

# 19

## Still the Main Source: The Established Media<sup>1</sup>

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The Australian federal election of July 2016 came at a time of ongoing turbulence and transition for the established press and broadcasting sectors—the ‘legacy’ media, as they are often described. In the period since 2013, when Wayne Errington argued that ‘mainstream media still matters’ (2015: 67), there have been more redundancies in the Fairfax, News Corporation, and ABC newsrooms. More local newspapers, such as the *Cooma Monaro Express*, have closed. New entrants to the Australian public sphere such as *The Conversation*, and local versions of global news brands such as the *Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, *Daily Mail* and *Buzzfeed* have emerged as serious competitors for the established providers such as Fairfax Media and News Corporation Australia (News Corp). And yet, as recent research has found (Watkins et al. 2015; McNair et al. 2017), mainstream broadcast and press news brands remain the main sources of news for the majority of Australians. The explosion of online sources and social media platforms has certainly influenced how the established media engage and interact with their audiences, and it is true that younger demographics are steadily moving to online platforms for their

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1 This chapter draws on research undertaken as part of the Australian Research Council–funded Discovery Project ‘Politics, Media and Democracy in Australia: Public and producer perceptions of the political public sphere’ (DP130100705). A more detailed account of the findings of that work is contained in McNair et al. (2017).

consumption of news as well as other forms of culture. But they had still not, by 2016, supplanted the older, familiar providers of journalism as the most trusted and routinely accessed sources of information, including election news and analysis. This chapter examines how the established media covered the campaign.

We find that a national election is still front-page news, occupying about half of the surveyed press front pages during the campaign. Overall, front-page priority is given to negative over positive stories—a trend long observed in political reporting in the United States and Britain. There were many more negative stories about the Australian Labor Party (ALP) than the Coalition during the campaign. While it is difficult to isolate the significance of media effects, we can identify in the media the reach and prominence of negative campaigns about Medicare (see also Manwaring, Chapter 11, this volume), asylum seekers and, more locally, the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) dispute. Overall, the impact of the coverage on voters is difficult to pinpoint as different campaign messages may negate one another (as discussed by Jackman and Mansillo, Chapter 6, this volume), but priming and framing of some of these issues in the media coverage might have marginally improved the position of some conservative candidates in Victoria and Pauline Hanson's One Nation in Queensland. We find evidence for intermedia effects whereby a news outlet influences others' story selections during the election. In an internet age characterised by audience fragmentation, the 2016 election saw some established media outlets and their journalists produce innovative election reporting, using blogs, podcasts and other digital technologies to engage broader audiences using the strengths of different media platforms.

We divide the chapter into two main sections, devoted to the established press and broadcast media respectively. We discuss how these outlets covered the 2016 election, against the background of wider debates on the role and performance of the political media in Australia.

## The economic context of contemporary journalism

On 9 May 2016, the day after Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called the election, Fairfax, Australia's second-largest newspaper publisher, announced more job cuts (Kennedy 2016). In line with the downsizing

trend, both Fairfax and its largest newspaper rival, News Corp, had cutback staff multiple times. The single largest cutback was in June 2012 when they shed almost 3,000 employees between them. This time it was 30 jobs at Fairfax but, unlike previous rounds, these were not voluntary redundancies, and the timing added unwelcome pressure on journalists during the busy period of a longer-than-usual eight-week election campaign.

Newspapers have played an important role in covering Australian elections (Simms 2002: 93). Marian Simms outlines the normative function of the news media during an election campaign: independent reporting and providing a platform for discussing issues and airing diverse opinions. Newspapers' election coverage has traditionally been worthy of particular attention because they collectively employ more journalists than other outlets, have more reporters in the federal press gallery and their stories have set the news agenda for other media. Since the late 1960s, Australian Election Study (AES) data have shown that, second only to television, most Australians get 'a good deal' of their election news from newspapers, but, as outlined below, these proportions are declining (McAllister and Cameron 2014: 6). Traditionally, Australia's print newspapers have had concentrated media ownership (Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy 2012: 60). During the 2016 election, newspaper ownership further consolidated when Seven West Media, Australia's third-largest newspaper proprietor, purchased Western Australia's *Sunday Times* masthead and *PerthNow* website from News Corp—completing the transformation of Perth as a truly one-owner newspaper town (Prestipino 2016).

The earmarked job losses in Western Australia, along with Fairfax's forced redundancies, are further indications of the disruption to Australia's news media landscape in the digital age. Further, as Peter Chen (Chapter 20, this volume) reveals, new news media entrants, including the overseas players listed earlier, have expanded Australian's political news choices. These digital media entrants, together with niche online local publications such as *TheVine*, *Crikey*, *New Matilda*, *The Mandarin*, *Inside Story* and *The Conversation*, along with round-the-clock social media and blogger commentary, have arguably diluted the political influence of the established print oligopolies.

In addition, Australia's major media companies have experienced revenue falls exacerbated by the fierce competition for advertising from these digital news alternatives, including global hegemony like Facebook and Google. This has further driven down advertising's unit price (Carson 2015: 1035). While it is true that online readership of Australia's daily newspapers is at record highs, revenues from paywalls and digital advertising have not yet matched revenues lost from hardcopy advertising necessary to sustain large newsrooms, thus explaining repeated cutbacks to their journalism resources (*ibid.*: 1038). Indeed, just weeks after the election, Fairfax wrote down its company value by \$1 billion after its annual advertising revenue fell 15 per cent (Mitchell 2016).

These shifts, from analogue to digital news and the advent of foreign-owned media colonising Australian audiences online, represent the political economic environment of Australian media companies in the twenty-first century. These changes have implications for Australia's federal election coverage as they not only have an impact on newspapers' journalistic resources, but also contribute to the increased fragmentation of its news audiences. For example, 55 per cent of AES respondents relied on printed newspapers for election coverage in 1969. By 2016, the newspaper audience of election coverage had fallen to 17 per cent, for the first time lower than the percentage of Australians using the internet (19 per cent) or radio (15 per cent) to source election news. Television more than halved its election news viewers, falling from 63 per cent (1969) to 25 per cent (Cameron and McAllister 2016: 8). Disruptions to the news media landscape and audience share raise important questions about the Australian press's capacity to cover an election campaign in the digital age and what, if any, influence that coverage has on voters.

