficial Opposition. The media do not represent a level playing field in which all actors in the policymaking process have equal access. Moreover, the media are key actors in the debate over media policy, a process wherein they have a dual role as players in the game and umpires of the media arena.

There is considerable doubt about the editorial and political independence of the media in Australia, especially in the context of editorial independence, given the huge information subsidies that government and political parties give the media. And there is cause for alarm as to their political independence, given the number of campaign news stories on prime-time commercial television news that lacked balance and fairness during the 1993 federal election campaign. However, these shortcomings cannot be sheeted home to technology. Technology is policy-neutral.

My research confirms that public relations practitioners inside and outside government are the primary newsgatherers of political news for television news organisations in Australia, information subsidies that offset the high costs of news production. But this activity (capital investment) should not transform the media from being watchdogs of democracy into lapdogs of government or political parties, thereby transforming the marketplace of ideas into a political straitjacket.³⁶ As I have demonstrated, many issues may be marginalized or consigned to oblivion through their lack of newsworthiness. For example, unemployment may not be newsworthy in relation to other items competing for inclusion in the news on a given day but the problem still exists. The danger of journalists

becoming over-reliant upon public relations practitioners for news is that issues such as unemployment or poverty may ultimately be regarded as insoluble rather than intractable.³⁷

Australian-owned media appear to have fallen victim to imitating reporting standards and management techniques of media proprietors of other countries with quite different political systems, power structures and institutions. This is sufficient reason why we should not permit our media institutions to fall into the hands of foreigners who have nothing but a vested financial interest in Australia.³⁸ I utterly refute the argument advanced by Christopher Pokarier that the quality of journalism in Australia is so poor that it could not be further impaired by increasing the level of foreign ownership of the media.³⁹ One has but to examine the content of many British or American newspapers to reject that argument. Advocates of liberalization of the cross-media laws would have us believe that the best solution to the problem of pollution in Sydney Harbour would be to invite other nations to dump toxic sludge into our waterways. A logical approach would be to prioritise cleaning up our own backyard whilst scanning the larger environment for solutions to a global problem. Put simply, we cannot rely upon media abundance to guarantee the survival of the marketplace of ideas. The unwillingness of media executives to uphold their social responsibilities as common carriers of information to society demands a media watchdog that does more than wag its tail and lick the hand that feeds it.

Enhancing Political Communication in Australia

What can be done to enhance political communication in Australia? The evidence to date overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that more media outlets will not guarantee diversity of viewpoints in the media. And it is this rationale based upon the evidence to date, rather than scarcity in the spectrum, that justifies the necessity to monitor and, if necessary enforce, free-to-air television broadcasters' compliance with news program standards demanding fair and impartial television news coverage. The reach of television and public dependency upon television as a primary source of news and information demands a socially responsible attitude upon the part of broadcasters.

Codes of editorial practice need to be reviewed, making broadcasters' obligations to their audiences, especially during election campaigns, more specific. And the regulator must have teeth. Broadcast news should be monitored regularly between elections and throughout elections, to ensure that news programs are not in violation of codes of practice. The regulator can walk softly but carry a big stick—heavy fines should be imposed for violations.

News organisations need to review their newsgathering routines because Australian citizens need to know how federal and state government policies impact upon different regions, requiring information to be gathered further afield than centralised newsgathering procedures currently permit. Only in this way can we offset the impact of the forces of globalisation, in particular global media products, thereby preserving national sovereignty and integrity.⁴⁰ Media corporations benefit substantially from the economies of scale that technology and the public relations industry provide, but these do not necessarily benefit the majority of Australians.

Journalists do not own media organisations. With the exception of public broadcasters, they are employees of big businesses with a primary objective of making profits. Whilst surveys of journalists show that most journalists believe their watchdog role is important,⁴¹ there appears to be a considerable gap between journalists' perceptions of their role and their actual performance. In the multi-channel, global, highly competitive

media world citizens inhabit, even a revised and updated journalism code of ethics introducing the concept of fairness is no insurance policy against free marketeers.⁴² In Australia, the concept of freedom of the media was never intended as a constitutional right on the part of global media organisations to transform the marketplace of ideas into just another marketplace.

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
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12. ABA, *Your Say*, Sydney, 1996, pp. 37–39.
13. ABC-TV, 14 November 1997. Andrew Olle was a respected Australian journalist whose untimely death in 1995 left the ranks of journalism in this country all the poorer. Wendt, dubbed 'the perfumed steamroller', is renowned for her incisive interviewing style. In 1997, she took legal action against her employer Seven Network, alleging the network failed to give her current affairs program *Witness* sufficient bite. See S. McLean, 'Jana blasts 'dumbing' of media', *Courier-Mail*, 15 November 1997, p. 3.
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