## Media effects and undecided voters

In terms of electoral outcomes, media effects are notoriously difficult to measure. While the weight of scholarly research identifies a 'limited effect' on the media's capacity to alter voters' choices, studies also find that media effects are strongest on the least-engaged voters. These voters are the most likely to be undecided until the election campaign begins, and are potentially more open to political news coverage influencing their vote choice—even if they pay cursory attention to it (Albaek et al. 2014: 102; Denmark, Ward and Bean 2007: 90–91). Doris Graber (2001), Klaus

Schoenbach and Edmund Lauf (2002) and Shanto Iyengar et al. (2010) have found that people who are the least politically interested tend to acquire most of their information about current affairs from news media.

This is important in the context of Australia's compulsory voting system whereby most adults do vote, regardless of their political interest. Television is singled out for its capacity to reach less interested or undecided voters with election news (Bean 1986: 58; Denmark, Ward and Bean 2007: 90; Ward and Stewart 2006: 194). From these studies' findings, it follows logically that in contemporary Australian election contests, less engaged, undecided or swinging voters in marginal seats will be the key targets of political parties' media campaigns. As a proportion of the Australian electorate, these voters are estimated to be rising, to between 30 and 40 per cent of voters (McAllister 2002: 24–25; Young 2011: 88). Earlier research also suggests that undecided voters are particularly 'vulnerable to scare campaigns' (Crisp 1965: 131). Additionally, since longitudinal AES data reveal that fewer Australians receive election news from the press, we can reasonably expect that political parties will utilise all forms of paid and free news media—television, print, new entrants and social media—to try and influence undecided voters in 2016.

Media effects also speak to the power of media proprietors to influence elites and policy-making processes. Australian prime ministers have been sensitive to this power and over the years have availed themselves of opportunities to meet with media moguls, particularly News Corp's Rupert Murdoch (Moses 2007). Yet, as Rodney Tiffen (2014) reminds us, the influence of media owners can be overestimated. Murdoch has backed losing sides in politics on more than one occasion despite, at times, overtly partisan coverage in his newspapers. Tiffen concludes that it is 'impossible to quantify the impact of Murdoch's editorial positions on public opinion, let alone on election results' (*ibid.*: 120).

With the changing economic environment for media, and with research about media effects in mind, the next section specifically examines how Australia's daily metropolitan press reported the 2016 campaign. We then examine the election coverage of Australia's established broadcasters.

## How the press reported the 2016 election campaign

Over the course of the 56-day federal campaign,<sup>2</sup> a content analysis of 11 Australian daily metropolitan papers found election coverage ran as a front-page story in half of these papers (261 front pages; n=528).<sup>3</sup> This was also the case in the 2015 daily front-page newspaper coverage of the British election (Deacon and Wring 2015: 313). As with the British example, this finding masks large differences in front-page coverage between smaller and bigger capital city dailies, and the national papers.

### Front-page election story frequency

More Australian front-page election news was published in the first and final two weeks of the campaign. That the first two weeks would be a period of significant coverage is not surprising, as this is a novel phase of the campaign during which political parties unveil their strategies. Similarly, the final two weeks showcase the major parties' campaign launches, enabling them to reiterate their key promises to voters as polling day approaches.<sup>4</sup> Both parties received favourable Monday headlines after their weekend launches, indicating these are still purposeful media events and not just in-house affairs for the party faithful.

Australia's (only) two national print mastheads, the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review (AFR)* provided frequent front-page election coverage. News Corp's *Australian* dedicated two thirds of its front pages to election news, more than any other paper; while Fairfax's *AFR* committed half of its cover pages to it (see Figure 19.1). The findings are not unexpected as both national papers cater to a predominantly tertiary-

<sup>2</sup> The analysis excludes Sunday editions because not all papers have a Sunday masthead.

<sup>3</sup> In all, 518 pages were analysed and election coverage was identified on 261 front pages; however, there were 10 missing entries (masthead front pages). The *Canberra Times* is not included due to incomplete data gathering. However, other Fairfax daily mastheads are and, as discussed in this article, the analysis of federal political reporting from Fairfax mastheads (the *Australian Financial Review*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*) reveals a high degree of overlap of front-page story topics compared to News Corp's front-page mastheads. Of course, the papers published many more election stories inside their mastheads; however, for the purposes of a snapshot of what print media outlets considered to be the most important election stories worthy of being placed on their front pages, only page one stories were analysed here.

<sup>4</sup> Launch dates were Sunday 19 June 2016 for Labor and Sunday 26 June 2016 for the Liberal Party.

educated and business-minded audience for whom federal politics matters. According to Sally Young (2011: 99), these elite publications also have a higher proportion of conservative voters.

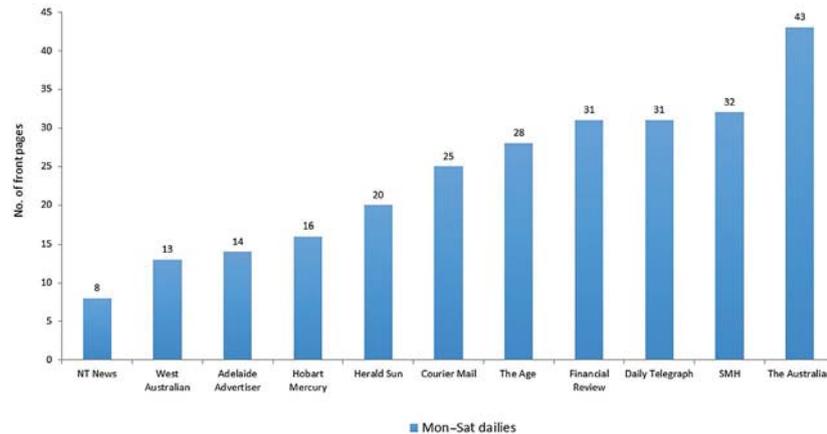


Figure 19.1. The number of front-page stories in Australia's daily mastheads' Monday to Saturday editions during the 56-day 2016 election campaign

Note.  $n=261$ .

Source. Constructed by © Carson and McNair.

Sydney's competing daily mastheads, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and the *Daily Telegraph*, also committed more than half of their front pages to election news, followed by Melbourne's *Age* and Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*. But beyond the east coast of Australia, election coverage was infrequently on the front page; instead, their cover pages promoted local issues. This suggests elite agenda-setting and priming of election issues by political parties is made more difficult by the lack of press coverage in the less populated States. In such instances, other forms of political communication are likely to be more effective for swaying voters. The Northern Territory's (NT) *NT News*, renowned for its irreverent stories, had the fewest election stories, an average of one a week. Among local issues headlining smaller capital cities' front pages were crocodiles (*NT News*); shark attacks and the 'ice' scourge (methamphetamine) in the *West Australian*; homelessness, healthcare and domestic violence in the *Adelaide Advertiser*; and Tasmania's damaging storms in the *Hobart Mercury*.

DOUBLE DISILLUSION

The *Courier-Mail* gave more positive coverage to the Coalition than any other paper on its front page (see Figure 19.2). At the same time, it also gave prominent coverage to the Coalition’s electoral rival, One Nation Senate candidate Pauline Hanson, with a full front-page cover photograph of the former politician and one-time fish-and-chip shop owner with a prophetic headline: ‘Senator Hanson’ (*Courier-Mail* 2016b). The *Age* in Victoria was the only paper to provide more positive front-page news about Labor than the Coalition. This largely reflects the *Age*’s reader demographics, which are more educated, left-leaning and sympathetic to postmaterialist concerns than most other news audiences (Young 2011: 248).

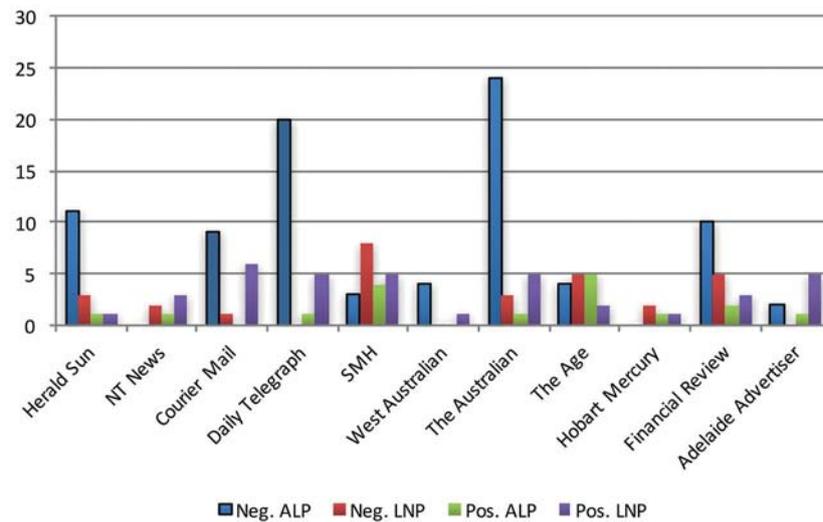


Figure 19.2. Number of positive and negative daily front-page stories by masthead for Liberal and Labor

Notes. n=187 with 74 neutral stories not shown.  
 Source. Constructed by © Carson and McNair.

### Front-page story sentiment: Positive and negative coverage

The descriptive statistics show that almost exactly half of daily mastheads’ front-page election stories were negative in message, more than double the number of positive election stories (22 per cent) and higher than the number of neutral stories (28 per cent). This negative coverage is consistent with time series analysis of US political reporting that identified negativity about presidential candidates had risen over the decades to become the

norm by the year 2000 (Schudson 2011: 84). Similarly, in the 2015 British election, front-page election coverage was almost always negative, and much more so for Labour (Deacon and Wring 2015: 313). Australia's 2016 campaign coverage also provided its major left-of-centre party with many more negative front-page headlines (87) compared to the Coalition (29), Independents (9) or Australian Greens (4).<sup>5</sup> About a quarter (74) of all front-page Australian election stories were neutral (see Figure 19.3).

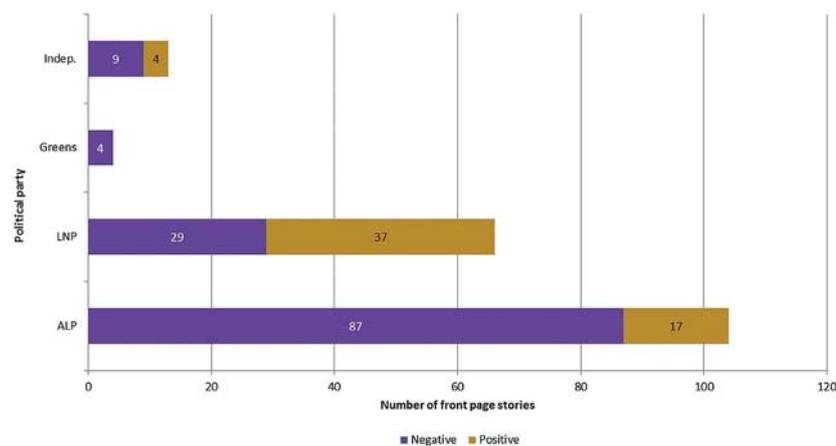


Figure 19.3. Number of positive and negative daily front-page news stories during the election campaign by political party

Notes. n=187 with 74 neutral stories not illustrated.

Source. Constructed by © Carson and McNair.

The weeks of the campaign with the most negative stories about Labor were two, five and eight ( $\geq 15$  stories per week). These included front pages in Sydney and Melbourne criticising lower house MP David Feeney for failing to declare a \$2.3 million home in his electorate on the parliamentary Register of Members' interests. The second week included stories about the controversial Australian Federal Police raids of Labor officials' addresses in Melbourne over allegedly leaked National Broadband Network documents. Other negative stories for Labor during the campaign's early stages included the *AFR*'s questioning of the party's stance on penalty rates, and the Murdoch press probing the ALP's policy on asylum seekers (see Figure 19.4).

<sup>5</sup> Negative coverage was defined as stories that reflected poorly on the party or politician under focus. Positive stories were those whose central message was positive for the party or its candidate. A positive or negative assessment of the story does not necessarily indicate journalistic bias.

## DOUBLE DISILLUSION

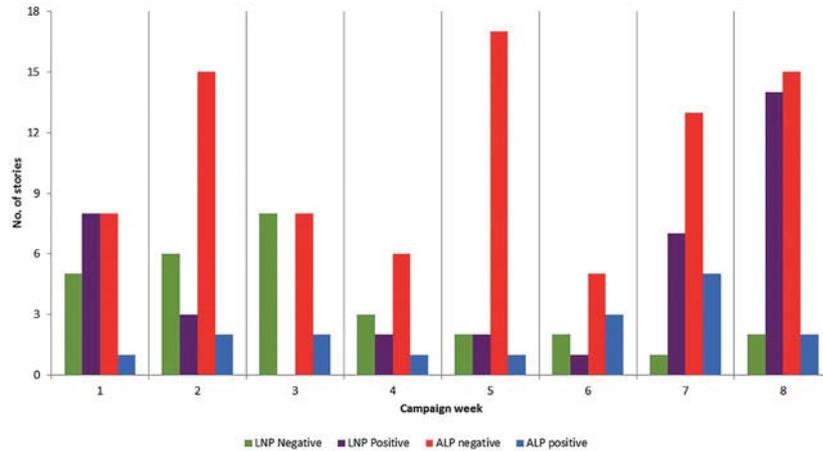


Figure 19.4. Story sentiment of front-page newspaper stories during the federal election for Liberal and Labor

Notes. n=187 with 74 neutral stories not illustrated.

Source. Constructed by © Carson and McNair.

## Fear campaigns in the media

The asylum seeker coverage (see Dehm and Walden, Chapter 26, this volume) began the day the election was called when Liberal Immigration Minister Peter Dutton held a press conference to confirm an asylum seeker boat was turned back to Sri Lanka. He then called out ALP candidate Melbourne's Sophie Ismail for comments that appeared to contradict her party's official asylum seeker policy (Anderson and Dziedzic 2016). The media persisted with negative asylum seeker coverage, usually linking it to Labor, in the weeks that followed. News Corp's (17 May 2016) front page described a party torn by its asylum seeker policy: 'Shorten holed on boats' (Harris 2016). The same day, the *Courier-Mail's* front page told readers about 'ungrateful illegals' sent to Manus Island who were trading Australian taxpayer-supplied cigarettes for televisions and smartphones, with the punny headline: 'Turnback the remotes' (*Courier-Mail* 2016a). News Corp's *Daily Telegraph* also ran negative asylum seeker stories linked to Labor on page one: 'Shorten's maple leaf boat "fix"' (*Daily Telegraph* 2016). In week six, the issue was moved to the inside pages, but still given prominence with an 'exclusive' double-page spread warning *Daily Telegraph* readers that Labor would 'invite thousands of illegals to stay'. The story featured a giant front-page picture of a welcome mat with inside stories about Labor's message to asylum seekers on pages 6, 7, 9 and 14,

including distant images of asylum seekers arriving by boat (Meers and Benson 2016). A week later, asylum seekers were again front-page news with the *Daily Telegraph's* self-proclaimed exclusive, 'Here they come: Smugglers re-start evil trade' (Benson 2016a), about a boat intercepted by the Royal Australian Navy in the Timor Sea. According to iSentia data, which tracked the top five media issues each week, asylum seekers were a prominent election issue in the first half of the campaign, ranking fifth in week one (8,685 mentions), second in week two (8,115 mentions) and third in week three (6,603 mentions).<sup>6</sup> It was the only media issue during the campaign to persist for three weeks in the top five national stories.

As an election issue, boat arrivals have had prominent media attention since 2001 (see Simms 2002). Since this time, the Coalition has had the most consistent, hardline approach to boat arrivals (Carson, Dufresne and Martin 2016; McAllister and Cameron 2014: 25). Australian political scientists find that negative immigration messages benefit conservatives in electoral contests, and that the issue played particularly well for Hanson in the 1990s (Jackman 1998). Labor and the Coalition shared the same policy on asylum boat turn backs in the 2016 campaign, yet the prominent media coverage, particularly by the Murdoch press, framed the issue as a Labor problem and gave it prominence and reach in three daily mastheads—effectively priming the issue to reinforce the political messages of Hanson and the Coalition's Dutton.

However, fear campaigns were not just the domain of the Murdoch press. Labor persisted, with limited evidence, in a narrative that Medicare would be privatised under a Turnbull government (see Elliot and Manwaring, Chapter 24, this volume). The scare campaign caught the electorate's attention with a 30-second ad airing nationally on a Sunday night (12 June) halfway through the campaign. It featured former prime minister and 'father' of Medicare Bob Hawke warning of a Coalition plan to privatise the universal health system. The Medicare claims were widely repeated in the news media and quickly ascended to the top five most talked about topics across Australia in the final two weeks of the campaign, scoring 20,362 media mentions in week seven and 9,456 in the last week according to iSentia data.

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<sup>6</sup> iSentia weekly monitoring includes 400 broadcast outlets, over 1,000 print publications and over 1,000 news websites across national, metropolitan, suburban, regional and rural media (author correspondence with Peter Baume, iSentia's managing director, 26 February 2015).

The media coverage of these two ‘scare’ campaigns caught the public’s attention. Australians responding to a Vote Compass questionnaire during the 2016 campaign identified asylum seekers and healthcare as salient election issues for them. When 60,310 respondents were asked to nominate what issue was ‘most important’ to them, ‘healthcare’ ranked third, after ‘education’ and the ‘economy’. More notably, for self-declared ‘undecided voters’, these issues ranked higher with ‘healthcare’ the second ‘most important’ issue after ‘immigration and asylum seekers’ (Vox Pop Labs 2016: 3).<sup>7</sup> In terms of counter messaging on these issues, Labor’s Medicare campaign prompted the Murdoch press to condemn it as a scare tactic on its front pages in the *Australian* and through a *Daily Telegraph* cover depicting Bill Shorten as the fabulist Pinocchio.

Past the campaign’s mid-point, Labor also encountered intense negative coverage about its fiscal plan in major mastheads. The *Daily Telegraph*’s front page bellowed: ‘32 pages of “mush”’ (McCrann 2016) followed the next day on 10 June with an appeal to the middle and working classes: ‘Revealed – Shorten slashes family welfare’ (Benson 2016b). The *AFR* warned its business-minded readers: ‘Labor plan would blow out deficit’ (Coorey 2016). In a similar vein, the *Daily Telegraph* earlier in the campaign derided Shorten as a blonde-haired Willy Wonka with the headline ‘Bill Shorten and the money factory’ (Benson 2016c), which seemed a little nonsensical given that Willy Wonka was a successful businessman.

It should be noted that none of these headlines or images on Murdoch’s front pages matched the full-blooded attack against the ALP in 2013. Headlines then were unambiguously anti-Labor such as the *Daily Telegraph*’s ‘Kick this mob out’ on the first day of the 2013 campaign (5 August 2013).

While Medicare and asylum seekers received national coverage, a more parochial campaign developed in Victoria (VIC) in week five. Disparate groups including paid firefighters, the Coalition and the *Herald Sun* sought to link the federal ALP with the Victorian government’s industrial dispute with voluntary country firefighters. This industrial fracas accounted for 17 front pages of the *Herald Sun* in the remaining weeks

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<sup>7</sup> Respondents self-selected to participate in the survey through the ABC website. The data was weighted using Australian Bureau of Statistics demographics to provide a more representative result of the Australian population.

of the election, and the newspaper even produced tens of thousands of ‘Back the CFA’ stickers for Victorians regardless of whether they bought the newspaper (*Herald Sun* 2016). Not all of the paper’s CFA front pages connected the dispute to the election, but those that did included ‘Burn the votes’ (Whinnett, Harris and Smethurst 2016). Some commentators, like Melbourne ABC morning host Jon Faine, quipped that more *Herald Sun* front pages were dedicated to the CFA dispute than when Australia entered the Iraq war. The prominent coverage might not have shifted votes, but almost certainly influenced Labor’s campaigning choices, costs and resource allocations. For example, the Prime Minister applied pressure to federal Labor and gained national headlines by campaigning on the steps of the Victorian Parliament, vowing to make the rights of volunteer firefighters his priority if elected. He also campaigned in marginal Victorian seats such as Corangamite where the CFA has a strong membership presence.

In contrast, the Coalition’s most fraught week in front-page headlines was week three (n=8) when the press revealed that Turnbull had once lunched with the now-deceased lawyer for the Mafia, Joe Acquaro. Acquaro had donated more than \$100,000 to the party and allegedly some of it on behalf of Mafia figures (McKenzie and Baker 2016). Turnbull’s dinner guests proved a problem again for him in week six when an Iftar gathering at Kirribilli saw him criticised for dining with a Muslim cleric with profound anti-gay views (Chambers and Morton 2016).

## Press coverage and voter impact

In the final week of the campaign, front-page headlines across the nation were overwhelmingly negative for Labor: 15 negative and two positive stories, contrasting sharply with the Coalition’s 16 positive and two negative. Front-page missives against Labor included ‘budget blowout’ stories, while the Murdoch broadsheet accused it of a backflip on the same-sex marriage plebiscite (Shanahan 2016a). Some headlines simply predicted Labor’s defeat: ‘Going down’ (Benson 2016d).

The editorial positions of the papers were little different. In the final days, all Fairfax and News Corp daily printed mastheads recommended a vote for the Coalition, citing a need for stable government—a central message of Turnbull’s following Britain’s Brexit vote to leave the European

Union (EU). Australia's online version of the *Guardian* refrained from a party endorsement, as did the online news digest *Crikey*, which claimed editorials were 'a throwback to an earlier era of political reporting' (Robin 2016). The weekly *Sunday Age* was the only capital city paper to urge a vote for Labor.

## Story convergence and reporting opinion polls

Two other striking features of the front-page election coverage were topic convergence between mastheads in the same newspaper stable and heavy reliance on commissioned poll results as news (see Goot, Chapter 5, this volume; Jackman and Mansillo, Chapter 6, this volume). Much has been written about why newspapers use polls to set the news agenda, and the 2016 election coverage was no exception with 40 poll-based front-page stories (Jackman 2005; Matthews, Pickup and Cutler 2012; Simms 2002).

Syndication of stories was particularly evident with Fairfax's *Age* and the *SMH*, more so than News Corp stable of papers. Fairfax stablemates replicated or pursued the same story angles on their front pages at least 11 times during the eight-week campaign. Earlier in the year, the wall separating Fairfax's *Age* and *SMH* Canberra bureaus was removed; this syndication of election stories suggests a convergence beyond bricks and mortar. This is a concerning trend because it limits story diversity from these press outlets in the public sphere. It also gives more power to a handful of political reporters whose names regularly appear in these mastheads. As print media loses paid circulation, revenues and ultimately institutional influence, some high-profile journalists benefit from these power shifts and gain personal authority from them. In the digital age, reporters' personal branding matters (Molyneux and Holton 2015). In some instances, individuals have more readers or followers than the paid circulation figures of the mastheads for which they write. Examples include Andrew Bolt (News Corp) with a self-proclaimed 1 million readers; *Sunday Age* columnist and *Kitchen Cabinet* host (ABC) Annabel Crabb with 336,000 Twitter followers; and Laura Tingle (*AFR*) with 65,000 Twitter followers.

## Innovations and adaptations in newspaper election coverage

On a positive note, the 2016 election coverage highlighted how mastheads were using digital technologies to report in ways not previously possible. Fairfax photographers published a revealing portrait series on Instagram to show candidates' microsecond responses to a series of emotional images, allowing voters to see them in new ways. Political journalists leveraged their personal brand to update audiences about the campaign using social media sites including Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram. The *Guardian's* Katharine Murphy through her *Australia Politics Live* blog was one of several examples that threaded breaking political news and pictures with social media posts, memes and audience interactions via 'third spaces' such as below-the-line comments sections. *Crikey* tracked election promises and how much parties were allocating to them with 'Cash Tracker' and gave readers political content not found elsewhere including Shorten's and Turnbull's more obtuse comments with #Zinger and #Malsplain respectively.

Other digital adaptations included political podcasts from stalwarts of the press gallery. Among them were national political editor of news.com.au Malcolm Farr and his News Corp stablemate Dennis Atkins (*Courier-Mail*) discussing the latest election issues using the apt title *Two Grumpy Hacks – An Australian Election Podcast*; the ABC's Leigh Sales with Crabb and their *Chat 10 Looks 3* series; and 'Australian Politics Weekly' by *Guardian* editor Lenore Taylor with Katharine Murphy.

The election campaign gave rise to new media collaborations too. News Corp and Facebook teamed up to bring voters the first-ever online Australian leaders' debate using Facebook Live and streamed on the news.com.au site. Facebook and news.com.au reported a total reach of 4.2 million people who saw the debate advertised in their Facebook newsfeed (news.com.au 2016) and 1.6 million who saw the debate in their newsfeed on the night of 17 June 2016 (news.com.au 2016). Whilst Fairfax partnered with the Netherlands' Kieskompas to offer readers the YourVote experience. Similar to ABC's Vote Compass that debuted in the 2013 election campaign, Your Vote allowed Australians to see how their views on election issues aligned with the policy positions of the major political parties.

## Broadcasting and the 2016 election

Recent research by the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra—part of a 26-country comparative study initiated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism—finds that, as of early 2016, TV news bulletins were still the main source of news for Australians, followed by 24-hour news channels (ABC News 24, Sky News) and radio news programs and bulletins. The dominance of traditional media is particularly pronounced in older demographics. While the 18–44 age group report that they mainly access online sources for news, the main online sources accessed by younger people, as with the population in general, are the web editions of established news brands such as the ABC and News (Watkins et al. 2015: 7). There is clearly a profound generational transformation underway in the channels by which people access news, including news about elections, but the continuing authority of established, trusted news brands is also clear.

Against this background, TV and radio coverage of the 2016 election featured some new elements, as well as the traditional outputs of news and current affairs programming. As usual, the ABC led the way in coverage of the election on free-to-air TV and radio. While all free-to-air channels reported the campaign daily in their breakfast shows and news bulletins, only the ABC provided in-depth analysis and current affairs coverage, with frequent appearances by Turnbull, Shorten and other senior politicians on ABC radio and TV flagships such as *AM*, *PM* and *7.30*. In 2016, to a greater extent than in 2013, the Coalition leadership engaged with the ABC.

Turnbull was friendlier towards the ABC than his predecessor, and openly approving of some of its key journalists such as Leigh Sales. Indeed, more than half of Turnbull's radio interviews in the first six months of his prime ministership were given to the ABC. This arguably reflects Turnbull's more open style of political communication in general and his judgement that ABC programs such as *7.30* and *AM* occupy key places in the Australian media cycle—opportunities to set the wider media and public agendas that senior political actors cannot afford to ignore. It also contrasts with his predecessor Tony Abbott, who was openly critical of the ABC during his time in opposition (and indeed pursued such tactics as a boycott of programs such as *Q&A* by his cabinet ministers when in government). Turnbull's press secretary David Bold explained the regularity of the Prime Minister's *7.30* appearances:

It offers the Prime Minister the opportunity to do a lengthy one-on-one, which is something he enjoys doing. There aren't many other platforms available to do those lengthy interviews on TV and with the sort of audience *7.30* has (Lacy 2016).

The ABC's charter binds the broadcaster to impartiality in election and other news coverage, of course, and no one has suggested that the improved tone of ABC–Coalition relations in the Turnbull era led to 'better' or more favourable coverage. But there was certainly more cooperation and engagement with the ABC in the run-up to the election than had been the case with the Abbott government, allowing, one might infer, a fuller account of Coalition policy to emerge on this most important of all national news platforms. ABC viewers and listeners may or may not have agreed with everything Turnbull and his colleagues said on the ABC, but they undoubtedly got to hear 'from the horse's mouth' what the Coalition election pitch was.

Three free-to-air channels (ABC1, Channel Seven, Channel Nine) produced election night specials, against a background of media complaint about the alleged dullness of the campaign. Competing for journalistic and public attention in the many weeks of what was Australia's longest election campaign in history were the EU Referendum in the UK, the US presidential campaign featuring Donald Trump and regular explosions of terrorist violence in Orlando, Florida, Turkey and elsewhere. In contrast with these events, and with the brutal tone of the Brexit and Trump campaigns in particular, the Australian election of 2016 was indeed polite, well mannered and rather predictable. To this extent, perhaps, it was also dull. Indeed, *news.com.au* reported on the eve of election night that: 'Bill Shorten and Malcolm Turnbull face "Mission Impossible" to get viewers interested in election TV' (Fenton 2016). Perhaps ironically, the Ten Network broadcast a five-year-old *Mission Impossible* movie against the election-night programs.

Notwithstanding this challenge, the combination of ABC1 and ABC News 24 (4 pm – 11.45 pm AEST) received the most viewers, with a record 5.3 million tuning in at various times through the evening. An additional 2.8 million people accessed coverage on online and social media sites. Nine and Seven reached fewer viewers, not least because the latter opted not to broadcast the coverage on its main Melbourne channel (due to a clash with AFL coverage). OzTAM ratings for the three programs are shown in Table 19.1. These ratings are consistent with repeated survey

findings that the ABC remains the most trusted source of news for the great majority of the Australian people. And, like the BBC in the UK, this movement to the ABC is greatest at times of great national importance, such as an election.

Table 19.1. Ratings for free-to-air election night TV programs

Network	Program	Audience numbers
ABC1	<i>Australia Votes</i>	856,000
Channel Nine	<i>Election 2016: Australia Decides</i>	606,000
Seven Network	<i>Federal Election 2016</i>	318,000

Source. Compiled by Carson and McNair using OzTAM figures.

Both 24-hour news channels also covered the election, although, in the main, with fewer viewers. The subscription-only Sky News election-night audience peaked at 113,000, while ABC News 24 peaked at 393,000, which was larger than the free-to-air coverage of Seven.

On radio, ABC again provided the great bulk of coverage, although commercial radio talkback shows such as Alan Jones on 2GB featured regular interviews with politicians, and public access to the debate through phone-ins. The evidence of the 2016 election is that the 2GB radio network continues to be viewed as an especially important broadcast platform for political communicators. Turnbull famously ‘black banned’ the channel after his ascent to the prime ministership, because of the perceived hostility of its leading presenters, Jones and Ray Hadley, to his ousting of Abbott. The offending interview of Turnbull (2014) by Jones before the successful leadership challenge of 2015 went as follows:

**Jones:** Can I begin by asking you if you could say after me this? ‘As a senior member of the Abbott government I want to say here I am totally supportive of the Abbott–Hockey strategy for budget repair.

**Turnbull:** Alan, I am not going to take dictation from you.

Later in the interview, Jones said to Turnbull:

You have no hope ever of being the leader. You’ve got to get that into your head. No hope ever (quoted in McNair et al. 2017: 132).

One can understand, given the tone of this exchange, why Turnbull might have preferred not to favour Jones in future media appearances. However, he apparently came to realise that bans and boycotts would be no more effective for him in relation to Jones than Abbott's anti-ABC stance had been (and which certainly contributed to his downfall). Focus group research evidence assembled by one of the authors (McNair et al. 2017) shows that members of the Australian public believe this form of 'mediated access' to politicians to be potentially important in shaping opinions. Several focus group participants referred to Alan Jones' impact on the 2015 Queensland State election—unexpectedly lost by the Coalition. Campbell Newman had swept to power in Queensland three years before with a landslide majority, but lost it to Labor three years later. For many, including several of the focus group respondents, Jones' intervention in this outcome was crucial. He had accused Newman of breaking campaign promises about extensions to coal mining in Toowoomba, and declared that 'he wouldn't back the Premier to win a chook raffle' (Withey 2015). One focus group participant stated the view that 'Alan Jones could kill Campbell Newman in Queensland just by being on air, obliterating him, you know'. Another stated: 'You know, one man can have a massive influence over a large number of people, just by the fact that his radio shows are played, I think, through New South Wales and Queensland'. 'If you think of Alan Jones, it's huge, I think. So yeah, personal opinion really matters. Particularly if a person's appealing to people' (McNair et al. 2017: 132–33).

Jones had a similarly confident opinion of his role in elections when he declared that 'no one has ever won an election by not appearing on my program' (Shanahan 2016b). He added: 'My program has the largest radio audience in the country and we go to some 77 stations with either program or highlights.'

It may have been with these words and the Newman experience in mind that, as the 2016 general election approached and with Turnbull now installed as prime minister, he decided to build bridges with the controversial pundit and go back on to his program for the campaign. This decision, like his more positive engagement with the ABC, did not prevent Turnbull's government from losing many seats in the election, and there is as yet no evidence that broadcast media coverage in any way shaped the campaign outcome.

## The ABC and the campaign

In addition to straight news coverage, the ABC devoted considerable resources to the 2016 campaign, with election editions of *7.30*, *Q&A*, *Insiders* and the innovative human interest-oriented interview format *Kitchen Cabinet* providing analysis of, and engagement with, the leading politicians, in a variety of styles. The first three of these exemplify the normatively approved adversarial journalism expected of a public service media organisation, while *Q&A*, as the ABC's flagship public participation political program, allowed public engagement with politicians in a live studio context. The most newsworthy incident amongst this coverage occurred in an edition of *Q&A* when audience member Duncan Storrar asked a question of the panel about tax concessions. Storrar described himself as having a 'disability and a low education'. He had spent his 'whole life working [on] minimum wage', and asked the Coalition representative on the *Q&A* panel:

You're gonna lift the tax-free threshold for rich people. If you lift my tax-free threshold, that changes my life. That means I can say to my little girl, 'Daddy's not broke this weekend', or we can go to the pictures. Rich people don't even notice if their tax-free threshold lifts. Why don't I get it? Why do they get it? (ABC 2016a).

There was polite debate on the matter, and the program moved on. But Storrar's intervention exploded into a controversy in the following days and weeks, as the right-of-centre media sought to portray him as a work-shy bludger. The *Herald Sun* 'exposed' Storrar as 'a thug', 'a villain' and 'drug user' (Galloway 2016). The ABC's *Media Watch* explained the appeal of the story to some outlets thus: 'with the story ticking all the boxes for News Corp – bash the poor, bash the ABC, bash Labor' (Barry 2016).

What the Storrar case also shows is how the media influences itself. The three-day coverage of Duncan Storrar is one such example of inter-media agenda setting; as are stories that might gain traction on social media that go on to influence the news agenda of established media and result in the media reporting on itself. An example of this was the Liberal Party's television advertisement featuring a tradesman criticising the ALP's 'war on the economy'. Within hours, this advertisement was trending on Twitter using the hashtag #FakeTradie. Social media users were quick to point out inconsistencies between the man's appearance with that of a 'real' tradesperson. This led to two days of speculation in the established media

about who was right, with various expert commentators highlighting that a ‘real tradie’ would not wear loose jewellery that could be caught in heavy machinery or drink from a ceramic mug that could be easily broken on a construction site. It took the *Daily Mail Australia*’s Daniel Piotrowski two days to confirm the man in the ad was in fact a real tradesman named Andrew McRae.

Turning to a more popular and ‘infotaining’ form of political culture, Annabel Crabb’s *Kitchen Cabinet* repeated its coverage of the 2013 election with editions devoted to both major party leaders, as well as the Independent Jacqui Lambie and others.

The *Kitchen Cabinet* format was developed by Crabb as an alternative to the conventional approach of ‘serious’ political media. Inspired by the success of cooking-based reality TV shows such as *Masterchef*, *Kitchen Cabinet* has been controversial, accused in some quarters of ‘dumbing down’ political discourse and of being ‘infotainment’ (where entertainment is assumed to be antithetical to a ‘quality’ public sphere). In 2015, *New Matilda* characterised the program appearance of Immigration Minister-turned-Treasurer Scott Morrison as propaganda:

This insidious spread of propaganda, soft interviews with hard-line politicians who wield enormous power over the lives of the most vulnerable, is sold as a fun, light-hearted look into the lives of the people we elect ... It completely dumbs down debate and again re-ingrains the perception that politicians are just like us, while the people their policies hurt, aren’t (McQuire 2015).

However, the huge ratings success of the format since its launch in 2011 has vindicated Crabb’s argument that there is a space for media formats that engage with politicians in ways other than the classic adversarial approach of ‘why is this lying bastard lying to me?’ As she explains the contribution made by *Kitchen Cabinet*:

My view was that the modern environment gives you lots of opportunities to do things differently, and to develop things that should complement other forms of reporting and coverage. I felt that if there was some space on a channel to see politicians differently, to interact with them differently, give people a different view apart from just the straight-down-the-barrel press conference, it couldn’t harm the process, and I think it is helpful (McNair et al. 2017: 195).

Today's Australian politicians have come to recognise the appeal of the format, and its potential role in a political culture shaped increasingly by issues of personality, trust and integrity. Both Turnbull and Shorten took part in *Kitchen Cabinet* during the 2016 election, taking the opportunity to present their political and personal histories, and talk about the things that motivate them. There is no evidence that such appearances have shaped electoral outcomes, but that politicians should participate in the personal, intimate manner of programs such as *Kitchen Cabinet* has become a routine expectation of political life, especially during elections.

## Sky News and ABC News 24

It is a notable feature of political culture in Australia (and comparable countries) that those established media outlets that provide some of the most sustained, in-depth coverage of politics are those with among the lowest audiences—the 24-hour news channels. Audiences for 24-hour news remain small, although the political coverage of these channels is very significant (McNair 2016). Sky News, in particular, as Australia's first domestically produced 24-hour news channel, and the only commercial rival to the ABC, played an important role in 2016, with round-the-clock coverage of the campaign, analysis and commentary, regular appearances by politicians of all parties and leaders' debates. These debates were central to the limited encounters between Turnbull and Shorten during the 2016 campaign, which makes the small audiences they attracted unfortunate.

The first 'People's Forum', held on Friday 13 May in western Sydney, featured Shorten and Turnbull before a selected audience of 100 members of the public. It was seen live by only 40,000 viewers, although clips and extracts could be viewed on YouTube. Next was a one-sided event in week five of the campaign, staged at the Bronco's League Club in Brisbane, jointly hosted by Sky News and the *Courier-Mail*. Shorten appeared without an opponent, after the Prime Minister declined to take part in what his office called 'a broadcaster's decree', allegedly because he had not been consulted. Sky's political editor David Speers insisted that both party leaders had been invited to attend.

The final debate, as noted earlier, was the first of its kind in Australian elections, an online collaboration between *news.com.au* and Facebook on 17 June. It reflected the increasing significance of social media in public access to political information.

Given the unexpectedly low Coalition vote on 2 July, it is noteworthy that Shorten ‘won’ the 13 May debate by 42 to 29 over Turnbull (29 were undecided) and was also declared the winner of the Facebook debate. Prior to the campaign, it had been widely speculated that the Labor leader’s poor communication style—as it was perceived by observers across the political spectrum—would be a major handicap for him and the ALP. This debate, and the coverage it generated in the following days, established a rather different narrative, in which Shorten was seen as a more authentic communicator as against the highly polished Turnbull (Grattan 2016). It seems likely that this revised public view of the Labor leader’s communicative abilities helped his party do better than expected on 2 July.

Here and elsewhere in its schedules, then, Sky News performed a valuable function in the 2016 campaign, presenting its (admittedly) small audience with unique material available nowhere else in the commercial free-to-air sector in this campaign. The ABC for its part broadcast the second leaders’ debate (ABC 2016b) on 29 May at the National Press Club, described by the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* James Massola (2016) as ‘dour’ and with no declared winner.

## Conclusion

The established press and broadcast media (including their online editions) continue to be the primary and most trusted sources of election news for Australians. But they are not without their challenges, as well as opportunities, in the digital era. The paid-for press faces the most difficulties of legacy platforms, with decreasing revenues and newsroom resources. Notwithstanding the longer-than-usual campaign of 2016, however, and fewer journalists to report it, election coverage remained prominent, particularly in major capital cities’ mastheads where it was more often front-page news.

Overall, voters appear to have ignored the almost uniform editorial stances across the country urging a Coalition vote for stability. Instead they delivered a razor-thin majority to the Coalition and a mixed bag of crossbenchers in both Houses. States where press coverage was at its most negative towards Labor, such as New South Wales (NSW), saw Labor gain five seats—Eden-Monaro, Lindsay, Macarthur, Macquarie and

Dobell.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the Coalition, which received largely positive front-page coverage in NSW, recorded a two-party preferred 3.8 per cent swing against it (Australian Electoral Commission 2016).

In Victoria (VIC), the coverage of the CFA dispute by Australia's largest selling daily newspaper, the *Herald Sun*, was persistently negative for Labor in the final weeks of the campaign. The Murdoch tabloid might not have swayed votes with its coverage alone—indeed, record numbers had voted early and may have missed the headlines—but it certainly amplified the industrial dispute that was already politicised by Turnbull and others. The electoral result was that VIC recorded Liberals' smallest negative swing of any State (1.6 per cent) and it picked up one marginal seat from Labor in Melbourne's east (Chisholm). If press coverage did influence voters, and this remains a contentious question, its net effect potentially benefited the Coalition in VIC and Pauline Hanson's One Nation Senate candidates in Queensland (QLD).

For the broadcast sector, and the ABC in particular, the 2016 election confirmed its continuing pre-eminence as a source of election news and analysis. Sky News provided extensive and valuable coverage, albeit to small audiences. There were few controversies or criticisms of the broadcast news media in this campaign—no Coalition claims of ABC bias, for example—although, as we have seen with the Storrar affair on *Q&A*, it did provide the News Corp press with an opportunity to attack the 'liberal' left elite it sees as in control at Ultimo, and highlighted inter-media agenda setting. Sky News' collaboration with Facebook was the most innovative broadcast event of the campaign, and an indicator of things to come as the profile of social media in the public sphere increases.

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<sup>8</sup> Dobell became a notionally marginal Labor seat after a 2015 redistribution.

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